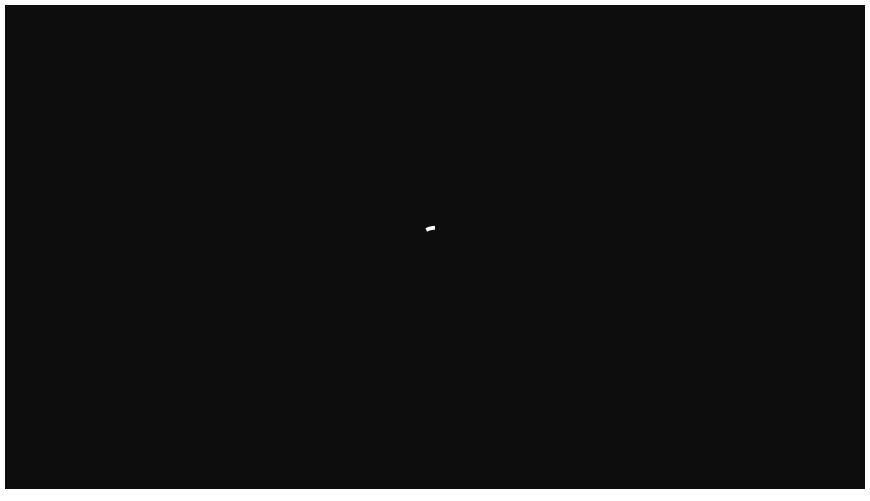
Why does Denmark have one of Europe's lowest rates of bullying?



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By Valérie Gauriat

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Denmark, along with Sweden and Finland, has one of the lowest rates of bullying in Europe. We speak to teachers, pupils and parents to find out how this Scandinavian country is managing to stamp out harassment in schools.

The Sluseholmen Skole in Copenhagen is one of many Danish schools where children are taught from an early age how to avoid bullying, which causes less damage here than elsewhere in Europe.

Meditation and cuddles are part of the morning routine for primary school pupils at Sluseholmen Skole. For teacher Maja Hindsgaul, well-being is key to learning.

"I'm the one they can talk to if something is difficult. And I'm actually talking a lot about who I am and what I like, and that it's ok if they like to hug. I like that too," she told Euronews.

"Of course, they have to learn to read and write and stuff like that, but they can do that if they feel safe. It's my mission to make them feel safe so that they can develop social skills at school."

Maja Hindsgaul, Teacher, Sluseholmen Skole - Euronews

Learning how to live with each other is part of the teaching.

"We're always trying to get the kids to work together in different types of groups, across genders and not always with their best friends," said teacher Louise Ibsen. "They're also practicing social skills for how to communicate, and also how to compromise on different ideas."

These methods are just some examples of the programmes used in many Danish schools to prevent bullying, as early as kindergarden. And the children are very receptive.

"Everybody has full respect for each other," said pupil Polly Schlüter Bingestam. "Friends help you if you are bullied because they stop the bullies and call a teacher."

Fatemeh Shahmarvand is a parent and part of the school board. This enables parents to take part in decisions regarding school programmes, which plays a key role in preventing bullying, says Fatemeh.

"I think the most important thing is that if you see that your children are feeling bad, you take it seriously and try to find out what could be wrong, that we parents talk to our children and find how to make them a bit more robust so that they can learn how to cope with adversity," she told Euronews.

'It's harder to be a teenager:' The impact of the internet and Covid lockdowns

Denmark, along with Sweden and Finland, has one of the lowest rates of bullying in Europe. However, a call centre, managed by Danish children's rights NGO Børns Vilkår, has seen the number of calls related to bullying increase, as well as suicidal thoughts, in particular among young teenagers.

"We have all age groups calling about bullying, but it seems to be a particular problem for, let's say 10 to 15-year-olds," says Børns Vilkår's CEO, Rasmus Kjeldahl. "And that's where it's extremely important for a child to belong to a group. The act of bullying is expulsion from the group."

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"The digital dimension has made it worse because the bullying doesn't stop when you leave the school," he added.

Rasmus Kjeldahl, CEO, Børns Vilkår - Euronews

Helle Hansen is an education and school bullying researcher. She's one of the experts who designed anti-bullying programmes introduced in Denmark's schools 15 years ago.

Such programmes have been successful, but must be reinvented she says, in the light of new realities.

"It's harder to be a teenager. We had the lockdown. We had Covid. You're more alone. In general, well-being is challenged. Young people, or kids who are involved in bullying, they need something. They need to understand the meaning of being here and being part of it."

"If we don't understand them, they are meeting meaninglessness. And meaninglessness is a part of why they start bullying each other."

The importance of communication and student-led governance

Understanding teenagers is a matter of course, for the headteacher of the Greve Gymnasium high school near Copenhagen. Like in many Danish schools, an anti-bullying charter can be found on its website.

More than sanctions, what matters most are group dynamics and dialogue with students. They have their say in the anti-bullying strategy, as they do for all the rules governing school life.

"We try to get close to the students in many ways and to discuss the teaching, the pedagogical principles, what they do in the breaks, what they do in their spare time, and of course, how they interact on social media. We have lessons about that as well," said Mette Trangbæk, the Headmaster of Greve Gymnasium school.

Mette Trangbæk, Headmaster, Greve Gymnasium - Euronews

"It's very important that we dare to go close to them and dare to facilitate their life, not only life in the classroom but also life in their spare time.We work on trust, because trust is a way to get closely related to them, but it's also to act upon the problems."

That was a trust we could bear witness to in one final-year maths class. A group of students chose to leave the room to talk to us about bullying, with their teacher's blessing.

"I'm an authority in my field in math and history. But I'm not an authority on what you should do or think. That's responsibility," Maths and History teacher Sanne Yde Schmidt told her students.

"I think a lot of bullying comes from hierarchies that don't work. And then people try to take power by bullying someone else. And if you don't need to take power because you have the power of your own life from the beginning, then that's another situation." she told Valerie Gauriat.

"The students have a quite big voice in the decisions that the school makes", points out Mathias Keimling, a student representative at the school board. "If we hear that any of our co-students, have problems, we can take it right to the board, where our opinions will definitely be heard."

Students from the Greve Gymnasium school near Copenhagen, Denmark - Euronews

Co-student Lucija Mikic feels the odds of bullying are lower in Denmark than elsewhere in Europe, because young people "learn from a young age to treat others as we would like to be treated. That's very much built into the way we're taught," she says. "And it's something you think of before you say anything to someone else."

For her class-mate Jonathan Emil Bloch Teute, the way children and teenagers relate to adults also plays a role: "teachers and parents are seen as confidants and guidance givers more than authorities you have to respect and answer to. If you do experience bullying in Denmark, I think everyone has someone older that they can reach out to and help fix this problem."

At the end of our conversation, the students meet up cheerfully with their maths teacher again.

"They missed the math class, but they learned something else that's also important. It's part of being grown up, to decide what is important.", smiles Sanne Yde Schmidt. "To be a person in your own right is part of feeling well about yourself, and that prevents bullying."

One of her students, Xenia Marie Biehl Wilkens nods approvingly. "Denmark as a country is good at giving us this feeling that we are a person, we are an individual, and we are heard and seen."

"And important!" adds Sanne. "You're your own person, but as a part of a community. We're separate but together."

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