

Information Sheet

Bullying and Autism Spectrum Disorders

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Community awareness and understanding of bullying behaviour has improved in recent years. Nevertheless, students with an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) remain highly vulnerable to bullying behaviour, and parents, teachers, other students and the community must be sensitive to the particular needs of these students.

Protecting the student with Autism Spectrum Disorder from bullying behaviour at school

Occasionally we received calls from parents who are concerned about their child being bullied at school. The majority are parents of children with high-functioning autism or Asperger Syndrome, attending mainstream school. British statistics suggest that students with special education needs attending a mainstream setting are three times more likely than their age peers to be bullied¹. How can you tell if your child has been bullied? What characteristics make students with Autism Spectrum Disorder a target of bullying? What can parents, teacher and peers do to prevent bullying and keep the student with Autism Spectrum Disorder happy and safe?

Identify that your child is being bullied

Your child may be able to tell you when something happened at school that made

them unhappy, or you may notice injuries such as bruises or scratched, torn clothing or missing items². Alternatively, changes in your child's behaviour may alert you to the possibility of bullying.



A child who is being bullied may have difficulties with eating, or sleeping which were not previously present, have nightmares with the theme of being verbally or physically hurt, or refuse to go to school³. There are other reasons for such behaviour, so it is important to do some further investigation with the child. A direct (but leading) way is to simply ask the child if anyone has made them sad. Parents may wish to use a less direct (and neutral) approach by use of an emotions timeline with their child. This lists routines of the day in chronological order. The child is given pictures of happy, sad and angry. The parent starts at the beginning of the day and says the name of the activity (for example, recess) and the child selects the correct face to represent the feeling at that time. If the

child selects sad or angry, the parent tries to elicit the events occurring and how it has led to that emotion. If bullying is not identified, then an idea of the reasons for such behaviour change may be found.

Parents may like to casually speak to the teacher about whether they can identify any upsetting aspects of school for the child. Parents may also want to speak to classmates they are familiar with, to determine if these children have witnessed any incidents of teasing or harm towards their child. For example, "I'm worried about _____. He has been sad lately. Have you noticed anyone saying unfriendly things, or doing things to hurt him?"

Older children may wish to use a 'grievance book'⁴ (as described by Tony Attwood) to record incidents that have bothered them (potentially bullying incidents). This can also be used later as a chronological record of bullying incidents, if these occur over time, in order to share with the child's school when addressing the issue. 'The Modified Inventory of Wrongful Activities'⁴ is a questionnaire suitable for secondary school aged children to complete, in order to elicit information about the types of bullying incidents occurring. Parents may wish to read this and use the questions as the basis of a discussion with their child.

What makes a child with Autism Spectrum Disorder susceptible to bullying?

The following characteristics of the child with Autism Spectrum Disorder may lead them to be the target of bullies.

1. Other students may notice the unique mannerisms of the child, such as pacing, verbalising thoughts out loud, or

repetitive body movements, and pick on this difference.

Strategy: Teach more acceptable alternatives¹, such as:

- pacing round the oval, so it looks like the child is exercising
- speaking quietly to themselves (or 'think it, don't say it')
- completing hand movements under the table, twirling a school related item like blu-tac or a pencil in their hand, or fiddling with a bracelet instead of flapping hands, or
- educating other students that these mannerisms are a sign that the student with an Autism Spectrum Disorder is not coping, and that they should offer help, or find a teacher to provide help.

2. Many students with Autism Spectrum Disorder prefer solitary play, or find it hard to socialise successfully with peers. Bullies may recognise that the child is vulnerable without close peers to protect them.

Strategy: these could include:

- fostering the child's friendships by arranging some play dates after school and providing the child the support necessary for the play date to be successful,
- teaching the child simple games, suitable for their age such as chasey, as this enables the child to join with others in a structured and predictable game,
- asking the school to provide specific equipment for familiar games at recess so the child knows what to play, and how to join others, and
- teaching the child to play near a large group, even if not joining in, as a way to be 'seen by many', and therefore be safer in a crowd.

