What to do about (Cyber) Bullying?

Systemic Intervention and Prevention in Schools
Excerpt from the volume What to do about (Cyber)Bullying? Systemic Intervention and Prevention in Schools (original title: „Was tun bei (Cyber)Mobbing? Systemische Intervention und Prävention in der Schule“)

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Further information, download and materials on (cyber)bullying at: www.klicksafe.de/cyber-mobbing and www.konflikt-kultur.de/cyber-mobbing
Summary and Content of the Handbook

New klicksafe Material on (Cyber)Bullying
In order to realize a new approach on (cyber)bullying, the German Awareness Centre klicksafe and the multi-level programme Konflikt-KULTUR teamed up, learned from one another, and together developed a new working material. It merges, for the first time, fields otherwise treated separately – namely, prevention of violence, bullying intervention, and media education – into interdisciplinary instruction materials about intervention methods and systemic conflict management in schools. The new handbook is intended as a contribution towards a professional response, enabling children and adolescents to avoid suffering and to develop pro-socially. Since bullying and cyberbullying are two sides of the same coin, expert knowledge on the prevention of violence and on media education was essential to the conception of the material.

Key assumptions
From Bullying to (Cyber)Bullying
Digital media play an important role in the everyday lives of children and adolescents; to a significant extent, communication among young people today is conducted online. Likewise, conflicts are no longer restricted to analogue encounters, but rather are increasingly played out by digital means. Bullying occurs today, in the great majority of cases, not only in the context of direct personal contact, but also on the internet, in social media, and via mobile phone. Practically speaking, there is hardly any bullying today without the “cyber” prefix. When children and teenagers are being bullied, it can be assumed to take on both analogue and digital form, since the analogue and digital worlds of those involved are so seamlessly intertwined as to be perceived as one entity. (Cyber)bullying arises particularly in groups that are not formed by one’s own choice and therefore cannot easily be escaped, such as school classes. But wherever and whenever damage is done to individuals, a response is necessary; school administrators and teachers must intervene in order to recognize and defuse conflicts.

Negotiating Values and Norms Online and Encouraging Pro-social Behaviour
Societal co-existence is based on a consensus concerning mutual values and norms, oriented to human dignity. A formal framework, in the broadest sense, is provided by constitutional law stating the individual’s right to mental and physical integrity, ownership of property, freedom of speech, equal treatment, and protection from discrimination. In addition, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Penal Code, and laws such as copyright regulations also contribute to the legal framework with regard to (cyber)bullying. In the school context, national or state school laws also apply, as do school and house rules on site. All of these formal rules also apply online: but young people do not always realise to what extent their behaviour conforms to or violates the values and norms that are in place. Particularly in the digital sphere, social regulation is poorly developed. Here, as in many social communities (school form, sports club, clique), an informal framework of values and norms often emerges, which in the case of (cyber)bullying clearly diverges from formal standards and sometimes exhibits inhumane tendencies. This makes it necessary to negotiate, again and again, the limits of free speech: when and how are they being overstepped, so that values are violated? Children, adolescents, and adults all require the capacity for non-violent self-assertion in order to protect themselves from infringements on their mental, social, or physical integrity. In this context pro-social behaviour plays a key role: pro-social behaviour is behaviour that gratifies one’s basic needs but respects those of others as well. One of the main goals of each bullying prevention and intervention in schools is to increase pro-social behaviour and competences.

Adolescents and the Internet
The development of one’s own identity is a core aspect of development in young years and is also undertaken through the use of social media, which present possibilities for communication, self-portrayal, and peer recognition. However, not all content that is shared is also well received. Self-presentation on the internet can also become a target for (cyber)bullying. Laxity and heedlessness in handling data about oneself and others provide to those of ill will with an opening for slander, threats, and vilification. Content can be copied, altered, reposted and made accessible to a wide audience within seconds.

When limits have been overstepped on the internet, adults usually don’t hear about it, or only very late, because they are not active in the same virtual spaces or because young people affected by bullying don’t regard them as competent advisors knowledgeable on effective means of defence or intervention.
Adolescents are, in fact, interested in protecting their own privacy; however, their understanding of it often differs from that of the adults, since adolescents primarily define it as privacy from adults. From young people’s point of view, the network audience they address seems private because they feel that they are interacting with peers. Adolescents often cannot imagine who else, outside of their own social environment, might be interested in following their online activities. Consequently, if the social situation seems intimate in character, they are not conscious of the fact that their conversations are public.

**Bullying via Internet**

A number of platforms and services present opportunities for misuse to potential cyberbullies. The assumption of net anonymity and the wide range of technical options may even promote attacks that are damaging to individuals. Frequently, malicious text messages are sent (anonymously), or humiliating photos and videos are posted. These can usually be commented on and shared, so that they continue to spread through the net. Another tack often taken is to deliberately exclude individuals from group activities in order to isolate them. Via so-called “fake profiles” or hacked accounts, messages can be sent out in the name of the victim as a way of damaging the owner of an account.

In contrast to exclusively “analogue” bullying, cyberbullying has certain additional characteristics: The victim loses the shelter of private spaces, since bullying actions can be undertaken at any time of day and from any location. Moreover, there is hardly any regulation on the internet of data/content, which can be disseminated extremely quickly and made available to a vast audience. Perpetrators often remain anonymous, so that the victim does not know who is launching the attacks. And there is no perception of the injury to the victim, meaning that empathy or regret is unlikely. Similarly, seen from the receiving end, the victim is unable to comprehend the motivation for the attacks.

**A New Systemic Approach on (Cyber)Bullying**

(Cyber)bullying always arises out of group dynamics and can only be understood from a systemic perspective that overcomes a simple bully-victim dichotomy. Usually many different players contribute to form rather complex conflicts and help to maintain bullying surroundings. That is why a systemic intervention needs to include the whole group involved, their relations and communications structure as well as their values and norms to achieve sustainable solutions. The main goal of each intervention is to de-escalate conflicts rather than identify and punish bullies and to re-establish formal pro-social values and norms in students’ heads and hearts. A peer-to-peer system of support and help furthers caring for each other in the long-run. To sum it up: In order to stop bullying and create a sustainable pro-social climate in schools, all players need to be involved when bullying occurs. A long-term commitment of teachers, involvement of the whole class and selected peer supporters help to achieve the goal of feeling empathy with others and cultivating pro-social behaviour.

**Content of the klicksafe Handbook**

In Chapter 1, the fundamental concepts and the overall approach are defined by the authors. Chapter 2 clarifies concepts and background knowledge on the topics of bullying, cyber-bullying, and (cyber)bullying. Particular attention is given to the dynamic of bullying and the specifics of bullying by digital means.

In Chapter 3, two field-tested intervention methods are presented: systemic bullying intervention (SMI) and systemic short intervention (SKI).

Chapter 4 describes some of the processes involved in systemic conflict management (SKM) as well as their aims and individual measures. Taking reference to the methods described in the previous chapter, it explains how to assess the severity of an individual case and find the intervention method that is appropriate. The chapter closes with a short set of directions to be consulted in an emergency.

Chapter 5 depicts an actual case – treated anonymously, of course – that exemplifies the workings of systemic conflict management. Finally the pedagogical framework is addressed. No amount of knowledge on (cyber)bullying can override the basic insight that an intervention will only have sustained effects if it rests on a solid pedagogical foundation. The building blocks include the courage to lead, aplomb and sensitivity to needs, a clear orientation in terms of values and norms, the promotion of personal skills and in particular the capacity for self-regulation, the integration of methods into a culture of motivation and personal relations, and the cultivation of emotional empathy and compassion.

If this list may sound long and demanding – Chapter 6 brings it to life. Moreover, practical units intend to encourage development of various skills valuable in combatting bullying.

In this excerpt, you will find a short list of ten basics that can be useful in emergency cases of (cyber)bullying, as well as a detailed case study of a sexting incident, the following intervention and the functioning of systemic conflict management.
Ten Basics for Emergencies

Many schools are not yet applying systemic conflict management. We therefore provide, in the following, ten points that can be of use in an emergency. When a case of (cyber)bullying occurs, it is essential to act immediately in order to put an end to the suffering of its addressee and to prevent lasting damage to the person’s emotional health. The following emergency steps indicate what you can do if you are the first person bearing educational responsibility who learns about the problem. Due to legal regulations, in individual cases there may be major differences in the steps you can take, depending on whether you are a schoolteacher, school social worker, school psychologist, or school counsellor.

1. Offer the student who is affected a trustful relationship and a safe environment
   Ask about what has occurred and how the person who was targeted experienced it. Confirm to the student that it was a very good idea to come to you and get help. Let the student know that you are concerned and want to support them.

