



Bullying and Students on the Autism Spectrum

Contributed by the NATTAP Partners (Network of Autism Training and Technical Assistance Programs)

This article is dedicated to the memory of Sue Baker, our NATTAP partner from Iowa. She was a long-time member of NATTAP and an incredible professional who was a champion for individuals on the autism spectrum. Sue: You are gone, but never forgotten.

It is not unusual to hear stories about students - with and without disabilities - being bullied. Stories about bullying have captured media attention across the country as children try and cope with being bullied, suffer the impact bullying has on self-worth, experience the humiliation and loss of feeling safe, and in extreme situations, attempt to adjust to losing a loved one to suicide motivated by bullying. The reality is that students on the autism spectrum are bullied more often than students with disabilities. In fact, of the students who are bullied, 63% are on the autism spectrum. Regardless of the outcome associated with bullying, and whether or not the student has a disability, bullying is a serious and pervasive problem that must be addressed in schools.

Bullying involves repeated harmful actions toward an individual or a group. It occurs when someone is perceived to have a weakness, a challenge, or a difference that may serve to isolate them and to make them a target for harmful acts. Bullying often occurs in front of or includes others, and witnesses can play an important role in increasing or decreasing bullying, if they choose.

There are various forms of bullying, including verbal, physical, emotional, educational, and property destruction. A growing area for bullying is cyberbullying, in which Facebook, email, Twitter, and other forms of social media are used to spread unkind and often untruthful information about students. While social networking can be a great resource to connect people, it can and has been used in a harmful manner to ostracize and exclude others.

The impact of bullying can be significant and can include lowered self-esteem, heightened anxiety, depression, fear, refusal to attend school, isolation, suicidal ideation, and suicide. Sometimes the signs are apparent, and at other times, individuals who are bullied try to mask or hide their reactions to the bullying. Involved professionals and family members may notice that the bullied individual experiences a decrease in grades, an inability to concentrate, a loss of interest in academic skills, school avoidance and higher rates of absenteeism, and ultimately the desire to dropout. Families and professionals should be aware of behavior changes that

may indicate a student is being bullied. For example, if a child or adolescent refuses to go to school, it may be an indicator that s/he is being bullied and does not feel safe at school.

For students on the autism spectrum, bullying may be difficult to detect and understand. Because of theory of mind or “mind reading” challenges and social skill deficits, these students become vulnerable targets for bullying. Theory of mind differences result in difficulties grasping the intentions of others and understanding what others are feeling and thinking. In terms of social skills, individuals with autism have difficulty reading nonverbal cues, including body language and the facial expressions of others. In addition, they may take comments literally instead of understanding the underlying and, perhaps, unkind message. Many may have difficulty detecting the difference between friendly banter and bullying. As such, learners on the spectrum may over- or under-react when perceived or real bullying happens.

In addition to the emotional toll on students and their families, bullying is becoming a growing area for litigation. Schools must seriously investigate any complaints of bullying made by parents or students. If the student has a disability, bullying could be viewed as denying a student a free and appropriate education (FAPE).

While bullying impacts individual students, programs must be implemented school-wide. School-wide anti-bullying programs should be conducted that focus broadly on teaching tolerance and understanding, and on creating a safe school environment overall. Research shows that proactively providing strategies and supports within the context of the school culture can decrease or minimize the need to reactively respond to incidents (Espelage & Swearer, 2008). Building leadership must demonstrate an absolute intolerance for bullying and the entire school community must understand and support this belief. Below are several suggestions:

- Create a school-wide no-bullying policy that clearly describes the various forms of bullying, outlines procedures to be followed when bullying occurs, and articulates consequences. This policy should be shared with parents, and parents should be encouraged to discuss the policy with their children, with or without, ASD. The policy should be revisited frequently with students and posted in various areas of the school.
- Address anti-bullying as part of your school-wide positive behavior support program. Establish rules and post these throughout the school. Rules should not be stated simply in negative terms (telling students what not to do), but should tell students how they are to act. Often times, rules are stated using abstract terms, such as, “respect others.” Be tangible and teach what respectful behavior looks like, teach how to be respectful, and teach others how to respond to behavior that is not respectful. Revisit the rules regularly and share rules with parents.
- Highlight students who have exhibited acceptance toward classmates. Staff should acknowledge random acts of kindness by posting notices in central locations. Staff can

also distribute reward cards to students when they notice students treating classmates in a positive fashion.

- As a school, identify social skills that are important to focus on. For example, many students lack problem-solving, negotiation, anger management, and conflict resolution skills. Choose a social skill of the month. Rehearse with students and continually coach throughout the month. Staff should also remember to be a positive role model for these social skills.
- Hold meetings in which bullying is discussed. Allow students to provide examples and discuss how it felt to be bullied. Make sure students know the consequences for bullying. At the same time, make sure they also understand the importance of establishing positive relationships.
- Many schools collect school-wide behavioral data. If there are times or areas of the school where bullying is more likely to occur, develop a staff plan for adult supervision. If recess, passing periods, bus rides, or certain classes are more problematic, work with staff in those areas to identify the signs of bullying. Oftentimes bullies are very discrete and bullying may be hard to detect. Work with staff on strategies and a plan of action. If unstructured times of the day are more problematic, it may mean that more staffing is required during those times.
- Create information about cyberbullying that can be sent home to family members and given to students. Students need to understand that technology allows us to maintain a permanent record. It may be necessary to establish rules for the use of personal technology in the school.
- Bullies seek power and attention from bystanders. Empower peers to take action to stop bullying events by teaching them how to seek help, distract a bully, and advocate on behalf of the target of a bully. Create a process they can follow if bullying escalates. Make sure bystanders feel safe reporting classmates and that confidentiality is respected.

For specific students on the autism spectrum who are potential victims of bullying, consider the following:

- Help individuals on the autism spectrum clearly discern what bullying is and is not. For some students with autism, it will be helpful to explain in concrete terms what bullying is by providing specific and concrete examples that do and do not depict bullying. Through the use of social narratives, role playing and coaching, individuals can be presented with real life concrete examples of bullying and teasing, and helped to learn the difference between the two. Realize that it is difficult for many with, and without,

ASD to understand the true intentions of others. However, for students on the spectrum, it is critical that they understand the differences.

- When bullying does occur, a safe person or safe place should be identified for students on the autism spectrum to access quickly. Write out and/or illustrate procedures that students should follow if they believe they are being bullied or if they are in a situation in which they feel uncomfortable or unsafe. Provide opportunities for students to practice the procedures at various times. It might be helpful to provide a small procedure card for the student to carry in his pocket, wallet, book bag, or backpack.
- Another key to safety is to create a community of friends around the student. Students have the potential to become victims when they are isolated in the student body. Making sure they are connected to others through informal or formal means may increase their safety. If the hallway is problematic, assign other students to be a hall buddy with the person with ASD.

Bullying can heighten students' anxiety, cause them to feel unsafe, and hinder academic performance. All students, including those on the autism spectrum, have a right to feel safe at school. Each of us has a role in making school a safe and caring environment that fosters learning and positive social-emotional relationships.

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Resources

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[CNN Health: Why Autistic Kids Make Easy Targets for School Bullies.](http://www.cnn.com/2012/09/07/health/autistic-kids-bullied-time/)

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