3. The child's sensitivity may make their reactions to provocation seem comical to bullies. The child may become teary or angry quite easily after being taunted, and so this is an instant pay-off for the bully trying to get a reaction. This is particularly so for those with Asperger Syndrome.

Strategy: Develop a bullying shield with the child. This is a concrete and visual way to represent protective thoughts for the child. The shield can be as simple as a sheet of paper, or as complex as whatever model the child wants to make. An adult helps the child come up with some statements to counter what is being said to them (for example, the bully says 'you smell', and the child's statement could be 'I smell like flowers' or 'I wash every day so I smell pleasant'). The agreed to statement is written on the shield. The child is prompted to think of the shield when being bullied – and of the bully's statements bouncing off the shield. This is not necessarily so they can say their counter-statement, but more so they can see that the taunt is not true, and so remain calm. Some children like to visualise putting on a raincoat as a barrier to teasing words instead of using a more abstract 'shield'.



4. The child who has difficulties with generalisation may repeat a mistake from a previous occasion, retriggering the bully's humiliation of them. Luke Jackson, author of *Freaks, Geeks and Asperger Syndrome*⁵ recounts how he would go to the same place

each day where the bullies were, not modifying his behaviour from the last time they had taunted him. When he did seek to change this pattern, he went to secluded places in the school ground, thinking he was hiding from the bullies, but really making himself vulnerable to attack without witnesses or other people to intervene.

Strategy: The school may provide a safe place inside to go if needed, such as a supervised indoor activity. If this is not possible, teach the student who plays in the yard where he can play in plain view of other students and staff. If incidents occur within the line of sight of the duty teachers or the staffroom, teachers are more likely to see, and respond to an incident.

5. The child may not recognise the intent behind the bullying behaviour and may actually think the bully is being friendly. Carol Gray highlights an example where a child was asked to 'shake hands' with another child, then pushed to the ground and hit.

Strategy: Teach the child how to recognise suspicious or unfriendly behaviour. In general, shaking hands is an adult activity, so children should be suspicious of another child offering this. Similarly, a child offering to be friends if given money is not a real friend – teach the child that friendship does not need to be paid for. You could also teach the child that a real friend doesn't ask you to do something that would hurt yourself or someone else.

6. A child's literal interpretation of language may set them up for further teasing (for example, showing unusual approaches to join a group, and being told 'go away'. The child may then genuinely question 'go where?').

Strategy: If a child recounts an incident such as this, correct their confusion by providing a concrete example: ‘when a child says ‘go away’, they really mean ‘go away from me’, and you should move to a different area where people look more friendly. If you can’t find friendly students, go to the duty teacher and ask for help.

Many of the above strategies have suggested ways to increase the child’s abilities and skills. This is not to say that their difficulties are to blame for the bullying, rather that even the most caring teachers may not see the bullying incidents as they occur. In that case, the most immediate way to help the child is to equip them with the means to prevent some bullying incidents. Of course the best way to stamp out bullying altogether is to deter bullies, catch them out if they persist, and then provide appropriate punishment (see more suggestions for teachers below).

More strategies to help the child who is being bullied

For Parents

- Know the school’s bullying policy, and use this information to your advantage. Every school is required to have a bullying policy. Visit www.education.vic.gov.au/healthwellbeing/safety/bullying/policy.htm for more information.
- Meet with the school to discuss incidents, how these were handled, and whether this is in accordance with the school’s policy. If you have a good relationship with the class teacher, begin by talking with them. For more serious matters, such as physical violence against your child, or ongoing teasing, requesting a meeting in writing through the principal is suggested. For such a

meeting, making a list of the issues to cover, and bringing along documentation of the events over time (see reference to the ‘grievance book’ above) can help keep the meeting on track. Ask your partner or a friend to come to the meeting as a support person if you feel overwhelmed speaking to the teacher and principal by yourself.

