

Bullying and how to deal with it: A guide for pupils with an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

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autism south africa



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BULLYING CAN TAKE MANY FORMS:

PHYSICAL

Hitting, punching, kicking, spitting, taking or mistreating belongings

VERBAL

Name calling, teasing, threats, taunting, insults, sarcasm, ridicule, spreading rumours

NON-VERBAL

Obscene gestures, eye-rolling, threatening stares, facial expressions

SOCIAL

Singling someone out, ostracising them

Bullies will always find a reason or make up their own reason for victimising someone.



WHO ARE THE BULLIES?

Bullying is not just an experience between two people, bully and target. 'It is a complex process of behavioural interactions that may involve many children.' (Heinrichs, 2003). The pupils present are 'bystanders' and may be a:

- re-enforcer – who provides an audience for the bully
- assistant or supporter – who becomes actively involved by providing physical/psychological support to the bully
- defender – who actively defends the victim
- outsider – who does nothing or walks away or observes from a distance.

The difficulty is that the bystanders are very much involved and without them the bully has no audience. However, should the pupil who laughs or verbally provides support for the bully, be punished the same as the pupil bullying? This is where 'zero tolerance' policies and whole school involvement are paramount.



Bullying can take many forms: physical bullying like hitting, punching, kicking, spitting, taking or mistreating belongings.

CHILDREN WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDERS

Children with autistic spectrum disorders (ASD) have problems in three areas:

- communicating
- social relationships
- imagination and creativity.

So imagine if you have to learn social skills because they don't develop naturally, you don't understand jokes and idioms, and body language is a complete mystery – how would you know what bullying was?

'It requires a certain level of social competence to categorise what is happening as "bullying." I mainly remember a painful confusion, not really knowing whether what was happening was accidental or intentional, whether this was supposed to be happening or not. Other children were baffling and frightening almost all the time: it's only now looking back, that I can classify some of that as "bullying".' (Sainsbury, 2000).

Bullying can happen anywhere and anytime, before or after school, in lessons, moving between lessons, in the toilets, in the changing rooms, during break times or lunchtimes

In this booklet I have described some guidelines for schools and parents to help with the problems and hopefully help to reduce this painful, damaging behaviour. We can make a difference and this is paramount as Childline (2004) reports that some children commit suicide every year because they have been bullied.

HOW CAN SCHOOLS HELP?

PUPIL AWARENESS

Teaching pupils about medical conditions, disabilities and any type of 'special need' may increase empathy and reduce prejudice. Assemblies on certain topics, for example, diabetes, ADHD and Asperger syndrome, will help to heighten acceptance and understanding. It is not that you are 'labelling' a person but offering 'signposts' which will develop tolerance and respect.

It is good to try and encourage schools that have enrolled learners with ASDs, to cover ASDs in a lesson, at least once a year.

ZERO TOLERANCE BULLYING POLICY

- Reinforce that bullying will not be tolerated
- Have clear procedures for staff to report incidents
- Every incident of intimidation to be investigated
- Monitor the documentation to establish which pupils are involved, when and where and act upon this information
- All information to be shared at staff briefings, by memos or on staff notice boards
- The information needs to be regularly reviewed to ensure the policy is effective. Is there, for example, an increase of bullying? If so, why? Trends need to be evaluated
- Adopt a 'tell' culture for the pupils: it is not right to keep quiet if you witness someone being bullied
- Develop more understanding and tackle prejudice by giving pupils the opportunity to debate, have class discussions, act out scenarios in drama, in fact any way to reinforce why bullying is wrong
- Encourage the class to make up their own rules for behaviour and discuss appropriate punishments. This will help the pupils to become aware and more responsible for their own behaviour.

Remember that a pupil with ASD will have difficulty in understanding and may respond in different ways.

'Often unable even to name what is happening to us as 'bullying', children with Asperger's just absorb it, and either feel that we are idiots or end up expressing our pain by lashing out.' (Sainsbury, 2000).

PUPIL SUPPORT SYSTEMS

Elect a school council or create peer support programmes to train and support older pupils to help younger pupils who may be experiencing problems. Hold regular meetings to receive feedback and document findings.