2. Consider whether anyone is in danger of being hurt or hurting themselves
   Don’t hesitate to ask about thoughts or actions that could be damaging to others or self-damaging. In this way, you are protecting the mental and physical health of this student and others. If the student who was targeted is informing you directly, you can ensure — at least for the moment — that he or she will not endanger themselves with any kind of rash action. Should there be indications that self-damage or damage by others might occur, consider together with the affected person how the grave state of affairs can be alleviated and the dangerous situation can be de-escalated, and which persons would need to be called in to help. In this case, have a careful look at the advice given in Basics 4 and 6 through 10.

3. Clarify with the affected person what they would like you to do, and what you are legally allowed or expected to do
   Ask the person what their wishes are in this situation. Explain the options that you have for accommodating these needs. Be cautious about proposing solutions of your own. Make it clear that you will not take any steps without informing her/him or, if indicated, asking for her/his permission (see Basic 8). Usually, (cyber)bullying can’t be stopped without informing and involving other teachers, the principal, and schoolmates. In this case, ask for permission to contact other persons about it so that de-fusing the conflict will be effective. Some arguments in favour of such contacts:
   - There has to be an unmistakable signal sent out: “(Cyber)bullying will not be tolerated here, and we are doing something about it!”
   - Teachers can only deal effectively with cyber-attacks if they are informed about the case.
   - Only systemic intervention can stop the spread of digital material. Such intervention can’t be undertaken without informing other teachers and the principal, or in some cases even the police.

If you can exclude the possibility of an emergency situation or child endangerment and you are a school social worker, school psychologist, school counsellor or youth counsellor, you are obliged to observe strict confidentiality. In most cases, it is not allowed that you pass on any information without the consent of the victim or also the offender! This has the advantage that you can concentrate fully on forming a trustful relationship within the framework of individual consultation. The disadvantage is that your access to support in the form of conflict resolution is restricted. Any release from confidentiality should be given expressly by the student, at least orally, and documented in writing. A release always applies only to the person(s) named in it and is thus non-transferable.

Note well: The confidentiality rule on this sweeping scale does not apply to you if you are a teacher or another type of monitor. Here, you are usually required to respond by informing the school principal and the parents. This does not preclude individual consultation or conflict resolution, providing that you have permission to proceed in those directions.

4. Involve other students as peer counsellors
   If you are told about the problem by other students or by adults, ask them to encourage the targeted person to get competent help. Request that these students get back to you with information on whether their intermediation has been successful. Should you yourself come in question as a qualified
helper, you can ask these students to offer your support to the affected person.

5. Get in touch with a targeted person who is refusing to accept help
If the targeted person refuses to get help, you should take up direct contact in order to size up their frame of mind. You are actually obliged to do this if there are indications that the person could be endangered.

6. Encourage the targeted person to defend herself/himself
Reinforce the victim’s resolve to defend herself/himself against (cyber)bullying using non-violent means. Appeal to the person’s self-respect. Possible supporting points:

- Bullying damages people – sometimes even much later in life. It can’t be tolerated and has to be put to an end, as quickly as possible.
- It may be that other students are also being targeted. They will be encouraged to step forward and report on it if there is a climate of resistance against (cyber)bullying at the school.
- It can get worse if you don’t do anything about it.

Offer coaching. Back up the targeted person and stick with her/him through thick and thin. It is much more likely that the person will decide to respond actively if you succeed in building a trustful relationship. One necessary ingredient for this is transparency at every step. If the affected person has difficulty in deciding to act, take that seriously! Together, explore the factors that could be holding the person back.

7. Keep a documentation on what has occurred
Have the occurrences explained to you for as long as necessary until you’ve understood them fully. Remember that what you are hearing is a subjective account – things may sound different when described by others. But under all circumstances: take the account seriously. Make a detailed documentation of what has occurred. The more information you get down at the outset, the better. Should there later be an intervention by a qualified specialist, you will have done decisive groundwork that benefits the overall outcome.

8. Consider whether you need to inform parents, other teachers, or the principal
Some conflicting parties – victims as well as offenders – don’t want parents, other teachers, or the principal to be informed. It is important to understand that wish, but not always to agree with it. You are required (at least by German law) to comply with this request if two of the following conditions apply; otherwise you would commit an offence by complying:

a) if you are a school social worker, a school psychologist, a school counsellor (§ 203 StGB) or a youth counsellor,

b) if no substantial indications of child endangerment (§ 8a SGB VIII) are known to you,

c) if your estimation is that the child (e.g. of primary school age) is mature enough and in an emotional and mental condition enabling him/her to understand and take responsibility for his/her own decision against informing parents or the school principal.

Consult experts on this issue by presenting the case in anonymized form.

However, if there are substantial indications of child endangerment, you are also permitted to speak to teachers, other parents or caregivers in order to estimate the endangerment more correctly. In such a case, it is wise to discuss this in advance with the victim so that you can act consensually. Whether the victim agrees to it or not, you should first inform the legal guardians of the victim, since you are required by law to do so. The younger the victim, the more emphasis is placed on this duty to inform the parents/guardians. Exceptions are allowed only in cases where the information would lead to further endangerment. This could be the case if you have reliable indications of violent behaviour on the part of the parents, for example if the student might be exposed to beating, kidnapping, or even forced marriage. Depending on the age of the student, in such a case you should inform youth authorities or the police. Again, the fundamental principle applies here: wherever possible, do this with the consent of the student and not without his or her knowledge.

Should you be unsure or in doubt, e.g. when it comes to estimating the degree of endangerment, you can take recourse to a qualified adviser (in German law “sufficiently experienced professional”) with an anonymized version of the case. Contact to such a person versed in the protection of minors can
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be established through the youth authorities or other youth welfare organisations.

In the event of an acute emergency, for example someone threatening to kill a (cyber)bullying victim during school time or a victim threatening to commit suicide, it is always imperative to first inform and call in those who can resolve the emergency quickly – even if the threatened person does not consent. At school, this is usually the principal, who in turn can call in the police.

The situation is different if you are a teacher or another type of monitor, since you then have the responsibility – regardless of whether there are substantial indications for endangerment – to inform the parents or the school principal whenever normal lessons are impeded or essential concerns for the education and care of the child are at hand, for example when punishable offences against school rules have occurred or need to be prevented in the school. Here again, there is the caveat about not informing parents if that might lead to an endangerment of the student. In such a case, ensuring the safety of the student has the highest priority and might speak for temporary placement of the student in the custody of youth authorities.

9. **Consider whether you should inform the police or advise others to do so**

Registering a complaint with the police should generally be undertaken by the victim or the parents. Doing so is indicated if and when

- the conflict events cannot be de-escalated using educational means and the police can have a de-escalating effect,
- an emergency situation has arisen which can only be remedied by police action,
- the perpetrators have been identified, are committing offences, and only police measures can prevent them from harming the victim,
- the offenders can only be identified using police techniques,
- mediation has failed and internal (school) educational and regulatory measures have proven ineffective,
- offenders are not part of the school community and cannot be influenced by educational efforts.

If **none** of the reasons given above apply, it may be advisable to refrain from informing the police. Arguments against informing the police can include:

- After an official complaint, ramifications for the offender and other involved parties can take a long time to have any effect, because the time span between making notice and an indictment or conviction can be very long.
- An official complaint can lead to further escalation.
- In (cyber)bullying, there are deeds done that are not punishable by law.
- Viable proof is not available or insufficient.
- Police action would block off pedagogical efforts to work the matter through.
- Police measures would not put an end to the (cyber)bullying, since it is probable that other persons would continue pursuing actions that are, strictly speaking, within the legal realm.
- Police presence would result in the victim being ostracized by the community.
- Since the police are required to investigate official complaints, the victim and her/his family might have little or no control over the conflict resolution.
- A pedagogical approach to dealing with the matter could be pushed aside heedlessly while legal aspects take the fore and lawyers determine the course of events.

All of these aspects can have the effect of worsening the victim’s situation due to an official complaint, marginalizing educational considerations and protection of the victim, and blocking timely corrective work with the offender.

Take into consideration that, in many cases, the police are required to investigate and prosecute. Initially, police measures may relieve the pressure on educators, but in the long run can produce incalculable “collateral damage”.

10. **Build a network of competent persons inside and outside your school**

Never walk alone! Whenever possible, work in a team – even when a final decision may rest on you. See to it that all the roles in the team are in good hands. Bring in essential decision-makers, experienced professionals, and persons significant to the victim. Members of the team must have access to the personal information surrounding the case. You should always, if possible, elicit consent for that in advance.

