

The Nottingham Model: A Toolkit to support embedding banter into school anti-bullying policies

Our vision: is to support schools and settings to embed the intervention and management of (in)appropriate banter into anti-bullying policies.

We recognise the complexities and ambiguity around banter-type behaviour and aim to replace a “just a laugh” culture with a clear framework for safety and respect where banter is used appropriately and inappropriate behaviours are not minimised as “just banter”.

This document outlines:

- the benefits of appropriate banter,
- the challenge of banter for schools and settings,
- defining the line: Banter versus bullying,
- understanding the difference between appropriate banter and bullying,
- the eight ways banter can become bullying,
- how the management of banter in schools and settings links to statutory frameworks,
- suggested wording for integrating banter into anti-bullying policies,
- how to support pupils,
- useful resources and the underpinning research,

The benefits of appropriate banter

Engaging in appropriate banter is a vital developmental tool for children and young people. When it is positive and pro-social it provides several benefits:



Social Bonding: It strengthens social relationships and enhances group affiliations.



Atmosphere: It relieves boredom and lightens the school mood.



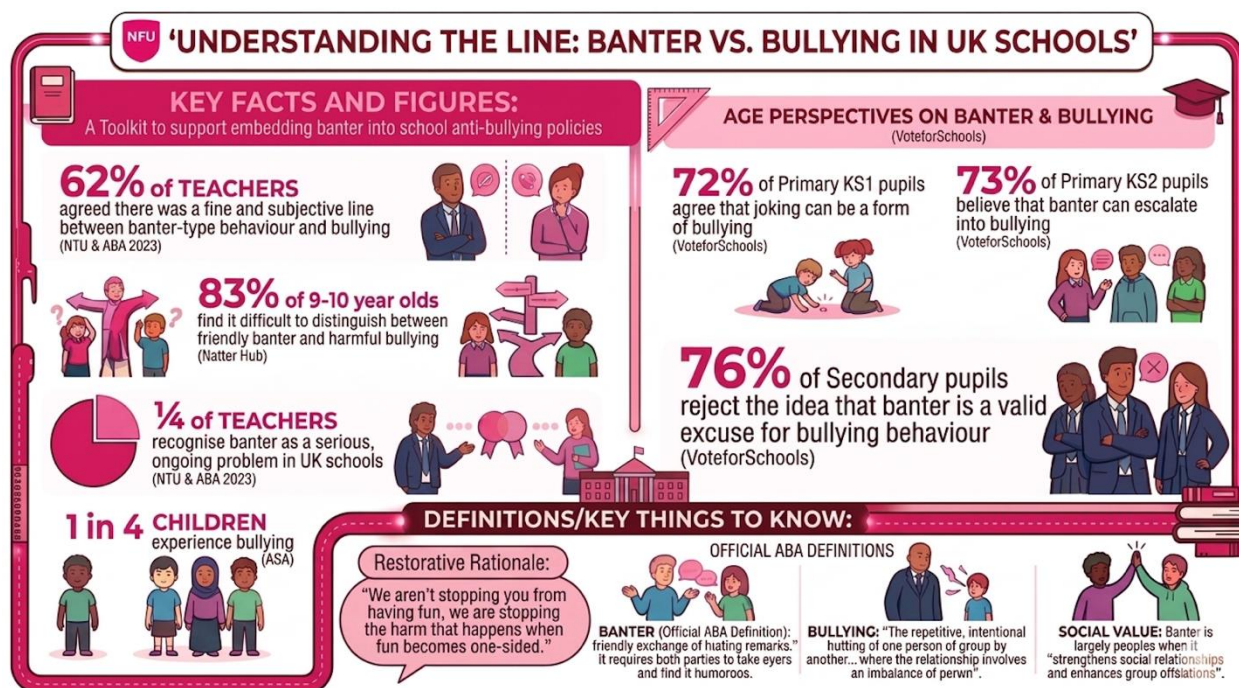
Skill Building: It helps children develop social "verbal ping-pong," navigating boundaries and understanding reciprocal interaction.



Perception: In most cases, sharing jokes with friends is fun and helps strengthen these friendships.

The challenge of banter for schools and settings

The inherent ambiguity of banter means that sometimes the significance of behaviours may be downplayed as “just banter”. Schools and settings need to challenge the “just a laugh” culture and the tendency to downplay the significance of behaviours as “just banter”, to prevent the normalisation of negative behaviours to ensure that every student can navigate social interactions safely. Research from NTU shows that there is often a fine and subjective line between banter and bullying.