Their role would include:

- being available at break times or lunchtime
- helping younger or new pupils with the transition of moving to a new school
- assisting with minor disputes or friendship 'fall outs'
- helping to sort out concerns and informing staff if necessary
- organising competitions (with small prizes) asking pupils to design 'anti-bullying' posters to be displayed around the school
- conduct an anonymous school survey to evaluate where and when the bullying takes place.



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BUDDY SYSTEM

This involves a responsible peer looking after a pupil with ASD, for example, spending break times/lunchtimes together or just being there whilst moving from lesson to lesson. It can be a regular or infrequent arrangement depending on the needs of the pupil.

‘Some pupils (particularly those with Asperger syndrome) may be reluctant to allow close proximity buddy support for fear of appearing too different. If this is the case, buddy supports can maintain a discreet distance in the corridor during change-over times. Should a difficult situation occur, buddies are then able to step in to help.’ (Hewitt, 2005).

Having someone to talk to and share your feelings with, bearing in mind that a pupil with ASD has limited understanding, is crucial. This quote was taken from a message left by a boy who committed suicide.

‘There was one, only one thing I wanted while I was alive, a friend I could talk to, really talk to from the heart. Just one friend like that, only one, was all I wanted.’ (Robinson et al., 2003)

SUPERVISION AND MONITORING

Good supervision and observance is a key to combating bullying. Every member of staff must be involved. Learning support assistants are very aware of group dynamics and will often notice an incident which won't be seen by a teacher in front of a large class. This information must be flagged up to colleagues. The answers could be simple, for example, a change of seating plan.

Remember that a pupil with ASD may respond in different ways to cope with bullying.

‘Many children, like survivors of trauma, “froze” in response to bullying (I remember being literally unable to move or speak at times) or developed forms of dissociation.’ (Sainsbury, 2000)

This can lead to complex mental disorders, so good awareness and observation skills are needed. Due to their lack of understanding of social situations, a pupil with ASD can sometimes incite a situation.

'Some young people with Asperger syndrome can intimidate and hurt other pupils, either because they do not understand when they are making others uncomfortable or because their interests can be dangerous, e.g. wrestling. This type of difficulty needs careful handling by support staff.' (Colley, 2004).

A further problem is that children with an ASD can often be prompted to do things by other children, knowing they will get in trouble. However, due to the inability of children with ASD to read signs or understand other people's intentions and also their intense desire to make friends, they will often do things just because people tell them to. The result is that the child with ASD often ends up getting the blame for bullying situations that were started by another student.

Prefects and peer counsellors can also take responsibility for looking out for bullying incidents.

Ensure information is documented and communicated.

PROMOTE CO-OPERATIVE LEARNING

When group work is required, group members should be chosen by the teacher to avoid certain pupils being left out and becoming anxious.

'Students who are not valued in the group can be excluded from contributing and group dynamics may even provide a perfect opportunity for bullying and teasing to occur.' (Heinrichs, 2003).

Being aware of pupils' needs and personalities is essential to create a positive learning environment. Reducing competition and encouraging respect will maximise the learning experience. 'Such a sense of safety and belonging is an important factor in bullying prevention.' (Heinrichs, 2003).

A RETREAT/SAFE PLACE

This could be a classroom, special needs department, library, computer room or any area recognised by the whole school as a quiet place for pupils to use if they are stressed, worried or just need somewhere to 'chill out'.

The use of a retreat needs to be monitored carefully. If a pupil is regularly spending a lot of time there, what is the reason? Pupils with Asperger syndrome often need time alone or will enjoy long periods of time on the computer but, if it is being used as somewhere to escape from bullying, the situation needs to be addressed.



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SOCIAL SKILLS

This training can help pupils increase their understanding, interpret social signals and practise their social skills. A one hour session for 6-8 weeks can be extremely beneficial to help raise self esteem and build confidence. The lessons will need to be tailored for the needs of the group (maximum 6 pupils), to allow time for any issues that may arise, such as discussing bullying.

'School was a torture ground in itself for me because of my lack of social skills and my absolute terror of people (in part because I didn't just automatically know the social rules and, when I did learn them, I had to think about them all the time – and who can keep up that sort of coping skill ALL THE TIME). (Karen).'
(Sainsbury, 2000).

