

# Bullying



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## **My son is getting bullied and teased at school what can I do?**

### **What is bullying?**

Bullying is repeated intentional intimidating behaviour that causes distress, hurt or undue pressure. The target is usually seen as weaker or more vulnerable than the perpetrator.

### **Bullying can be**

**Verbal** – threats, name calling, put downs

**Physical** – physical violence or threats of violence

**Social** – deliberately excluding the person from social situations or ignoring them

**Cyber bullying**- threatening emails, harassing or threatening text's, circulating offensive photos or materials about the person, harassment in chat rooms or on social networking sites.

### **Characteristics of Bullies**

When boys bully they tend to use overt physical tactics. When girls bully it can be less obvious and harder to spot.

Bullies tend to have issues controlling their aggression, may have witnessed violence or aggression at home or may have been bullied themselves.

### **Why are children with autism bullied?**

- Children and young people with autism are unfortunately often teased and bullied at school. Sometimes they can also be the bullies and pick on others.
- Children and young people with autism are often soft targets for bullies; they are 'loners', have unusual behaviour, poor social interaction skills and lack assertiveness.
- Children with ASD are frequently subjected to bullying when others learn that they can tell the child with ASD to do or say almost anything and they will then go off and do it. This type of bullying is particularly hard to spot.
- The student may have no desire to conform to age appropriate social norms such as popular fashions, interests and music. These differences are especially noticeable in adolescence and single the young person out from their peers.
- The young person with autism may not even recognise they are being bullied or recognise what bullying is.
- People with ASD may tolerate teasing from peers just to have company. They may have difficulty understanding whether the comments or actions of others are malicious or manipulative. The young person may break school rules, steal or engage in other inappropriate behaviour just to be accepted.
- The young person is more likely to get caught if retaliating to bullying.
- Young people with autism are easily set up by others to be bullies without realising it.

- Teasing and bullying can trigger an angry or emotional outburst without warning, some time after the event. When behaviour of concern is occurring in the classroom, always consider whether it is the result of bullying. The student might have great difficulty communicating the distress caused by these problems.

### **Signs of Bullying**

It may be harder to detect that a child with autism is being bullied, as behavioural changes may not be as obvious as in children who do not have autism.

The child with autism may even be oblivious to being bullied and not display any obvious behaviour change or report their feelings to you.

### **Physical**

- Unexplained bruises, scratches or cuts.
- Torn, damaged or missing clothes or belongings.

### **Emotional**

- Experiencing non specific pains such as headache or abdominal pain.
- Increased anger or aggression
- Increased anxiety
- Development of a “tic”-Uncontrolled continuous twitch/spasm/grimace/cough or sniff see “Tics and Autism” for further information.
- Irritability, tempers outbursts- more than usual.
- Being unhappy, upset tearful or distressed.

### **Behavioural**

- Becoming more withdrawn, stammering,
- Refusing to go to certain places, events or see certain people
- Stopped eating
- Attempting suicide or self-harm, talking about suicide
- Increased fixation in special interest/ change of special interest to violent related TV shows, video games or weapons
- Increased self stimulatory behaviour
- Increase in self harming behaviours such as head banging or biting
- Seeking more sensory stimulation or withdrawing from all sensory stimulation such as touch
- Unable or reluctant to say what is wrong
- Drawing or story writing with violent themes

### **Other behaviours**

- Bed wetting
- Nail biting
- Poor sleep
- Poor behaviour at school in an attempt to come home.
- Refusing to go to school

### **What you can do**

- Watch carefully for signs of bullying
- Be available to talk with your child about their concerns.
- Talk with the child about what they are experiencing
- Talk to the child about what is a good friend./ what is a bad friend
- Do not encourage the child to fight back – the child needs to learn how to appropriately deal with the situation –  
Remind them to tell the other person to STOP and Walk away and then Tell a teacher  
(it is very important the child can tell a teacher often children with ASD do not realise they need to do this.)
- Parents should not approach a child they suspect of bullying their child or approach the parents of the other child. Approaching the other child or family involved can lead to further problems and even legal action.
- Parents should speak with the principal of the child's school regarding concerns, make the school aware that this is a very serious issue for your child and you would like it to be dealt with appropriately.

