

KEEPING BULLIES AT BAY

Intimidation and peer pressure are global issues, especially for children and young adults on the spectrum...

BY MICHAEL P. MCMANMON, ED.D.



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In today's world, bullying, including cyber-bullying and peer pressure, is a reality that all schools and many families are dealing with. For students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) or Learning Differences (LD), the following statistics from the National Autism Association are especially heartbreaking, a shocking 65% of parents report that their children with autism have been victimized by peers in some way within the past year.

Educators and the clinicians and professionals who assist them

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can help these statistics change by knowing what the warning signs of bullying are and then ensuring that all students (from the primary through high school years) are aware of them. Adopting a "zero tolerance policy" and an "open door policy" where students can approach teachers and others who guide them if they are being bullied are also part of the solution.

Residing on the ASD/LD Spectrum myself, I was a child who never fit in, who was different from my peers, and I experienced bullying in various forms during my school years. While I eventually learned that "bullies always crumble when you stand your ground", gaining awareness during these painful years or even knowing that this abuse had a name and a set of criteria would have been incredibly helpful. Parents and educators need to work together to

ensure this awareness out there, and to hold students who bully others fully accountable.

THE WARNING SIGNS

Aside from physical abuse, bullying can also include verbal abuse (taunting, teasing, and name-calling), emotional abuse (making someone the subject of rumors, social exclusion, and intimidation), and cyberbullying (intimidation or harassment via text messaging or social media).

According to the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, at least half of all school-aged children will experience some form of bullying in their lives, with 10 percent of children being bullied regularly.

Here are the warning signs of those being bullied and those who do the bullying, adapted from the US government website Stopbullying.gov.

The experts tell us that young people who are reluctant to tell a teacher or an administrator about bullying, harassment, and personal or interpersonal problems may find it more comfortable and viable to tell an identified peer supporter.

Signs that a student is being bullied:

- ▶ Unexplainable injuries
- ▶ Lost or destroyed clothing, books, electronics, or jewelry
- ▶ Frequent headaches or stomach aches, feeling sick or faking illness
- ▶ Changes in eating habits, like suddenly skipping meals or binge eating
- ▶ Declining grades, loss of interest in schoolwork, or not wanting to go or be at school
- ▶ Sudden loss of friends or avoidance of social situations
- ▶ Expressed feelings of helplessness or decreased self esteem
- ▶ Self-destructive behaviors such as running away from home, harming themselves, or talking about suicide

Signs that a student is bullying others:

- ▶ Gets into physical or verbal fights
- ▶ Has friends who bully others
- ▶ Is increasingly aggressive
- ▶ Gets sent to the principal's office or to detention frequently
- ▶ Has unexplained extra money or new belongings
- ▶ Blames others for their problems
- ▶ Doesn't accept responsibility for his/her actions
- ▶ Is extremely competitive and worries about his/ her reputation or popularity

Both of these lists were created by the US government to build awareness of bullying in schools nationwide. The guidelines were written to apply to the general population and are relevant for all age ranges. The Stopbullying.gov website is a great resource that all



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ASKING FOR HELP

It may seem counter-intuitive, but students who are being bullied are often reluctant to ask for help. Here are some reasons for the failure to reach out for assistance:

- ▶ Bullying can make students feel helpless. Students (especially adolescents and young adults) may want to handle it on their own to feel in control again. They may fear being seen as weak or a "tattletale".
- ▶ Students may fear backlash from the kid—or kids—who bullied them.
- ▶ Bullying can be a humiliating experience. Students may not want adults to know what is being said about them, whether true or false. They may also fear that adults will judge them or punish them for being weak.
- ▶ Students who are bullied may already feel socially isolated. They may feel like no one cares or could understand.
- ▶ Students may fear being rejected by their peers.

students (and those who work with them) should be aware of.

RIGHTS OF THE CHILD

On November 20, 1989, the United Nations General Assembly came together for the sole purpose of creating a document that would inform anyone under the age of 18 of their

rights. It is called the *United Nations Rights of the Child*. This document (signed by 95% of UN member countries around the world) protects children from the time they are born until they reach age 18. Then, other laws take over and protect each individual as an adult. Including 42 different rights for children aged zero

through 18, the document includes the following that pertain to bullying:

- ▶ Express his/her views (even if they are very different from their peers or the adults around them), and have the right to have opinion taken seriously.
- ▶ To attend school, engage in leisure activities, and live his/her daily life “without fear, harassment, or someone hurting them (physically or verbally).”
- ▶ Be treated with dignity throughout his/her childhood so that each individual can become self-reliant, self-assured, and self-confident while participating in a full and active life in society.
- ▶ To be informed of these rights.

Encourage your child’s teachers to make sure that students understand their rights and follow up the discussion with some specifics. Bullying often occurs at school and/or on the way to or from school so students need to tell someone (or ask a friend to tell a teacher or adult) if they are being harassed or frightened while walking to or from school, on the bus, in the cafeteria, or on the playground.

The rights as set forth by the UN apply to everyone when they are in school, in their homes, or out in their communities. Every student, whether on the autism spectrum or not, has a right to live his or her life, at all times, in an atmosphere of dignity and respect, and without fear.

TAKING ACTION

Encourage your child’s teachers to talk about these rights in the classroom and to discuss strategies for dealing

with violations of rights by telling an adult in charge or through peer listening, peer support groups, and peer mediation. All can be effective ways to raise awareness of these issues at school. The experts tell us that young people who are reluctant to tell a teacher or an administrator about bullying, harassment, and personal or interpersonal problems may find it more comfortable and viable to tell an identified peer supporter.

Peer mediation and peer support groups have been instrumental in changing bullying statistics and

creating schools where dignity, respect, and students’ rights are taken seriously. This is because it starts with the problem—the students themselves.

Teaching awareness about the *UN Rights of the Child* and bullying statistics then showing students—especially on the ASD or LD spectrum—various avenues for seeking assistance and resolution is just as important as teaching academics. ◀

COMING OUT OF THE CHAOS

Ellen is on the ASD Spectrum. When she was in junior high school, nine girls formed a ring of exclusion around her that gradually escalated into daily bullying. A couple of years later, Ellen turned to poetry to describe how this experience felt at the time and to cope with the ongoing memories of what she experienced during those painful school years. Ellen’s poem puts a real name and real feelings to the bullying statistics.

From Chaotic To Peaceful

by Ellen O.

The forest stretches far and the trees stretch tall.

The ravine trickles and the wind whispers.

To the unknowing, the trails are hard going. But to her, habit leads the way forward.

As she walks on, she thinks and she remembers.

Nine. The number that used to overwhelm.

Excluded. For she was one and they were nine.

“That was the past and this is the present.” Is what she says now — a conscious reminder.

The winds are now coaxing her confidence.

Leading her lovingly to her location.

The trees, weeding out all the bad feelings as if they were stitching up old wounds in need.

Once there, the ravine commands her to sit and listen to the sounds that nature surrounds.

Then the wide woodlands ask her: are you glad?