- If a resolution of grievances cannot be achieved to your satisfaction at teacher or principal level, parents can then contact the Education Department’s Disability and Student Welfare Section in their region OR the Student Wellbeing Branch at Head Office.

For Teachers

- Lead by example. Show in your attitude and actions that bullying behaviour is not tolerated by you. Address every incident you witness or hear about. Don’t turn a blind eye, thinking that the students involved should just sort things out themselves. Although this may work for other students, the student with Autism Spectrum Disorder does not have the social understanding, or perspective-taking ability to do this. They will need education about what went wrong, and why. They will also need a clear guideline about what to do next time to try to avoid the same situation reoccurring.
- Incorporate specific bullying training into the curriculum, such as information about how to recognise bullying. Use Carol Gray’s ‘How to respond to a bullying attempt’⁶ to set up teams amongst classmates who will then watch out for each other in the playground. This method also teaches children exactly what to say and do when they are faced with bullying behaviour.

- Other preventative measures, like a 'buddy system', or a 'circle of friends'⁷ can help the student with Autism Spectrum Disorder be included in a group of students who look out for them in the playground. Although this takes time to set up, it can save time for duty teachers later on if they are not dealing with bullying incidents, and therefore is a good investment. Choose carefully when assigning an older buddy or when inviting potential members into a circle of friends as there is the potential for bullying within these programs!
- Highlight pro-social, inclusive and caring actions by classmates as a model of how to treat others. Reward such behaviour with your overt approval.
- Provide consequences for bystanders. One way to stop bullying going unnoticed is to treat bystanders as if they are as guilty as the bullies. This then gives students the choice to stay on witnessing and possibly encouraging the bullying, or to leave, providing less of an audience, and going to seek teacher intervention.
- Many more suggestions about how to tackle bullying at a class level can be found in 'Perfect Targets: Asperger Syndrome and Bullying' by Rebekah Heinrichs⁴.

Other Issues

Perceived bullying. Sometimes the student with Autism Spectrum Disorder will misinterpret an unintentional bump in line as purposeful physical aggression, and retaliate. At other times, the student may misinterpret good-natured teasing or 'banter- aimed at including them (see also 'what if my child is the bully?' below). For example, peers may say to the student 'How's it hanging?', meaning 'How are you?'

The student with Autism Spectrum Disorder may misinterpret this as somehow an insult about their being droopy. Another example is where teen boys use phrases borrowed from American gang speak, such as 'dog/dawg' meaning 'homeboy' or 'friend'. The teen with Autism Spectrum Disorder may interpret this literally, and feel insulted that they are being likened to an animal.

When the student with Autism Spectrum Disorder reports that they are being teased, it is therefore important to determine exactly what words were said to them. Then teachers and parents need to learn more about the terms that teenagers use, and demystify



these for the student with an Autism Spectrum Disorder. Brenda Boyd offers some guidelines for assessing a child's level of understanding in relation to bullying, banter and teasing, and unintentional hurting in her book 'Parenting a child with Asperger Syndrome'⁸.

What if my child with Autism Spectrum Disorder is the bully?

If it has been reported to you that your child has been the perpetrator of bullying, it is important to establish exactly what happened during the incident (that is, everything that was done and said). It can then be determined why your child is responding in this way, and teach alternative responses. Reasons for bullying may include:

- retaliating for perceived purposeful bumping,
- retaliating for perceived insults,

- sensory overload and lashing out,
- learning that bullying is a way to be left alone⁹,
- not recognising the emotional effect on others,
- being set up by other classmates¹, and
- attempts to be part of a group of other children who are bullies¹.