Policepersons can potentially be of aid in consulting roles. However, you need to be careful when
describing the hard facts of a case to them, as they may be legally required to take up proceedings. Portray the case to the police in an anonymized, hypothetical version, using the subjunctive mode. Get information about external sources of support. Are there advisory organisations in your area? What conceptions do they apply in their work? Take full measure of the fact that options for effectively putting an end to (cyber)bullying are significantly expanded when you have outside help.

Establish contact with such a centre and ask about the possibility of scheduling counselling or an intervention, and also about costs that would be incurred and potential sources of funding.
Nele – A Case Study

The following case is true-to-life, it actually occurred. Some details and personal characteristics have been altered – but the social roles and the sequence of events correspond fully to the conflict as it unfolded in reality.

This case of sexting (communication on sexual themes via mobile messaging, in particular involving photos or video) demonstrates that educators in schools and youth agencies are not helpless when faced with instances of (cyber)bullying. Not only prevention is possible: intervention is, too, and it should not just be left to the police.

This case also shows how well interdisciplinary cooperation can work and how schools can tap into the expert knowledge of social educators and school psychologists. And finally, the case study illustrates the functioning of systemic conflict management (undertaken from a systemic perspective and with a systematic, planned procedure in a team), creating a school configuration that can lead to educational effects of measurable quality.

1. The Starting Point

One Tuesday, after morning recess, in the counselling room of an academic high school in northern Germany: Her head lowered, 13-year-old Nele is staring at her smartphone, her friend Jessica is next to her and Theresa Obermüller is sitting across from them. She is a school social worker and it’s her job to provide psycho-social ‘first aid’ in cases of conflict and to advise the school decision-makers. As Nele starts to tell her story, Theresa Obermüller realizes quickly that the girl has become the victim of a serious and extremely hostile (cyber)bullying attack. The counsellor senses that the girl is going to need a lot of support in the coming days.

The story Nele tells is a teenagers’ classic. Nele had fallen in love for the first time and had made, for her boyfriend Steve, a video in which she was shown nude. “The love I felt for him was like nothing I had ever known” says Nele, her eyes shining. When Steve had asked her for a video like that, she had in fact felt a bit queasy. She knew – from an information day at school where a policeman said so – that one might perhaps take intimate photos for oneself, but should never send them to anyone via chat. Well, those were rules made by adults, she adds, as if making an excuse for something stupid.

She didn’t send the video to Steve right away – but he put her under pressure. “Prove that you love me!”, it said in the chat, which Nele shows to the other two in the counselling room at their request. She felt blind trust toward Steve, who was two years older than she.

Four months later, the relationship had broken up, and Steve threatened to pass around the video in a chat room – which Nele obviously did not want. He wrote, “I swear I’ll send the video to everybody. I’m gonna finish you off. The whole school is going to see what a bitch you are!”

That Tuesday morning, Nele goes on, she learned that Steve’s words hadn’t been a hollow threat. The day before, a number of students from various forms had already seen the video on their mobiles, as Jessica found out. Nele did notice that people were leering at her and exchanging whispers – something was off key. But that Steve would go that far: she just couldn’t imagine that. “The video went around the school like lightning, and who knows where else it will end up!” She says she feels absolutely helpless and at people’s mercy. She is scared that someone could use the video to go after her and maybe even blackmail her later on. “Now I’ll never get an apprenticeship! The policeman said that the personnel bosses google you!” When Theresa Obermüller asks her what she wishes for right now, Nele doesn’t need to stop and think: “Not to come to school tomorrow!” She says she can’t bear the whispering and gawking. But she doesn’t want Steve to be punished and “thrown out of school” – in this statement the memory of her affection for him still echoes.

Theresa Obermüller presents her with a different idea: “Nele, suppose you could regain control of the situation. What if the video disappears from your school because everybody decides that its’s despicable to have that on one’s mobile or to re-send it? What if your schoolmates, teachers, and the principal show you their compassion and want to help make sure people respect you? What if your reputation didn’t suffer? If Steve admitted what he did, regretted it, and made up for it?” Nele starts listening hard. She hadn’t thought of anything like that – since she’d always heard that once something was on the internet, there was nothing you could do about it. Besides, how would she ever be able to persuade her classmates to do that? She wouldn’t even be able to speak openly about it with them. And Steve? “We’ll talk to him”, says Theresa Obermüller. “But I need your permission for that, and it would be best to have your parents’ permission, too!”
2. Background at the School

With regard to school development, this case has a back story that is essential to the success of the intervention that took place.

Theresa Obermüller is employed as a school social worker by an independent organization, her job is financed by three sources: this organization, the Social Ministry of the state, and the community (town). This is not to be taken for granted, since towns and independent organizations are not required to do this. But this town wanted to support its school with more than just a building and equipment to go in it. They wanted to contribute to the content of good education and upbringing. One of Obermüller’s special areas of professional work is conflict management. In an average school year, she handles about 70 serious cases of conflict in several different schools.

At the school where Nele’s case comes up, there has been a steering group for five years now – initiated by the principal, Mr Schuster (see box). Thanks to this group, systemic conflict management has been firmly established as part of the school’s culture; the procedural standards developed here have systematised pedagogical efforts and provided them with a reliable framework. After initial resistance, today the parents, students, teachers, Theresa Obermüller herself, and the principal are glad that these structures have been developed.

As a result, this school is well set up to deal with (cyber)bullying. Theresa Obermüller may not have much power to make decisions — these are up to the principal. Nonetheless, she pays a key role by serving as a conflict manager in individual cases. In this role, and separately for each case, she forms a team (called the SCM team), coordinates the process of conflict resolution, counsels the responsible parties, and conducts the intervention. She has come by the high-level professional competence required for this demanding work through continuing education. In this context, the ‘first’ educational profession is not as important as the special skills acquired in advanced training and having sufficient time resources to apply them beneficially.

3. First Aid, Positioning, and Data Protection

The first adult to hear about Nele’s problem was the ‘link’ teacher (a teacher chosen at German schools who can be approached by any student). Nele’s friend Jessica spoke to her after having seen the video with her friend in the nude.

The link teacher listened carefully and empathetically. The student’s extreme distress could be sensed immediately. But the link teacher also realized right away that this problem situation was over her head. As the “person of first contact” she now had to decide how Nele could be helped. Being a link teacher, she is glad to serve as a first contact, but not to take responsibility for further support. She therefore — with Nele’s permission — accompanies Nele to see Theresa Obermüller and informs the principal. The link teacher, as the first educationally responsible person drawn into the conflict, takes a clear position: first link – yes, conflict treatment – no.

Theresa Obermüller would now, together with Nele, like to find out more about what has occurred. Sympathetically and respectfully, she places questions to Nele, who settles in to the relaxed atmosphere and is able to report more and more clearly. Theresa Obermüller tries to find out whether Steve has committed punishable offences, and if so, how serious they were. Items of evidence — particularly videos, photos, and chat exchanges — need to be ascertained, since they will prevent the offending student from denying or trivializing the matter, or trying to reverse the burden of guilt. “Nele, now everything has to be put on the table. I believe you, but I also need proof. Did you save the chat exchanges with Steve? I need to see the video and should also save it, otherwise I can’t do the right things for you!”

**STEERING GROUP**

**Members:**
- School principal Mr Schuster
- School social worker Theresa Obermüller
- School counsellor
- Teacher commissioned with prevention issues

**Tasks:**
- Implementation, ongoing development, and evaluation of systemic conflict management at the school
- Reporting to school bodies/committees and drafting proposals for decisions on issues relevant to the pedagogical profile of the school

**Roster:**
One meeting per quarter, lasting about 2½ hours
Quite some time back, the media appointee of the school had seen to it that Theresa Obermüller had the technical means to save quickly any material proof that was on the internet or on mobile phones. This way, she can view it in detail after an interview. To avoid committing an offence herself, she saves the potentially incriminating material only on DVD and later hands that over to the principal, to be stored in the school safe as ascertained evidence.

If it couldn’t be proven that Steve elicited a pornographic video from Nele and took possession of it, then he would not be an offender by constitutional standards — and would not need to take responsibility for it.

Nele is agonized, full of self-reproach. “It’s my own fault if I behave like a bitch! How could anybody be that stupid!” At this point in the interview, Theresa Obermüller concentrates increasingly, together with Nele, on probing the girl’s inner process; feelings and needs are now at the focus of attention. “Nele, how serious is the situation for you? So bad that you don’t want to come to school anymore? Or so bad that you don’t want to be anywhere anymore?” No, answers the student, she hasn’t thought about doing harm to herself.