Defining the Line: Banter vs Bullying

We have adopted the definitions of Banter and Bullying from the Anti-Bullying Alliance (ABA):

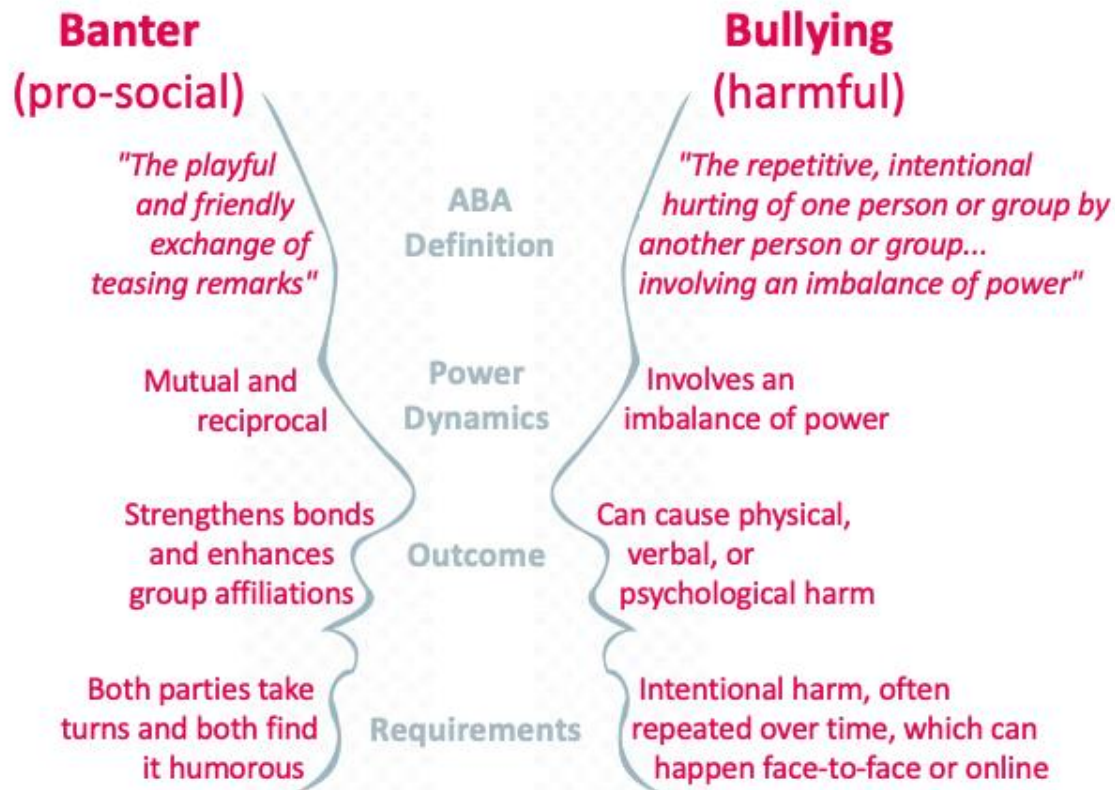
- Banter as: *"The playful and friendly exchange of teasing remarks"* It is pro-social when it is mutual, reciprocal and strengthens bonds. Banter requires both parties to take turns and both to find it humorous. ¹
- Bullying as: *"The repetitive, intentional hurting of one person or group by another person or group, where the relationship involved an imbalance of power. Bullying can be physical, verbal or psychological. It can happen face-to-face or online"* ²

¹ Anti-Bullying Alliance Definition of Banter

² Anti-Bullying Alliance Definition of Bullying

Understanding the difference between appropriate banter and bullying

Not all banter is harmful. The figure below highlights the key difference between healthy banter and bullying, helping us recognise when banter builds connection and when it causes harm.



The intent vs. Impact Gap: We recognise that impact may outweigh intent. Even if the speaker's intent was "just banter", the impact could still be bullying. If the impact is offensive, exclusionary or hurtful it must be addressed as harm.

The eight ways banter can become bullying

Understanding the distinction between appropriate (pro-social) banter, inappropriate banter, and bullying is crucial. Our research shows that banter can become harmful depending on the context, intent and impact on those involved. Staff should use these eight indicators to help determine if an interaction remains appropriate or has crossed the line from appropriate banter to bullying type behaviours:

Indicator	Why this Matters	Question to ask
Topic	Some topics as clearly inappropriate for banter.	Did the comments target appearance, identity, family, protected characteristics, bereavement or personal insecurities?
Social Context	Power imbalances and peer pressure can affect how banter is experienced.	Was there a genuine friendship and mutual understanding, or was there pressure, exclusion, or a power imbalance?
Repetition	Repeating behaviour can shift banter to bullying.	Was the behaviour repeated, ongoing, or directed at the same pupil over time?
Intent	Intent matters when judging banter	Was the interaction intended to build relationships and create humour, or to upset, embarrass, or exclude someone?
Audience Size	Larger audiences can increase embarrassment and social harm.	Did the interaction take place in front of a large group or online audience to cause humiliation?
Public vs Private	Banter shared publicly is more likely to cause harm or humiliation.	Was the interaction shared in front of others, online or beyond the intended audience in a way that creates a "Negative peer culture"?
The Target's Reactions	How the recipient reacts informs how and where we draw the line of acceptability.	Has the target stopped "giving the banter back" or asked the person to stop? Are they upset, distressed or offended?
Emoji Use	Emojis and humour markers can sometimes disguise harmful behaviour online.	Were emojis used to minimise or mask offensive comments?

