

A Finnish scheme that teaches pupils to stick up for classmates being bullied is now helping British schoolchildren, writes Julie Henry

One of the things that haunts Rebecca Parkin about the bullying she suffered at school was the apparent apathy of her classmates. As she was taunted in the playground, had water and food thrown at her in the dining hall and was beaten up outside the school gates, other children watched silently or turned their backs and walked away. Some even joined in from the sidelines.

"Nobody stood up for me," says the 16-year-old from Sheffield. "People took part in the bullying and those who didn't kept out of it. It was really distressing that there was no support."

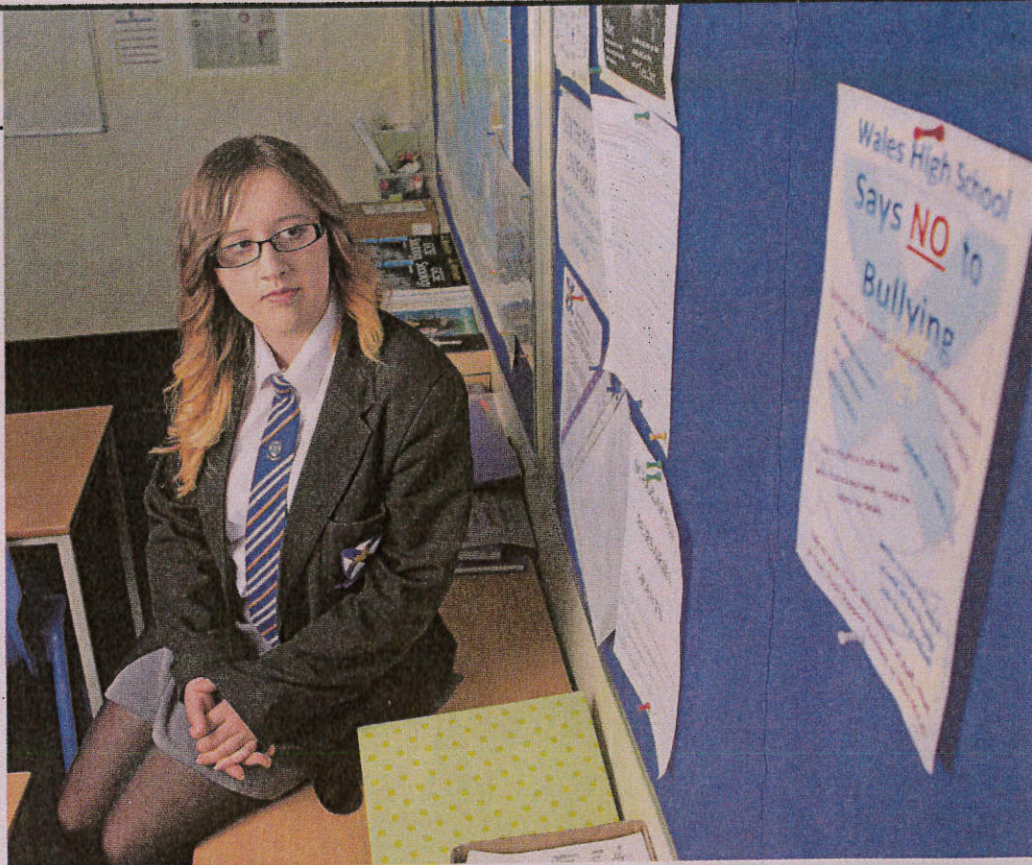
Research into bullying confirms that when witnesses do nothing to help, victims' sense of humiliation is amplified. It also reveals that many bullies are driven by a desire for higher status and that their behaviour is reinforced by onlookers' apathy.

Now, 17 schools in England and Wales are piloting a programme from Finland that aims to tackle the scourge of bullying by giving children the tools to stick up for their tormented classmates.

The KiVa programme (in Finnish, KiVa means "nice"; it is also an acronym of the expression "against bullying") is used in 90% of the country's schools following a trial when it cut bullying by nearly a third.

Academics at Bangor University who are evaluating the British trial have found "substantial decreases" in both the number of children reporting they had been bullied and in those who had bullied other pupils.

The need for an effective programme, and for schools to take bullying seriously, is evident from research into bullying in British schools. A survey in April by Ditch the Label, an anti-bullying charity, found 45% of 13 to 18-year-olds had been bullied, and of those, 61% had been physically attacked.



Rebecca Parkin is a pupil at Wales High School in Sheffield, 'an amazing school that takes bullying seriously'

Don't just watch, do something

In Rebecca's case, bullying started in primary school with name-calling and being left out of friendship groups. Although teachers knew about her autism — the factor that made her "different" from her classmates and potentially "vulnerable" — the taunting and isolation was never tackled.

At secondary school, the bullying escalated. "I was abused verbally, physically and online," says Rebecca. "People tried to set my hair on fire, people hit and pushed me. I was called fat, weird, psycho, stupid."

"There was an incident where a girl posted that she was 'going to get me' and people from school replied 'make sure I'm there', and she answered 'don't worry, you'll see the blood'. That was one of the most traumatic things."

Despite telling staff, her situation improved only when she moved to Wales High School, in Sheffield, which

she calls "an amazing school that takes bullying seriously" and where she is an anti-bullying mentor, helping to support other children.

The kind of bullying Rebecca experienced needs to be tackled urgently, according to Professor Judith Hutchings, who is evaluating the KiVa pilot.

"Influencing the behaviour of classmates who are witnesses to the bullying can reduce the rewards gained by the bullies and consequently, their motivation to bully in the first place," she says.

In the programme, which involves 10 90-minute lessons, pupils are taught to display their disapproval by telling bullies to stop and persuade others not to take part. Children are encouraged to support the victim by saying, in front of others, "I think you are being mistreated" and to report abuse to staff.

A lesson on cyberbullying tells youngsters to write positive messages to

the recipients of abusive comments and to report abuse to the site administrator.

Joanne Williams, a teacher at Christ the King Primary School in Macclesfield, Cheshire, which took part in the pilot, says the programme has had a "really positive impact".

"If children learn strategies to deal with bullying at an early age and are not prepared to stand by while it happens to others, it sets the tone for when they get to secondary school," she says.

Huw Jones, the deputy head at Ysgol Gyriradd Llanllechid School in Gwynedd, which took part in the pilot and is still running KiVa, says children are more prepared to defuse incidents.

"There is a great Martin Luther King quote that really resonated with the children: 'In the end we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends.' That sums it up," he says.