Theresa Obermüller registers that there is no indication of acute danger, no threat to the girl’s life. But the idea of refusing to go to school keeps circling around in Nele’s head. The stares and whispers behind her back are unbearable, she wishes she could just beam herself away! Nele breaks into tears. Only Jessica is loyal to her. And from Jessica she learned what others were saying about her, “that I’m a slut and got what was coming!” Theresa Obermüller asks whether everyone reacted that way. Jessica says no, some people were quite taken aback and pensive. But a few were maliciously sharing the video.

She didn’t know, says Nele, downtrodden, whether she would ever be able to trust a boyfriend again. “Nele, I hope that someday you will meet a person you can give your love to and still take good care of yourself, without his feeling slighted. Trust has to grow, and it always has a limit,” answers the social worker. “I think, OK, what you did was pretty lightheaded, but there is nothing reproachable about making videos or nude photos of yourself. You have the right to do that and you were expressing your love. Steve did something wrong, not you!” One year later, Nele will get back to Theresa Obermüller to say that this ‘first aid’ provided by the social worker and the link teacher was tremendously important for her.

It would make Theresa Obermüller’s work much easier, she explains, if Nele consents to her taking active steps in the case. Nele agrees to that and in doing so gives her a formal commission. Now they have to determine what kind of commission it should be: individual support or conflict support? First, Theresa Obermüller asks Nele whether she may inform Nele’s parents; Nele gives her consent. If Nele also permits that data be given to the principal and the SCM team, Theresa Obermüller could accompany her within the framework called “conflict support”. However, if Nele and/or her parents opt for full discretion, the commission would simply be “individual support”.

Under German law (§ 203 StGB), Theresa Obermüller as a “bearer of secrets” must observe strict confidentiality. Without consent, she cannot even make contact with others involved in the conflict. Nele gives her permission to make the data available — and Theresa Obermüller can now approach the case as one of “conflict support”.

There is one exception to the school social worker’s confidentiality obligation. Even if Nele had not given her consent, in this case Theresa Obermüller would have been required to take steps. This would be her duty according to § 8a SGB VIII: where there are serious indications of child endangerment, it would generally be imperative that she urges the legal guardians — here, the parents — to initiate remedial action.

Before bringing the consultation to an end, Theresa Obermüller must also judge whether Nele could be additionally endangered when her parents are informed. Theresa Obermüller knows from experience that parents are sometimes unable to cope and can react with force. Nele says it will be unpleasant and taxing for all three, but that she trusts her parents and that they will remain approachable for her.

Theresa Obermüller has being noting down Nele’s report in the first person; now she uses a standardized form to take down additional data (Form for Conducting and Documenting an Interview with a Person Seeking Help). Nele receives a copy of these minutes for her parents. Theresa Obermüller lets Nele know that the principal or the class teacher will be getting in touch with the parents, probably that evening. Before then, Nele should find an opportunity to get her parents ready for that. As a precaution, Theresa Obermüller tells the student that she can get back in touch with school social work immediately should there be any unforeseeable escalation at home.

4. Team Formation, Conflict Diagnosis, and Plan for Action

The initial steps are completed: ‘first aid’, clarification of the commission, and definition of Theresa
Obermüller’s position within the working field of conflict support. After a short conversation with the school principal, Theresa Obermüller sets up a first meeting of the SCM team for the next morning before school. With this step the case treatment which has, up to now, taken place on the intrapersonal level, is expanded to include treatment on the institutional level of the school. Because the social worker continues to assume that the student may be in danger, it is justified to call in a meeting on such short notice. Theresa Obermüller will be coordinating the SCM team as the conflict manager. She has been given (blanket) permission to do so by the principal and the teachers’ conference. The other members of the SCM team are (in this case) the two class teachers and the school principal.

Wednesday 7.30 A.M. – Before school has even started, the SCM team meets for its first collegial case consultation. Theresa Obermüller gives the team members the support application and the minutes she prepared during the interview with Nele. Documentation and written reports form the foundation for successful conflict resolution. The first task of the team is now to come to an initial assessment and to clarify role assignments within the SCM team.

Theresa Obermüller projects onto a wall screen the completed Form for Implementing and Documenting a Conflict Analysis, and she summarizes what has happened: “According to the information we have at this point, based on statements made by the 13-year-old student Nele and her friend Jessica, as well as chat exchanges and a video that have been ascertained, the student Nele had terminated the relationship several weeks earlier. In a viewing of the video, it emerged that Nele’s video shows her genitals, which was no accident, but rather undertaken with sexual intent – meaning that it fulfils the legal criteria for child pornographic material. There were numerous other students involved who became accomplices by requesting the video, taking possession of it, and re-sending it. It is not yet known how widely the video has in fact been distributed.”

In brief, Theresa Obermüller categorizes the conflict on the basis of its characteristics: “The conflict occurring is to be considered as stage E and is very complex. That means that the potential for escalation and endangerment is very great for all involved; the psycho-social damage already done to those involved is, in part, extremely severe; in the course of the conflict events, criminal offences have been committed; and the conflict events are highly complex! They are occurring on all levels: intra- and interpersonal, institutional, systemic and probably also on the level of parental cooperation.” The assessment of a conflict is always undertaken on a scale set up by the Steering Group. It categorizes the gravity of conflict situations on a scale from A to E (the highest).

In Theresa Obermüller’s estimation, there is a threat of serious detriment to Nele’s social status and to her emotional and physical well-being. She reports that Nele is on the verge of refusing to attend school. Fortunately, she is not expressing any suicidal thoughts right now and says she has no tendency to them. Steve’s attack, Theresa Obermüller explains, began on the interpersonal level and then escalated systemically. It could potentially lead to a significant disturbance of the peaceful community and work climate at the school. How widely the video has circulated on the internet is not yet clear; up to now, it is known to have been sent to various groups on WhatsApp. Mr Schuster, the principal, adds that he had a long talk with Nele’s mother the previous evening. She impressed him as being cooperative and rational. At that point, Nele’s father did not yet know what had happened because he didn’t get home from work until very late in the evening.

In the SCM team, questions come up: What is Steve’s response to the accusation? With teenagers, you can’t completely exclude the possibility that someone else with a mobile could have posted the video. And: how is child pornography defined in legal terms? On this second issue, Theresa Obermüller has done her homework. She spoke to the youth officer in the police department, using “What if…..?” mode as one would for a fictitious case. Nele is 13 years old. That is very significant. Nele’s video shows her genitals, which was no accident, but rather undertaken with sexual intent – meaning that it fulfils the legal criteria for child pornographic material, even if Nele looks like she’s 16. When such videos (or photos) are produced, acquired, or circulated by other persons, it is a felony according to § 184b StGB.

According to the penal code, this is a criminal offence and the police are required to investigate as soon as it comes to their attention – regardless of whether Nele and her parents want them to. If, on the other hand, the video (or comparable photo material) were not pornographic, then circulating it against Nele’s wishes would not be quite as grave an offence in terms of the penal code, and it would only be prosecuted on demand. Here, however, “With very high probability, a crime according to § 184b StGB is to be assumed.” That Theresa Obermüller has this reliable assessment – made by her cooperation partner in the police department –
so promptly at hand is an outcome of networking efforts she has pursued over many years.

In planning how to proceed, the SCM team follows systematically an action strategy that they have previously set out together. First, the mode of action needs to be determined – the team has to decide how to treat the conflict: by self-regulation, regulation on demand, obligatory regulation, threat intervention, or crisis intervention. The following questions are of help:

1. Does the conflict have to be treated immediately in order to prevent acute, severe damage to anyone’s emotional or physical well-being?
2. Would the conflict threaten to escalate and produce a situation of acute endangerment if there were no intervention?
3. Has there been a serious transgression against values and norms that calls for a pedagogical regulatory measure levied by the school?
4. Does the student who has been targeted wish for help with the conflict?
5. Does the class teacher or the principal want to leave the conflict resolution up to the students (or the parents)?

In this case, the group quickly reaches unanimous agreement: questions 1 through 4 clearly ‘yes’ and question 5 ‘no’. With that, the mode of action for the ongoing procedure is set: the school has to conduct a crisis intervention.

Every member of the SCM team now takes up a position in accord with his/her expertise and options for decision-making and action: as an advisor, conflict helper, conflict manager, or regulator. Treatment of conflicts that are serious or can escalate into a crisis should always be undertaken by a team.

Conflict treatment by a team ensures

- high quality of the treatment, particularly with regard to maximum protection of victims,
- a high educational standard in overcoming the crisis,
- the division of the time/work burden among several persons, which conserves resources,
- responsibility borne by several persons,
- critical reflection on and correction of planned actions thanks to feedback from team members.