How the management of banter in schools and settings links to Statutory Frameworks:

- **Keeping Children Safe in Education 2026:** Ensuring “*all staff understand the importance of challenging inappropriate behaviours between children that are abusive in nature*” (p15). Sexual violence and harassment and child-on-child abuse must never be passed off as “banter,” “just having a laugh,” or “boys being boys”. DfE 2026

- **Equality Act 2010:** Schools have a legal duty to eliminate harassment related to Protected Characteristics.

Suggested wording for integrating banter into anti-bullying policies:

As conversations about bullying evolve, schools are increasingly recognising the role banter can play in both positive social interactions and harmful behaviour. The following suggested wording provides a balanced approach for incorporating banter into anti-bullying policies, acknowledging its value in building friendships while ensuring that banter is never used to excuse behaviour that causes harm.

- Our school understands that banter is an increasingly relevant part of discussions relating to bullying; however, it is important to acknowledge that banter is not inherently bullying, and it can be an important part of social bonding and friendships. At the same time, we know that some bullying in society is passed off as ‘just banter’, and we know that banter can quickly escalate to inappropriate or harmful exchanges and bullying.
- Our school defines ‘prosocial banter’ as ‘playful, typically funny, teasing between friends’. Prosocial banter can occur both online and offline and includes a range of behaviours that may be verbal, physical, or information/message sharing (online). Banter can include some of the bullying behaviours set out in this policy document, so it is important to distinguish between shared positive social bonding and inappropriate banter and bullying. School staff will distinguish between banter and bullying by taking careful consideration of the *intention, content and topic* of reported incidents.

How to support pupils

It is important to acknowledge that well intentioned banter may go wrong, and mistakes can happen if the behaviour is not interpreted as it was intended. Clear reporting mechanisms are needed to ensure that pupils are able to speak out regarding inappropriate banter and bullying behaviours. Pupils should be supported to understand:

- when banter is and is not appropriate
- the factors that influence whether banter becomes bullying

Useful resources

Resource Name	What this resource does	Link
Anti-Bullying Alliance (ABA): Definition of Bullying	Provides a clear, research-informed definition of bullying and helps distinguish it from other behaviours	<u>ABA Definition</u>
Banter versus Bullying Toolkit (ABA/NTU)	Offers practical guidance and tools to help schools/settings and practitioners understand the boundary between banter and bullying	<u>Banter versus Bullying Toolkit (ABA)</u>
CPD Course: Banter or Bullying? Navigating the line of acceptability (ABA/NTU)	Professional development course exploring how to identify and respond to banter that may cross into bullying	<u>CPD Course</u>
<i>The Conversation</i> article. Betts et al. (2021): Seven ways that banter can become bullying	Article explaining the key ways banter can escalate into bullying and how to recognise warning signs	<u>Conversational piece; Betts et al. 2021</u>
Video Resource: Banter vs Bullying (NTU)	Video resource exploring real-world examples of banter vs bullying in school contexts	<u>Video Resource</u>
Podcasts	Podcast episode exploring how banter can create feelings of belonging but may also become isolating or harmful. Discussed the fine line between playful teasing and bullying. Podcast aimed at educators, exploring how bullying can be disguised as banter and how teachers can recognise, challenge and respond to harmful behaviour while promoting positive classroom culture.	<u>Anti-Bullying Week 2023: when does banter cross the line? - Reframe Podcast Series</u> <u>Anti-Bullying Week 2023 – Banter vs Bullying: influencing classroom culture (Teacher’s special) - Reframe Podcast Series</u>

Underpinning research

- Understanding Banter: A Systematic Review of Literature to Conceptualize the Behaviors That Characterize Banter
<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/sjop.70127>
- Exploring UK teachers’ Perceptions and Management of Banter versus Bullying
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/15388220.2026.2699681>
- The role of digital cues in online banter: a systematic review of adolescents’ and emerging adults’ views, uses and interpretations, 2024
<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s12144-024-06698-8>



- “It’s all part of the culture”: undergraduate students’ experiences of banter in university sports clubs and societies, 2023 <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s12144-023-05026-w>
- Banter Versus Bullying: a University Student Perspective, 2021 <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s42380-020-00085-0>
- “I feel like everyone does it” – adolescents’ perspective and awareness of the association between humour, banter and cyberbullying, 2020 <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0747563220300522>
- “People think it’s a harmless joke” young people’s understanding of the impact of technology, digital vulnerability and cyberbullying in the United Kingdom, 2017 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/17482798.2016.1233893>

This toolkit was developed in collaboration between Nottingham Institute of Psychology, Nottingham Trent University Psychology and Nottinghamshire County Council by Lucy Betts, Sarah Buglass, Hannah Lindsell and Katherine Marshall.