

Danger in schools: stop violence!

Irina Malovichko, Project coordinator, UNESCO Club – Dignity of the Child, Volgograd

School is a place where adolescents spend most of their time, where they not only acquire knowledge but also social skills and the ability to tell good from bad. It is a place where characters are formed, with effects on all their future lives. School brings together children from different walks of life and family backgrounds, and so contradictions and conflicts can arise. This is neither good nor bad in itself, as long as the conflicts can be resolved in a constructive way.

Conflicts often take the form of insults, slurs and spiteful behaviour. They stop children from understanding and getting on with each another, and if they persist, can end in blows, fights, group feuds, boycotts, bullying and so on. Bullying is one of the most dangerous phenomena.

Such things have happened in schools in Volgograd too. In a survey which asked the question “Do you think your school is a safe place and there is no risk of violence and insults in it?”, only 40% of students in the 5th to 8th years answered positively. The remaining 60% said they had experienced violence and bullying in some form or other at school. If these things are not tackled, they can become the main means of conflict resolution in schools. The effects of bullying are very damaging, especially to the victim. But the perpetrators, who at first feel like victors, eventually lose the respect of their peers, and if they are prosecuted, they become criminals. Either way, the whole school suffers, as it becomes an unsafe place, which neither students nor teaching staff like to be in.

To make schools safer, more welcoming places for children a charitable project called “Danger in schools: stop violence!” was set up. Its aim was to reduce the level of aggression and violence among schoolchildren in Volgograd, introduce non-violent ways to calm down situations and resolve conflicts, and help children who have been victims of cruelty and bullying.

The project was set up by the Volgograd regional charitable organisation “UNESCO Club – Dignity of the Child” jointly with the education committee of the Volgograd administration, with support from a German NGO “Ost-West Trikster e.V.” and The BEARR Trust. Children from three schools in Volgograd took part.

School No 6, a high school (litsei), was the main centre of the project. The beneficiaries were 750 students, about 1000 parents and guardians, and more than 100 specialists. We looked at methods used to combat bullying in Volgograd, other places in Russia and abroad, and used them to create an information booklet; we conducted a survey among schoolchildren, experts and parents about the extent and seriousness of the problem; and organised a number of training seminars for teachers, at one of which a German expert, Konstanza Stoll, spoke about what was being done in Germany in this sphere. The teachers jointly produced a plan for action and cooperation with children.

The children were taught ways of dealing with perpetrators and victims, and groups were set up within the school called the Stop Violence Service, and the School Peace-making Service. Training events and group workshops were held, along with mediation programmes for both perpetrators and victims. A “Safe School” forum for schoolchildren was organised as well as a children’s writing, painting, games and badge competition.

Children were shown the film “The Scarecrow” about bullying at school and discussed it afterwards. A round table was organised to discuss the project’s results, involving a wide range of participants from government, education, NGOs and academic experts, at which the experience gained was shared with those with an interest.

The biggest challenge encountered in the project was changing the tendency to punitive reactions by teachers to instances of bullying, and their reluctance to trust children to deal with complex disputes themselves. In fact the creativity, sense of responsibility and sincerity of the children themselves was the main factor in the success of the project.

Thanks to this project, for the first time in Volgograd, the attention of government and school management was drawn to the need to make schools safer and deal with the problem of bullying. Attitudes and methods used by teachers and students to deal with violence seemed to change as a result. The level of aggression and violence in the schools which took part in the project has declined, and children who have suffered bullying are given help. The work started in the project will continue after the grant has been used up, drawing on resources from within the education system.

Contact

Irina Malovichko
Project coordinator
unescovlg@mail.ru