The following persons and roles should be involved in an SCM or crisis intervention team:
### The SCM-Team

The core team is built around four roles. Although they could be performed by two persons, this should remain an exception due to the work load, but also in terms of defining oneself in the role. Therefore, the SCM team should be formed by at least four persons.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Task</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School principal (regulator, first order)</td>
<td>directs the team; confronts student(s) with accusation; decides on strategy for action, particularly on interventions, pedagogical or regulatory measures; leads intervention in cases of threat or crisis; takes responsibility for all actions in the school; involves the conflicting parties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class teachers (regulator, second order)</td>
<td>directs the class; confronts student(s) with accusations; decides on pedagogical measures; also takes responsibility for the legality and commensurability of actions taken in classes; involves the conflicting parties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict manager (role can be played by class teacher or school social worker)</td>
<td>conducts a conflict diagnosis; makes recommendations towards assessing the conflict events; advises the decision-makers in their planning and decision on strategies for action (mode, direction, level, data sharing); coordinates and supervises the process of crisis intervention, conflict resolution, and follow-up; reports to the regulators; involves the conflicting parties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict helper (teachers or external consultants)</td>
<td>conducts negotiations on reparation, three-way talks with victim and offender, mediation with others involved, coaching of human-rights observers; supports the monitoring of voluntary self-commitments or declarations to cease and desist</td>
</tr>
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#### Expanded team

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Task</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social education professionals</td>
<td>conduct social training sessions, systemic bullying intervention or brief intervention; these should be certified professionals who have pursued advanced training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media education specialists (optional)</td>
<td>provide advice on media education issues and technical-organisational aspects in cases of endangerment through the use of media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coaches (optional)</td>
<td>accompany and support victim and offender in serious conflict situations in order to avoid violent escalation or traumatisation; these should be professionals who have pursued advanced training (school psychologists, school social workers, crisis intervention specialists, school counsellors)</td>
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#### Support team (participates only partially in the collegial case consultations of those listed above)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Task</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conflict support assistants (teachers, external consultants or parents who have specific training)</td>
<td>conduct exploratory interviews with involved students and teachers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 5. The Crisis Intervention

Due to the decision to conduct an intervention, in this case the SCM automatically becomes a crisis intervention team. Now they spell out the goals of the crisis intervention: the primary aim is to achieve, in short time, de-escalation on the interpersonal and systemic level. That means:

- supporting Nele in re-gaining her stability and refraining from acts that could be self-damaging or damaging to Steve,
- obliging Steve and accomplices to refrain from any further cyber-attacking,
- re-gaining control of the situation, above all over possession and circulation of the video, and thus preventing further criminal offences,
- strengthening the pro-social value system among the classmates of Steve and Nele, and raising concern and compassion for the victim,
- and confronting the rationalization strategies that Steve has been propagating ("I didn’t do anything wrong, Nele is a bitch and it’s all her own fault!").

But first, several questions still need to be answered:

- How did the video get onto the net?
- How widely has it been circulated, and in what medias forums?
- Who requested to receive a copy?
- Who forwarded/shared it?
- Who has it in his/her possession?
What to Do About (Cyber)Bullying?

During the following school hours the conflict assistants, directed by Theresa Obermüller, conduct interviews with those students (and also teachers) who are involved in the conflict in the broadest sense (or who are witnesses to it). The outcome of the 30 interviews is already available the next day:

- At the school, approximately 70 students had viewed Nele’s nude video up to that point.
- About 30 students had saved the video, which they received via chat, and stored it on their mobile phones.
- Several students were very eager to get a copy and sent out requests for it.
- Only a few students deleted the video, finding it offensive.
- During school breaks, groups had formed in the hallways with people smirking and laughing. Only a few students were concerned and pensive.
- With the exception of Jessica, not one of these 70 students got in contact with an adult about the matter – despite the fact that the disastrous results of sexting had been discussed at a prevention workshop only six months earlier.
- Justifications had produced their intended effect on many students: compassion for Nele was uncommon. Even when questioned explicitly about Steve’s behaviour, hardly anyone found it morally reprehensible – there were practically no critical statements.
- The focus of indignation was on Nele’s behaviour.

Theresa Obermüller had been expecting that Nele would not be treated with much compassion. The value system of many children and adolescents is not oriented, of its own accord, towards respect and human rights. On the contrary, commercial TV formats based on shaming people mercilessly (“Germany’s Next Superstar”) present a blueprint for cynicism. Malicious jokes about someone else’s suffering are a lot more popular than compassion and moral courage.

Now that Theresa Obermüller has been able to glean a reliable impression of the conflict’s status, based on the interviews, she can now arrange to talk to Steve. An essential principle of the school’s SCM is that every person must have an opportunity to be heard. But Theresa Obermüller won’t contact Steve directly. Her confrontational interview with Steve will be preceded by a conversation between Steve and the class teacher or the principal. The binding tenet is: the accusation is always voiced initially by the responsible teacher or the principal (or the victim). Only the heads of the form and the school are legally commissioned to address educational issues of this gravity and have the right to confront a student with an accusation. Therefore the principal, Mr Schuster, conducts this first regulatory talk with Steve, who roundly rejects any blame for the cyber-attack. He denies that he was the first to re-send the video. He claims that he received it from other students and then shared it. And besides, he asserts, Nele herself had already posted the video on Facebook. Mr Schuster asks Steve to enlist help from Theresa Obermüller and get his version of the story down on paper. This way, everyone will understand him better. Steve agrees to do that, and Mr Schuster accompanies him to Theresa Obermüller’s office.

Theresa Obermüller greets Steve in a friendly and respectful manner. She will help him, she says, to express his view of the events, his experience, and his needs. “Steve, I would like to motivate you to be open and honest. If it came out later on that you didn’t tell the truth, the situation might get unpleasant for you. I don’t think that Mr Schuster or your class teacher would exactly be forgiving.”

She confronts Steve with the facts and the subjective experience of those involved, and she is eager to see how he responds. After all, based on the interview reports and the chat exchanges that have been ascertained, he is highly suspect. Perhaps he can contribute new information that would be important in regulating the conflict? Theresa Obermüller’s task right now is to understand him – his thoughts, his feelings and motives. In this consultation, she will establish whether Steve can accept the accusations and is willing to take responsibility for the effects of his own behaviour.
Unfortunately, Steve does not react as Theresa Obermüller had hoped he would. There is a lot at stake for Steve. If he can manage to deny responsibility for the purported violation of values and norms and for the emotional harm done to Nele (as well as the violation of her personality rights), then he's off the hook. And in fact, Steve does grab for the same justifications that he has been trumpeting to his classmates. The strategies range from denial (“She sent out the video herself, even posted it on Facebook”) through attempted reversal of the burden of guilt (“That slut, she shouldn’t be surprised”) to legalizing what he did (“That’s not forbidden”). It’s clear to Theresa Obermüller that there are plausible explanations for these justification strategies. That makes it possible for her to avoid condemning Steve morally. She holds to the basic tenet of separating the person and the behaviour, and remains friendly and open towards Steve.

Steve’ reaction does, however, reinforce Theresa Obermüller in her resolve to begin an intervention on the systemic level in both classes as soon as possible. And another matter seems to demand immediate attention, as well: Many of the classmates have already profited from possessing and sharing the video, motivated by things like sensationalism, wanting recognition from peers, or schadenfreude (gloating over another’s misfortune) coupled with the feeling of being worth more than the victim, or glee over being on the safe side.

For a systemic brief intervention (SBI), formally speaking Theresa Obermüller needs a commission from the class teachers and the principal. She would even prefer having a decision made by the all-class conference as a basis for action, but there is no time for that now. The following points are of importance:

- For the intervention to succeed, one of the essential requisites is that of evoking compassion. There are two factors potentially working against that: firstly, the relatively low social status of the victim, even before the attack; and secondly, the possibility of socially incompetent behaviour as a reaction to the attack, e.g. in the form of retaliation. On the first point, not much can be done in short order. Nele is not the class darling, but she’s also not marginalized.

- Nele and her parents need further support without delay – coaching that is tailored to the situation. Her class teacher says that Nele is a smart girl with good self-regulation.

- Another condition for success is that the behaviour of Steve and his accomplices be ostracised by the class teacher and the principal, plainly and clearly. Nele needs advocates. She is the one who was damaged – there can’t be any doubt about that.