Comic strip conversations¹⁰ are a useful tool. Developed by Carol Gray, comic strip conversations are a way to visually and concretely represent a situation that has occurred, such as the incident where another student felt the student with Autism Spectrum Disorder was bullying them. Stick figures are drawn to represent each person involved, and speech bubbles show what each person said. Thought bubbles are then included to show what each person thought or was feeling. Misunderstandings can be identified and the student with Autism Spectrum Disorder can be helped to gain insight into how the other person was affected by their actions. Traditional punishments will not be effective in changing their bullying behaviour unless the student understands why the behaviour was not appropriate, and what they should do instead the next time a similar situation occurs.

What if the teacher is the bully?

Often when disciplining a student, the teacher will reprimand them in front of the class. This works well with most students – they are sufficiently embarrassed that they will not repeat the undesirable behaviour again. The student with Autism Spectrum Disorder may not have the desire to please the teacher, and such a reprimand may serve to confuse them. The child may realise they are in trouble, but not understand what they need to change in order to put things right. Consider the following excerpt from the book ‘Blue Bottle Mystery’¹¹ where the

main character, Ben, who has Asperger Syndrome is reprimanded by his teacher.

.....“Listen son”, Miss Browning-Lever said in a hard voice, “I’m sick of your attitude. When you will speak to me, you will address me as Miss Browning Lever, understand?”. Ben felt sick. What did ‘address her’ mean? He didn’t understand any of this conversation. He didn’t know why he was in trouble. How he hated school!

The student with Autism Spectrum Disorder can appear to be defiant and provocative at times if they do not understand what is expected, if they correct the teacher in a pedantic manner, or if they interpret literally what the teacher has said. A teacher unfamiliar with the characteristics of Autism Spectrum Disorder may repeatedly reprimand a child in the manner above, wondering why the child just won’t do as they are told, and leading the child to fear them as they would a bully.

Strategies: Ensure the teacher knows about Autism Spectrum Disorder, and how this may affect the student’s behaviour and level of comprehension. Most teachers who are informed will try to be sensitive to the student’s needs. A comic strip conversation⁹ can help a teacher understand which parts of an interaction the child misunderstood, and how both can avoid the same situation occurring. If the child continues to feel distressed about a teacher’s response to them, utilise the suggestions for parents in the ‘more strategies to help the child who is being bullied’ section above.

Bullying in Specialist School Settings

Calls to Autism Victoria for advice about bullying are rarely from parents of a child in a specialist school setting (SDS, Special

School or autism specific school). This may be because the other students, due to their own difficulties are not aware of the child's differences, and therefore teasing does not occur. Alternatively it may be that children attending these settings are less able to report bullying to us. If behaviour change indicative of bullying is apparent in the child (as described at the start of this article), investigate further with the child's school staff and enlist their help to increase supervision at those times where bullying may be occurring.

Bibliography

All references used in compiling this article are available for loan from the Autism Victoria library (the accession number # is in brackets):

1. National Autistic Society. **Words will really hurt me. How to protect your child from bullying.** (#1948)
2. Gray, C. **Gray's Guide to Bullying (including 'How to respond to a bullying attempt')** (#2474)
3. Attwood, T. **Asperger Syndrome: A guide for parents and professionals** (#1560)
4. Heinrichs, R. **Perfect Targets** (#2436)
5. Jackson, L. **Freaks, Geeks and Asperger Syndrome** (#2252)
6. Gray, C. **How to respond to a bullying attempt.** (#1992 discussion of method and examples for implementation and #1993 workbook for children)
7. Victorian Parent Advocacy Collective. **Circles of Friends** - video and manual (#1375)
8. Boyd, B. **Parenting a Child with Asperger Syndrome.** (#2402)
9. Attwood, T. **Asperger Syndrome Part Two** DVD (section on anger) (#2695)
10. Gray, C. **Comic Strip Conversations** (#1912)
11. Hoopman, K. **Blue Bottle Mystery** (#2013)

Other resources available from Autism Victoria library:

Boardgame: Searle and Streng. **The Anti-Bullying Game.** (#2687)

Carter, M and Santomauro, J. **Social Spectrum,** Bullying issue (#2677)

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