

Bullying and harassment

Understand the difference between bullying, unlawful harassment and legitimate management, and respond using evidence rather than labels alone.

- ✓ 18 min reading
- ✓ Full teaching, practical next steps and reflection
- ✓ Six practice questions with answers and explanations
- ✓ Complete source list and jurisdiction notes

Prepared for SAS, locally employed and other UK doctors

Author: Dr N Aziz

Using this module

Independent education

This is general professional information, not individual clinical, legal, employment, immigration, regulatory, tax or pensions advice. Current official instructions and the circumstances of the individual case remain controlling. Practice scores do not establish professional competence or accreditation.

The short answer

Bullying has no single statutory definition in Great Britain, but unwanted intimidating, offensive, degrading or humiliating behaviour can still breach policy and cause serious harm. Harassment has specific legal meanings, including conduct related to a protected characteristic and sexual harassment. Record the behaviour, context, effect and response, then obtain advice on the appropriate route.

Three next actions

- Write down the exact behaviour and context while it is fresh.
- Check the relevant dignity-at-work, bullying, grievance and sexual-harassment policies.
- Seek role-appropriate advice before deciding between direct resolution and a formal complaint.

Learning objectives

- Distinguish bullying, harassment and legitimate management action.
- Identify evidence that helps an organisation examine the conduct fairly.
- Choose a safe response that does not depend on proving motive.

What bullying can look like

Acas explains that there is no legal definition of bullying, although it covers various forms of unwanted behaviour. Examples may include threats, humiliation, persistent criticism without constructive purpose, exclusion, spreading malicious rumours, misuse of authority, deliberately impossible deadlines or withholding information needed to work safely. Behaviour may be spoken, written, digital, physical or expressed through work allocation and opportunity.

A single serious incident can require action. Repetition can reveal a pattern, especially where individually ambiguous events consistently disadvantage the same person. The effect matters, but impact alone does not determine every policy or legal question. Record what was said or done, when and where, who was present, the work context, the effect and what happened after the issue was raised.

Harassment and sexual harassment

Under the Equality Act 2010 in Great Britain, harassment involves unwanted conduct related to a protected characteristic that has the purpose or effect of violating dignity or creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment. Sexual harassment and less favourable treatment following rejection of or submission to sexual conduct have specific provisions. Northern Ireland uses different equality legislation and advice routes.

The legal assessment considers the person's perception, the other circumstances and whether it was reasonable for the conduct to have that effect. This is more nuanced than asking only whether offence was intended. The Worker Protection (Amendment of Equality Act 2010) Act 2023 introduced an employer duty, in force from 26 October 2024, to take reasonable steps to prevent sexual harassment. Obtain current specialist advice because facts, jurisdiction and deadlines matter.

Management action or bullying?

Managers may set standards, allocate reasonable work, give evidence-based feedback, investigate concerns and use formal procedures. A doctor may understandably find these actions stressful without them being bullying. The relevant questions include whether expectations are clear and achievable, evidence is shared, the process is consistent, the doctor can respond, feedback is respectful and decisions are proportionate.

Legitimate authority can still be exercised badly. Public humiliation, personal insults, shifting allegations, selective enforcement, denial of a fair response or repeated disproportionate scrutiny should not be excused merely because the speaker is a manager. Focus on process and conduct, compare treatment where appropriate and seek representation when formal capability or disciplinary action is contemplated.

Gather evidence lawfully and proportionately

Keep a contemporaneous chronology and preserve relevant emails, rotas, meeting invitations, feedback and policy documents to which you are entitled. Confirm important agreed actions in a measured follow-up email. Identify potential witnesses without coaching them. Keep patient details in approved clinical or incident systems rather than a personal evidence file.

Do not secretly record meetings, access records without a work purpose, forward confidential documents to an insecure personal account or collect material indiscriminately. The legality and employment consequences of covert recording are fact-sensitive. Obtain union or legal advice before assuming that a recording is lawful, admissible or wise.

Choose a response

If the conduct is low-level, isolated and safe to address, a direct conversation or supported informal intervention may stop it quickly. For serious behaviour, repeated conduct, sexual harassment, threat, marked power imbalance or failed informal action, use the formal policy and obtain advice. A formal grievance should set out the nature of the complaint, relevant examples, effect, evidence and desired resolution.

Acas advises that employers take complaints seriously, investigate fairly and sensitively, support those involved and protect confidentiality. Formal procedures should not presume guilt: the complainant, witnesses and person complained about all require fair treatment. Confidentiality means controlled, necessary sharing - not that no one can be told enough to investigate.

After reporting

Ask for acknowledgement, the policy being used, named contact, expected stages, interim protections and review dates. If temporary separation is needed, it should not automatically disadvantage the person who raised the concern. Keep records of outcomes and monitor whether agreed changes occur.