The very same day, Mr Schuster talks to Nele’s parents, in the presence of the class teacher and Theresa Obermüller. Nele and her parents pledge to
reveal any and all information relating to the conflict and to inform the school immediately should any further attacks occur. They give the school permission to exchange case data within the SCM team. Mr Schuster makes it clear to Nele and her parents how important it now is that neither Nele nor any of her friends tries to ‘strike back’ aggressively. That would seriously endanger the outcome of the intervention. Nele and her parents promise that they won’t make any moves on their own and will refrain from any use of force or escalatory acts. The parents report that, as Mr Schuster had requested, they have temporarily taken away Nele’s mobile phone – among other reasons, to protect her from any further attack. Mr Schuster, for his part, promises to keep Nele and her parents well informed about how things progress. He reminds the parents that they can turn to him or the conflict manager Theresa Obermüller at any time. Theresa Obermüller offers Nele highly-frequent counselling and coaching sessions; Mr Schuster urges Nele to take advantage of that and never miss a session. The professional approach of the SCM team impresses Nele and her parents – they have trust in the team.

The next morning – it’s Friday – the SCM meets for its second collegial case consultation. Theresa Obermüller reports that the circumstances have been clarified, unequivocally: stowed in the school safe is a DVD with the ascertained video and the chat exchange between Nele and Steve. These suffice to prove that Steve – contrary to what he claims – posted the video against Nele’s will, purposely and deliberately, in order to “finish her off”: it is indisputable that Steve bears the responsibility for escalating the conflict.

Theresa Obermüller addresses a concern that relates to the conflict events on the systemic level of the school classes and peer groups. From her point of view, dissocial attitudes and behaviour have come to the fore in both classes. Justification strategies have been taken up by classmates. Due to the attack, Nele has been manoeuvred into an inferior position. In many of the interviews, she was condemned – and Steve’s behaviour wasn’t. The responsibility for the offence is being reversed. There is a danger that Nele will be marginalized even more. She is now in dire need of advocates, and both classes are in need of pro-social orientation.

Theresa Obermüller suggests that a systemic brief intervention (SBI) be carried out in both classes, and very soon. The SCM team agrees. The principal commissions Tom Griener with conducting the intervention. He is a teacher who is also a certified specialist for social training and systemic bullying intervention, and has engaged in both for many years. Together with the class teachers, he plans for the intervention to take place on the next school day.

Parallel to the SBI, the SCM team also develops a plan for other actions. The most important steps are summarised in a 10-point crisis plan:

1. **Individual support for Nele through highly-frequent coaching on the intrapersonal level (one-on-one)**

2. **Highly-frequent information and counselling for Nele’s parents and – if they wish – also for Steve’s parents to avoid a blockade in the form of a secondary conflict on the level of cooperation among the educational partners**

3. **A hearing with Steve and his parents suggesting a “package deal” for his participation**

   Since Nele says she can imagine continuing to attend the same school that Steve does, the SCM team recommends that the principal suggest a “package deal” to Steve. The offer would involve **deed adjustment** to “heal” the institutional conflict between Steve and the school community, as well as **loss adjustment** or reparation to ease the interpersonal conflict between Steve and Nele. The “deed” aspect usually includes doing a certain amount of unpaid work for the school community and apologizing, in front of the class, to the principal and the class teacher. In this particular case, Steve would also be expected, very soon, to revisit the chatrooms, disclosing his misbehaviour, expressing his regret (and thus restoring Nele’s “honour”) and requesting that the chat members immediately delete the video he has circulated.

   Deed and loss adjustment are, at Steve’s school, pedagogical methods that are applied according to established procedural standards and are usually implemented by the school social work office in the framework of conflict support. If he wants to profit from this offer, by a given date Steve has to submit a formal application to that office for conflict support. His taking this opportunity would be the starting point for consensual resolution. Other sanctions could be avoided or reduced. One conceivable sanction might be suspending him from class for a limited time.

4. **Restriction of mobile phone use during school hours**

   It will be suggested to Steve’s parents that, for a period of four weeks, he will not be allowed to carry a mobile phone during school hours. When entering the school building, he must hand in his smartphone to the secretary’s office and may not pick it up until his school day has ended. Should Steve be willing to
observe this measure voluntarily, that will be acknowledged as a sign of willingness to make reparation.

5. Deposition renouncing the use of force
A renunciation of (the use of) force is a particular type of declaration to cease and desist, which is formulated in the presence of the parents and signed by the student. In it, the student pledges to refrain from any further use of force.

In this case, the deposition includes the pledge to delete the video, never re-send it again, and refrain – also, expressly, in chatrooms – from commenting on the conflict, apart from posting a negotiated statement (as above under point 3). In addition, the renunciation of force comprises refraining from mental or physical coercion or harassment and from any violation of property rights (on photo/video material). In the event of a violation of this deposition, the school administration will impose sanctions: an official complaint to the police and Steve’s expulsion from the school. During the meeting in which the deposition is composed, an assessment will be undertaken of the willingness of the student offender and his family environment to conform to legitimate values and norms in the future. Point 4 (restriction of smartphone use) can be included in the deposition as a voluntary effort on the part of Steve.

6. Offer of support through highly-frequent coaching for Steve
Under the condition that Steve is willing to work towards improving his behaviour and resolving the conflict amenably (as stated in Point 3), he will be offered support toward fulfilling his deposition in the form of highly-frequent coaching.

7. Monitoring during school hours
For a period of four weeks, Steve will not be allowed to move freely about the school without a monitor. During this time, options for movement and communication at school will be restricted for him and his accomplices. His presence on or in the school properties will only be allowed if he is monitored by a teacher or other educator who is present.

8. Implementation of systemic brief intervention (SBI) in Steve’s and Nele’s classes
In the course of systemic brief intervention, in both of the (entire) classes, the students are expected to develop their compassion for persons in a situation similar to Nele’s and to compose a voluntary declaration of commitment towards that goal. Human rights observers shall be chosen in each class, and the distinction between tatting and eliciting help will be clearly drawn.

9. Talks with class members emphasizing norms and risks
Shortly after the bullying intervention, the principal and class teachers will conduct talks with students who were involved, in order to elucidate norms and risks and to re-emphasize that the possession and circulation of unauthorized images and videos constitute a criminal offence, violating the value system of the school community and, in the future, resulting either in educational and regulatory measures or in notification of the police. The principal and class teachers can refer in this context to the declarations of commitment that were composed and confirmed on a voluntary basis during the SBI.

10. Announcement of a social award — Monitoring the declarations of commitment
Once the SBI has been successfully completed, monitoring will occur on a regular basis in both classes to ensure compliance with the declaration of commitment. If the class members succeed in observing their self-made rules on decency, they will receive a social award. The human rights observers will receive recognition in their school report (“Student N.N. contributed very significantly to the development of social awareness and norms within the class”).

The minutes of this meeting are – as always – taken down by Theresa Obermüller in her role as conflict manager and distributed to the members of the SCM team.

The implementation of the 10-point crisis plan gets off to a good start. Nele and her parents accept the offer of counselling and coaching. Nele is able to refrain entirely from retaliation or returning insults. Her parents act prudently; they set aside their idea of confronting Steve personally and having a talk with his parents. They are not planning to notify the police. The class teacher and the principal were able to convey how damaging a further escalation of the conflict would be for Nele at this time. At bottom, Theresa Obermüller herself would not have been disinclined to recommend an official complaint. There had been several instances in the past where the involvement of the police and the district attorney added gravity to the process. However, the SCM team estimated that notifying the police would have made it much easier for Steve to present himself as the victim and to reverse the burden of guilt. The chance of forming an alliance with Steve’s parents and the classmates would be reduced. Still, the possibility is not excluded that the police may later be involved if pedagogical measures do not produce the desired effect.
The principal invites Steve and his parents to a formal hearing (see Point 3), giving them an opportunity to comment on the events and the principal an occasion to take stock of Steve’s willingness to de-escalate and make reparation, while trying to enlist the parents as partners for educational measures. The conversation begins as Mr Schuster and Theresa Obermüller had expected it would.

Steve tries to deny it all, to trivialize it, to put the other side to blame. His parents adopt his position. They endorse it. They say they trust their son and cannot imagine that he would do something like that. When someone makes videos like Nele did, that tells you a lot. They voice doubts about Nele’s moral integrity. Besides, other students had also received videos that I receive”). Since she didn’t have to play any exposed role in the SBI, Nele was present the whole time. Afterwards, she seemed visibly relieved. A few students who did not want to sign were not pressured to do so. They hadn’t done anything wrong, they argued. It was not possible to convey to them that the intervention was not about the past, but rather about future behaviour.