The pupils could be selected by teachers and include not just pupils with ASDs, but pupils who are shy or experiencing problems with friendships. An individual education plan (IEP) can be written for the social skills training and to record progress.

There are many resources available to develop a social skills training programme, see recommended reading.

WHAT PARENTS + CARERS CAN DO

Become familiar with the school's policies and anti-bullying strategies.

Keep in regular contact with the school, especially as pupils with ASD have difficulty with communication and tend not to share problems.



'It did not even occur to many people, myself included, to tell parents what was happening. I just didn't think of it, which is not surprising given that at the time I hadn't really worked out that I needed to tell people things in order for them to know them.'
(Sainsbury, 2000)

Be very aware and monitor any changes which could be the result of bullying, such as:

- reluctance to go to school or certain lessons
- frightened to walk to or from school or travel by the school bus
- feeling ill in the mornings
- truanting
- deterioration in school work or homework
- unexplained physical signs such as bruising and cuts
- not wanting to eat
- appetite changes (bully taking dinner money or eating their packed lunch)
- sleep problems
- damage to clothing or equipment
- loss of equipment, e.g. pens
- changes in peer relationships
- possessions missing
- behavioural changes, e.g. withdrawn, aggressive, tearful
- stealing money, (to give to the bully)
- 'losing' their pocket money
- self-harming
- threatening suicide.

Create a Social Story™ or write bullet points in, for example, the child's homework diary:

what to do if an incident takes place or if they become anxious and need to talk to someone. This would include where to go and who to speak to.



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ORGANISATIONS THAT CAN HELP

- * Autism South Africa
- * Childline: for immediate assistance, please call our tollfree number - 0800 055 555
- * Social Stories™ www.thegraycenter.org
- * Fact Sheets www.autism.org.uk/a-z

REFERENCES AND RECOMMENDED READING

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Asperger Syndrome and Bullying ISBN: 978-1-84310-846-7

Strategies and Solutions

Nick Dubin. Foreword by Michael John Carley

Exploring Bullying with Adults with Autism and Asperger Syndrome

A Photocopiable Workbook. Anna Tickle and Bettina Stott. ISBN: 978-1-84905-035-7

Bully Blocking. Six Secrets to Help Children Deal with Teasing and Bullying - Revised Edition. ISBN: 978-1-84310-554-1

Evelyn M. Field

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The material contained in booklets numbered 1 through to 12, was provided by UK National Autistic Society under a Memorandum of Understanding with Autism South Africa.

1. **Early Years and Autism Spectrum Disorders.** By Christine Deudney and Lynda Tucker.
2. **Going to the Shops: a guide for parents of children with autistic spectrum disorders.** By Catriona Hauser
3. **Bullying and how to deal with it: a guide for pupils with an Autism Spectrum Disorder.** By Patricia Thorpe.
4. **Going to the doctor: a guide for children with an Autism Spectrum Disorder.** By Emma Jones.
5. **Patients with an Autism Spectrum Disorder – information for health professionals.** By Christine Deudney.
6. **Classroom and playground support for children with an Autism Spectrum Disorder.** By Prithvi Perepa.
7. **Why does Chris do that?** By Tony Attwood.
8. **Environment and surroundings - How to make them autism-friendly.** By Anh Nguyen.
9. **Asperger's Syndrome from diagnosis to solutions – A guide for parents.** By Tony Attwood.
10. **Working with an Asperger pupil in secondary schools.** By Judith Colley.
11. **The sensory world of the autistic spectrum: a greater understanding.** By Kate Wilkes.
12. **Understanding difficulties at break time and lunchtime guidelines for pupils with an Autism Spectrum Disorder.** By Patricia Thorpe.
13. **Asperger Syndrome.** By Dr Cobie Lombard (Autism South Africa)
14. **Autism – Practical Aspects** (In English, isiXhosa, isiZulu, Setswana, Sesotho, Sepedi and Afrikaans) (Autism South Africa)
15. **Sexuality Brochure – “I’m growing up”.** By Rebecca Johns. (Autism South Africa)
16. **Thoughts of a young sibling.** By Kim Stacey (Autism South Africa)
17. **Dietary Intervention.** By Paul Shattock and Paul Whitely. (Autism South Africa)