Watch for retaliation, adverse opportunities, exclusion, hostile references or unexplained scrutiny. Raise new events promptly and obtain advice about victimisation or detriment. Do not assume that an internal outcome determines a legal claim; internal policy findings and tribunal tests are related but not identical.

Worked example: showing a pattern

A doctor reports that a supervisor is bullying them. An adviser helps replace the label with a chronology: public criticism using personal language on three dates, removal from teaching without explanation, conflicting instructions followed by blame, and hostile messages after the doctor asked for clarification. The doctor identifies witnesses and documents and explains the effect on escalation and confidence.

The account also records a separate occasion when the supervisor gave justified private feedback, demonstrating that the doctor is not treating every criticism as bullying. This balanced presentation strengthens credibility and helps the organisation distinguish management from harmful conduct.

Questions for policy and advice

Ask which policy applies, whether informal action is optional, who will assess conflicts, what interim protections are available, whether accompaniment is permitted, what information will be shared with the person complained about, how witnesses will be approached and how outcomes and appeals are communicated.

If sexual harassment, threat, stalking, hate crime or severe psychological harm may be involved, seek specialist advice promptly. The appropriate response may extend beyond an ordinary relationship meeting.

Common mistake

Avoid this

A long account describing someone as a bully is weaker than a concise chronology showing specific conduct, context, pattern, effect and the action requested.

Pause and reflect

Which three examples most clearly demonstrate the behaviour and why it matters, without speculating about motive?

Takeaways

- Bullying and harassment are overlapping but not identical concepts.
- Respectful, evidence-based management is legitimate; misuse of authority is not.
- Preserve proportionate evidence and obtain advice before high-risk steps.

Knowledge check

Choose one best answer. These practice questions support reflection; they do not assess a real case or confer accreditation. Answer positions match the browser edition.

1. Which statement about bullying in Great Britain is accurate?

- A. It requires physical contact
- B. There is no single legal definition, but the behaviour can still have serious legal and employment consequences
- C. It cannot breach workplace policy
- D. It has one complete statutory definition

2. What can matter in an Equality Act harassment assessment?

- A. Only repetition
- B. Only whether witnesses complained
- C. Only the alleged harasser's intention
- D. Perception, circumstances and whether the effect was reasonable

3. Which may be legitimate management?

- A. Evidence-based private feedback with a fair chance to respond
- B. Selective rules based on race
- C. Inventing new allegations during the hearing
- D. Public personal insults

4. What is the safest evidence practice?

- A. Download every patient record
- B. Keep a factual chronology and relevant documents you may lawfully retain
- C. Post events in a group chat
- D. Secretly record every colleague

5. A serious sexual-harassment allegation is raised. What is generally appropriate?

- A. Follow the relevant formal policy and obtain advice
- B. Require direct confrontation first
- C. Move the complainant without consultation
- D. Ignore it if it happened once

6. What should be monitored after reporting?

- A. Whether colleagues stop speaking about policy
- B. Whether the complainant resigns
- C. Only whether an apology was sent
- D. Agreed actions, safety and possible retaliation

Answers and explanations

1. B — There is no single legal definition, but the behaviour can still have serious legal and employment consequences

Acas notes the absence of a single legal definition; bullying can still breach policy and overlap with harassment or other claims.

Review the definition and examples.

2. D — Perception, circumstances and whether the effect was reasonable

The legal test considers purpose or effect with perception, circumstances and reasonableness.

Review the harassment explanation.

3. A — Evidence-based private feedback with a fair chance to respond

Fair, respectful performance management is not bullying merely because it is difficult.

Review legitimate authority and fair process.

4. B — Keep a factual chronology and relevant documents you may lawfully retain

Evidence should be relevant, lawful, secure and free of unnecessary confidential material.

Review proportionate evidence collection.

5. A — Follow the relevant formal policy and obtain advice

Serious allegations should not be forced through unsuitable informal resolution.

Review when formal handling is needed.

6. D — Agreed actions, safety and possible retaliation

The organisation should monitor effectiveness and guard against further unfair treatment.

Review follow-up and victimisation risks.

Official and professional sources

Confirm the current source version and applicable nation, contract, scheme or specialty. A source list is not a statement that every rule applies to every reader.

Acas: Bullying at work

Great Britain · <https://www.acas.org.uk/bullying-at-work>

Acas: Discrimination and the law

Great Britain · <https://www.acas.org.uk/discrimination-and-the-law>

Acas Code of Practice on disciplinary and grievance procedures

Great Britain · <https://www.acas.org.uk/acas-code-of-practice-on-disciplinary-and-grievance-procedures/html>

Edition and verification

Editorial edition: 9 September 2026. The page source-review date is 2026-09-07. A publication date, editorial edit and substantive source check have different meanings. See sasdoctors.com/corrections for material corrections and the scope of review.

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