Theresa Obermüller asks Tom Griener to put together a formalised report on the SBIs (see www.klicksafe.de/cyber-mobbing). With their completion and the declarations of commitment, a milestone is set for the overall intervention. That is the basis for Point 9 of the 10-point plan: talks with class members to elucidate norms and risks. They take place on the same day – directly after the SBI – and are conducted exclusively by the “regulators” (the principal and class teachers). In this case, Mr Schuster conducts them in both classes. One-on-one with students, he calls attention to the legal norms and school rules that apply and emphasizes the risks students would be taking if they violate these norms in the future. And he makes it clear that he considers the appointment of human rights observers an important step. That is not an easy job, he explains, and taking it on indicates a person’s great capacity for compassion and their impressive moral courage. Theresa Obermüller is watching the students’ response. The principal’s talk hits the mark. The students appear concerned, aware of the seriousness of the situation. Theresa Obermüller is convinced: the use of force – in the form of cyber-attacks or otherwise – has just become a lot more unlikely in these classes!

The principal has the best intentions. He wants Steve to learn something from this conflict. He gives Steve his first chance for reparation: If, by Tuesday evening, Steve publishes a chatroom post in which he had posted the video “to get back” at Nele. He hated her after she broke up with him. The conversation takes a turn. Steve indicates that he is willing to make reparation.

The Systemic Brief Intervention

On the next day of school, Monday, Tom Griener comes into play with the systemic brief intervention SBI. Theresa Obermüller is involved as co-trainer.

Tom Griener is like a boulder in the bedrock of this school; he is a member of the steering group, and many years earlier he pursued continuing education to acquire the advanced skills such work demands. On such occasions as this, Mr Schuster excuses him from regular lessons – he considers himself lucky to have such capable people among his teachers.

The “scripts” for the intervention have been set out together with the two class teachers. For their orientation, Griener goes through the plan step by step. In advance of an SBI, Theresa Obermüller is always a bit tense. She never knows exactly what values and norms she is going to encounter in a school class. On the basis of the interviews, she reckons with considerable erosion of values in these classes. She and Griener take into account that the SBI may fail. That tends to occur in classes where pro-social values have been trodden on over a long period of time, and where pro-socially inclined students and parents are few and far between or have withdrawn out of anxiety. Nonetheless, even if the SBI fails, it remains valuable as a diagnostic tool. The SCM team can orient its ongoing strategy to the outcome.

But Theresa Obermüller is optimistic that the classes will, collectively, develop their compassion. If things go well, at the end there will be voluntary declaration of commitment signed by everyone.

The SBI is successful in both classes: both prepare declarations to respect human rights (“I hereby pledge that in the future I will not re-send and will immediately delete any damaging images, texts, or videos that I receive”). Since she didn’t have to play any exposed role in the SBI, Nele was present the whole time. Afterwards, she seemed visibly relieved. A few students who did not want to sign were not pressured to do so. They hadn’t done anything wrong, they argued. It was not possible to convey to them that the intervention was not about the past, but rather about future behaviour.

Theresa Obermüller asks Tom Griener to put together a formalised report on the SBIs (see www.klicksafe.de/cyber-mobbing). With their completion and the declarations of commitment, a milestone is set for the overall intervention. That is the basis for Point 9 of the 10-point plan: talks with class members to elucidate norms and risks. They take place on the same day – directly after the SBI – and are conducted exclusively by the “regulators” (the principal and class teachers). In this case, Mr Schuster conducts them in both classes. One-on-one with students, he calls attention to the legal norms and school rules that apply and emphasizes the risks students would be taking if they violate these norms in the future. And he makes it clear that he considers the appointment of human rights observers an important step. That is not an easy job, he explains, and taking it on indicates a person’s great capacity for compassion and their impressive moral courage. Theresa Obermüller is watching the students’ response. The principal’s talk hits the mark. The students appear concerned, aware of the seriousness of the situation. Theresa Obermüller is convinced: the use of force – in the form of cyber-attacks or otherwise – has just become a lot more unlikely in these classes!
The next day, Theresa Obermüller picks up the human rights observers for a first briefing and coaching session, for which they are excused from class. In the school community, sessions such as this are regarded as part of the educational work and can therefore be held during class hours. The human rights observers have the task of reporting, without naming names, any violation of human rights – in this case, as pledged in the declaration of commitment. Theresa Obermüller discusses at length how the monitoring of a voluntary declaration works. The observers need protection, good orientation, and frequent recognition. "You have to be aware that in this function, sooner or later someone is going to give you a hard time!" It's no accident that the word "courage" is contained in the expression "moral courage". Theresa Obermüller assures them she will provide support whenever they need it.

A discrete survey in both classes is conducted to see whether the SBI is bearing fruit. The results show that a large number of students are in favour of refraining from damaging behaviour in chatrooms. The majority says that force is taboo. A smaller number, those who had previously set the tone, still trivializes it, reverses the burden of guilt, and clings to justification strategies. The pro-social value system of the classes has been strengthened, but is not yet firm. Rules for the class chat are rejected. That is nothing new to the SCM team, it is a typical reaction of many classes that age: their need for autonomy and their corresponding resistance against interference from adults is great.

**Conflict Support for the Offender**

On Tuesday morning, Steve appears in Theresa Obermüller's office. Since the hearing on Friday, he has had time to think about whether he will submit an application to the social worker for conflict support – and finally has brought himself to take this step. Steve opens the conversation as was to be expected: Mr Schuster had told him he was supposed to go and see her. Theresa Obermüller set that straight: he must have misunderstood something. The school can't have misunderstood something. The school can't demand voluntary work or an apology. Only he himself, and in accord with his parents, can make a decision to do those things. If he really wants it, then the teacher responsible for mediation and reparation at the school will give him support. (This could also be done by the school social worker. But it is advisable to have various competent partners for different tasks at the school. Differentiating in this manner helps to avoid work overload and role confusion.)

Theresa Obermüller senses how annoyed but also torn Steve is inwardly. "You're annoyed? I can help you to get things back in order – but only if you want that!" She offers to support him in finding his own way.

Steve takes her up on that. Then Theresa Obermüller sets up two chairs in front of him and asks him to think about which one stands for the side of him that is annoyed, feels treated unfairly, and wants to refuse the deal on reparation and reconciliation – and then she asks him to sit on that chair (on work with chairs, cf. Hartmann-Kottek, Lotte: Gestalttherapie. Berlin Heidelberg 2008, S. 206f.).

It's easy for Steve to take up this position. A lot of resentment and injured pride comes to the fore – for Theresa Obermüller, an unmistakable sign of needs that have been neglected. He can't forgive Nele for having left him. She had just zapped him off with a message on the chat. "She was already keen on somebody else! She said the reason was that my clothes were shitty and I was not cool and got on her nerves all the time!" Theresa Obermüller mirrors him on the experiential level, saying "I can imagine that really hurt, being rejected like that." Bull's eye! Steve falls sad.

Now she asks him to sit on the other chair. "Steve, that could be the side of you that thinks it's done something wrong. The side that wants to get things back into order. So I'm asking this side: Do you think that you did something wrong?" Resentfully, Steve gets right to the point. Yes, he did something wrong, he knows that now. He shouldn't have posted the video. That was going too far. And he hadn't known that it was so strictly forbidden.

"Okay. So what does this side of you say about Nele? Do you think you did something wrong to her, too?" A hard nut to crack! "Not really! She earned it that my clothes were shitty and I was not cool and got on her nerves all the time!" Theresa Obermüller sets that straight: he must have misunderstood something. The school can't demand voluntary work or an apology. Only he himself, and in accord with his parents, can make a decision to do those things. If he really wants it, then the teacher responsible for mediation and reparation at the school will give him support. (This could also be done by the school social worker. But it is advisable to have various competent partners for different tasks at the school. Differentiating in this manner helps to avoid work overload and role confusion.)

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"Okay. So what does this side of you say about Nele? Do you think you did something wrong to her, too?" A hard nut to crack! “Not really! She earned it that I hurt her just as bad!” – “Whoops, you just slipped back over onto the other chair, he’s already had his say. Try again to see it from this chair! Start talking about effects it had for Nele!”

This is the entry into assuming another perspective and workings towards empathy and compassion. Theresa Obermüller assumes that Steve has a long way to go. Maybe he will at least be able to take the next step towards cognitive assumption of a different perspective.
The school specialist for mediation and reparation would be able to continuing working on that with him.

Theresa Obermüller pulls out the application form for conflict support. “So, Steve, now decide: accept help – yes or no? Now you have the opportunity to give one side of you the right of way, I think that the right decision would be to accept help. It would show that you’re strong enough to face the music for what you’ve done. Don’t forget that Mr Schuster wants to give you a chance if you post an apology on the class chat today! Without that, it’ll be the end of the road. It’s your ticket to patching things up.” She gives him an hour’s time to come to a decision.