The school has a duty of care to take reasonable measures to prevent foreseeable risk of injury to their students. The child has the right to an education in a safe and supportive environment free from bullying, harassment and injury.

- Discuss the schools bullying, welfare and discipline policy, ensure you understand it and that the school is following it. All schools should have a code of conduct and a plan to combat bullying.
- Model appropriate behaviour at home – children with ASD find it difficult to distinguish playful joking and roughhousing from bullying and fighting.

### **What Schools can do.**

- Enforce the bullying and discipline policy.
- All students in the school should be aware that bullying is unacceptable through a school policy of positive behaviour management.
- Support the child with buddies in the playground, integration aide or yard duty support.
- Encourage friendships.
- Ensure that all staff have an understanding of the social difficulties experienced by students with ASD. Staff need to be trained to look beyond the behaviour of the child with ASD to ascertain what or who caused them to act that way with regard to the child naively following the suggestions of others.

- Teachers need to be very aware of their own behaviour- do not act in ways that belittles the child with autism in front of their peers.
- Set up a home base or resource room for the student to retreat to when feeling threatened or anxious. See creating a home base.
- Educate students about ASD/ differences and tolerance.
- Make sure the student has someone to talk to when upset.
- At lunchtimes ensure the child is engaged in activity with supportive peers.
- If the child is aimlessly wandering, alone and in areas that are unsupervised they are more likely to become a target of bullying
- **Bullies target kids with autism not just because they are different but because they are often ALONE** with no friends to back them up or support them and no assertive skills to ask the bully to stop.

### Dealing with Cyber Bullying

Cyber bullying is very common; children and young people with ASD may be subject to cyber bullying quite often, given the amount of time that these children spend on computers. Cyber bullying is as distressing and damaging to a person's self esteem and reputation as being bullied in person. There are instances where young people have committed suicide due to cyber bullying. Young people with ASD may not report cyber bullying or know what to do about it.

### What to do

- Tell someone- it is very important the young person tells someone that there is a problem.
- If the problem is coming from another child at school then involve the school in the issue.
- Don't respond- the more the young person engages with the bully the more likely they are to continue
- Privacy settings- ensure that if the young person is using social media or other sites they have strong privacy settings enabled, that they do not post private pictures of themselves or their personal details (address, phone number etc.) on line.
- Mobile phones- it may be good to ensure the young person does not have a mobile phone with them after bedtime each day- then you know that the phone is not going to be distracting the person from their sleep
- Ensure the young person only gives their number to close friends.
- Keep usernames and passwords secret so others can't hack into your accounts
- If the bullying is very serious and involves personal threats report it to the police.
- Keep records of the threats/ harassment
- Contact your phone /internet provider- you may be able to block certain phone numbers or websites
- Change numbers/emails contact details if possible

<http://au.reachout.com/find/articles/cyberbullying>

### **Supporting kids with autism**

It is important to teach children with autism -

- What is good friend behaviour?
- What is not friend behaviour?
- Who is a bully? - That a bully can be anyone- someone at school, someone on the internet, a sibling or an adult.
- What is bullying?
- What to do about it.
- That they need to report it - it is important that the child with autism knows to report bullying to a teacher, aide, principle, parents or someone they trust so it can be dealt with.

The young person with autism may not be aware that someone can help them with their problem. They may retaliate or put up with bullying without realising they can be helped.

- This information can be taught through social stories, role plays, social scripts, diagrams or another way that the child will take in information and respond to it.
- ASD is life long, so the young person will need repeated participation in anti-bullying programs that fit each social and developmental stage.

### **References and further information**

[http://www.theline.gov.au/factsheets/factsheet\\_bullying.pdf](http://www.theline.gov.au/factsheets/factsheet_bullying.pdf)

<http://www.bullyingnoway.com.au/issues/disability.shtml>

Department of Education

<http://www.education.vic.gov.au/aboutschool/childhealth/bullying.htm>

[www.autismtraining.com.au](http://www.autismtraining.com.au)

<http://au.reachout.com/find/articles/bullying-what-it-is>

Article- Strategies to reduce the bullying of young children with Asperger Syndrome  
Tony Attwood available from [www.Mindsandhearts.net](http://www.Mindsandhearts.net)