Steve returns to Theresa Obermüller’s office right after the next lesson and fills out the application for conflict support with her. He formulates his apology for the class chat, including a short description of the consequences of his offence. Theresa Obermüller fetches Steve’s smartphone from the secretary’s office. He prepares the text and discusses it with Theresa Obermüller. Then he posts it on the chat. With that, the path towards ongoing conflict resolution is opened. Theresa Obermüller is glad that Steve seems to be getting on the move, too. But things are yet to take a different turn.

On Thursday, the SCM team holds a short meeting to assess the situation. All agree: the crisis intervention seems complete. Due to it, the crisis has de-escalated from stage E to D. Hostility and malice have, in the main, given yield to concern, compassion, and fear of prosecution. According to a criminological study, 70 % of children and adolescents adjust their behaviour with regard to norms and rules when threatened with prosecution (cf. Pogarsky, Greg: Identifying deterrable offenders. Implications for research on deterrence, in: Justice Quarterly, Vol. 19 [2002], No. 3). For the time being, the heat is off.

6. Regulating the Conflict

Theresa Obermüller regularly asks Nele, the class teachers, and the human rights observers about the current status of things. She concludes that for the time being, the de-escalation of the conflict is ensured: there seems to no longer be a high degree of self-endangerment or endangerment of others.

The human rights observers have the impression that all the classmates have deleted the video, not re-sent it, and not received any new videos. Still, the conflict is not yet definitively regulated.

This is a moment in which Theresa Obermüller, in her role as conflict manager, is irreplaceable – it can happen all too quickly that people start congratulating themselves in the assumption that the goals of the intervention have been attained. The 10-point programme for crisis intervention has been implemented in many of its parts – but not in all of them. There remains the educational heart of the matter: work with Nele as the person who was targeted. She needs support in overcoming the injury and learning the right lessons from it. On the offending side, Steve requires support, during the course of reparation, in working through what he did and maturing personally in the process. And finally, in both classes the development of pro-social competence has to be promoted through ongoing efforts.

The class teachers are monitoring whether the declarations of commitment are actually being complied to – and in fact, no violations have come to their attention. Nele seems more relaxed. She has the feeling that she has regained some control – but she still feels unsure of herself. She is worried that the video may have been circulated among students of other schools and may suddenly pop up again on the net – an fear that is hardly unfounded. Nele takes advantage of the coaching she was offered. She doesn’t want “buddies” who go to bat for her. Her friend Jessica suffices as a back-up among her peers. The topic of refusing to go to school is off the table. Classmates don’t mention the video to her. She doesn’t really want to consent to victim-offender mediation with Steve. She doesn’t want to be near him anymore.

Due to the monitoring requirement that was imposed on him, at the moment Steve cannot move around the school freely – so there is no danger that she will run into him during a break. This relieves the pressure on her.

And then: on Thursday, Steve does not come to school. His parents write him in sick. A week later, they give notice that he is leaving the school. He is transferring to another school, they say, to make a new start. The educational partnership with Steve’s parents ends here. The next day, the SCM team discusses the new situation. Cancelling the ‘package deal’ would normally result in a notification of the police about the offence. It would also be possible to expel him from the school ‘after the fact’. The other option is to refrain from these measures in the hope that Steve will effectively withdraw from the conflict. Then again, he might find another victim at his new school – no one really knows whether he has now learned better. Theresa Obermüller recommends that protection of the victim be given the highest priority and that the school refrain from a post-facto expulsion and an official complaint to the police, under the conditions that Nele and her parents agree and Steve does not initiate any more attacks. Steve’s class teacher regrets the student’s
withdrawal: “He could have learned a lot for the future from this conflict.” The specialist for mediation and reparation adds, “Making adjustment for the deed in front of his class and the reconciliation that would have followed could have worked wonders!” In lack of an educational partnership with the parents, however, formative influence at this level cannot be exerted.

The principal decides to involve Nele and her parents, as well as Steve and his parents, in the decision. He gets in touch with Steve’s parents. They are of the opinion that Steve has already made his contribution to settling the matter. “He apologized on the chat. That’s enough.” The parents don’t want him to work on regulating the conflict and making reparation. They request that Mr Schuster let him go his way without burdening the new start at the other school with a post-facto expulsion from the old school. Mr Schuster is not very satisfied with this. After conferring with Nele and her parents, he decides to refrain from further measures. That provides the best foundation for sustained protection of Nele and for control over the situation. Nele’s parents want to “calm things down” now, so that Nele can think about schoolwork again – right now, she’s way behind on that. Nele herself feels no urge to retaliate. She is glad that the climate in her class and her circle of friends has returned to normal.

In a final team consultation, Theresa Obermüller concludes that the conflict regulation is now completed – and the team working on the case can be scaled down in size. Now, the follow-up phase begins.

7. Follow-up and the End of the Conflict

It would be naïve to assume that two days of social training or even a systemic brief intervention could alter the informal value system and the dissocial tendencies that have been established in a school class over the years. Alterations in behaviour can be accomplished over a period of time through emotional concern, insight, good relational work, and also the threat of sanctions – but one has to keep at it.

One of the central tasks during the follow-up now consists in monitoring the observance of the agreements that were made. The students need the supportive presence of adults if they are to adjust their behaviour in the long term in accord with a re-activated framework of pro-social values and norms. The outcome of the systemic brief intervention serves for Theresa Obermüller as a basis for the follow-up phase. She will support the class teachers in their next steps. On her agenda are:

- orientation talks with the human rights observers, then further meetings with them – on a daily basis during the first week,
- periodic monitoring of the declarations of commitment during the coming school weeks, at least twice a week,
- composition of a renunciation of force together with one student and her parents, since she has declared her intention to continue re-sending the video if she gets a copy of it,
- invitation from the prevention team to the police to return to the school for another information event on the legal situation and the consequences of offences against the penal code,
- across-the-board measure: acknowledge the students’ effort! At least once a week! Don’t forget to announce the social award, and remember the acknowledgment for the human rights observers in their school reports.
- attempt to reach agreement with the classes on rules of conduct in social networks.

Unfortunately, when it appears that a conflict is over, motivation often slacks off. So also in Nele’s case. After the first monitoring rounds provide grounds for optimism, both class teachers want to get back to the normal agenda as quickly as possible. One of the classes is behind in maths, the other is busy with a vocational preparation project. That means that time for social education work is scarce, as Theresa Obermüller also knows. Therefore, she is not really disappointed when the teachers come out with a more or less definitive statement against further monitoring of the declarations and against continuing the human rights observers’ work.

The social worker would have liked to see things progress otherwise, but she respects the decision of the class teachers.

She has two more tasks to complete. Firstly, she produces a final report on the events and on the outcome of the systemic brief intervention, distributing it to the entire team. In it, she also mentions the deficits during follow-up, since they present a risk for the sustainability of the learning process. Secondly, she keeps in close touch with Nele.

Half a year later, Nele and Theresa Obermüller are holding their last session. Nele’s mother is also there. During these months, no further cases of (cyber)bullying have come up in the classes. That is a success! Theresa Obermüller is eager to hear how Nele and her parents have experienced the work that was done.
“When I think back…” Nele’s mother sets in, “that was a shock! As a mother I want to protect my daughter from that type of thing and I had to see: I couldn’t do it!”

Theresa Obermüller knows that in cases of such serious violations of values and norms, feelings of guilt and failure are always involved – for the victim, the offender, and within their school and family environments. The question of who is at fault is a burden for everyone, causing stress and overload.

Nele says that during the first few days she had had great difficulty going to school. The first steps into the building were like “horror”. She was glad to be able to take up the offer of coaching by the school social worker. It helped her a lot that the school had assured her its support and had looked after her. “Mr Schuster, my class teacher and you, you were so optimistic and you bolstered my courage. I remember that you told me, ‘We’ll master this together! We want you to go through this conflict together with us. That will make you even stronger!’”

Her mother adds, “It was really important for my daughter that she had people at school who took her part and spoke out about who was the offender and who was the victim!” She remembers well the first thing that the principal said to her: “Anyone who behaves like that at my school and damages other people so badly is going to take the responsibility. We don’t tolerate that kind of behaviour here!” For the principal, protecting the victim was the highest priority. He could have reacted with hesitation or reproaches, says Nele’s mother. She is thankful to him to this day for his resolute stance. Theresa Obermüller documents the conversation and prepares an evaluation of today’s feedback for the next meeting of the steering group.

This conflict case can now be considered closed.
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