

Disability Campaign.org

Bullying of Students with Disabilities and Special Needs

Children with disabilities and those with special needs are at an increased risk of being bullied. This includes children who have physical, developmental, intellectual, emotional, and sensory disabilities, as well as those who have food allergies and other special health needs. The PACER Center reports children with disabilities are 2 to 3 times more likely to be bullied than their nondisabled peers. If you are the parent of a child with a disability or special health needs, it's important that you learn about bullying of children with disabilities: what it is, how to prevent it, and what to do if it happens to your child. Because no child — regardless of their abilities or health — should ever experience bullying.



Image from downs-syndrome.org.uk

Why children with disabilities and special needs are at risk

- **Physical vulnerability.** Your child may not be as strong as other children. She may be smaller, have limited mobility, or impaired speech. This not only puts her at risk of being physically injured, it also limits her ability to defend herself (e.g. walk away from the bully, tell the bully to stop). Other times, the child's mobility aid or communication device serves as the bully's target for attack.
- **Social skills challenges.** Even young children can identify when a kid experiences difficulty connecting with others socially or emotionally. Perhaps your son is on the autism spectrum and does not look people in the eyes, or he has social anxiety and

is afraid of eating with other students in the cafeteria. Children who are bullies can see this as an opportunity to pick on your child.

- **Allergies or intolerance to environments.**

Yes, kids are picky eaters, but most kids eat foods that are commonly served or available in schools (cheese sticks, crackers, sweets); however, if your child cannot eat gluten, she is different from the rest of the group. Or, if your child is sensitive to high temperatures and cannot play outdoors when the weather is above 75 degrees, this may isolate her from kids who have recess outside in the summer. This can create an opportunity for bullies to poke fun at your child and potentially expose them to allergens or harmful environments.

Image from thinkingmomsrevolution.com



Types of bullying



Image from englishhelponline.me

- **Verbal bullying** includes verbal or written teasing, name-calling, inappropriate sexual comments, taunting, or threats.
- **Physical bullying** is when a child's body or possessions are hurt. This may include taking or breaking a child's things, rude hand gestures, spitting, hitting, kicking, tripping, or pushing.

- **Social or relational bullying** involves embarrassing a child in public, spreading rumors about a kid, telling others not to be friends with that child, or leaving the child out on purpose during games or recreational play.
- **Exposure to harm.** A child with food allergies can be tricked into eating food that can harm her or a child who is blind can be misled so as to fall off playground equipment. In these cases, bullying can cause serious harm — or even death. Unfortunately, children often do not think of life-and-death consequences.
- **Cyber bullying.** Bullying can happen in person or through electronic products and services, such as texting, social media (Facebook, Instagram) or shared videos. There are reported incidents where children have killed each other and committed suicide after having been involved in a cyber bullying incident.



Warning Signs of bullying

Many times, kids won't ask for help — and in some cases, your child may not be able to verbally communicate his or her need for help. This can make it even more challenging for you as a parent to identify if and how your child is being bullied. It's why it is important that you remain watchful of any behavioral or emotional changes. Warning signs that may indicate if your child is being bullied include:



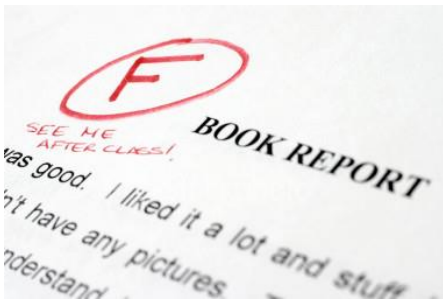
Image from conversationswithmymother.com

- Changes in eating habits. If you notice your child arrives from school hungry, it may be because he is being bullied at lunch. Indicators also include skipping meals or binge eating.
- Lost or destroyed personal items, such as clothing, notebooks, or backpacks.

- Frequent headaches or stomachaches.
Some children even throw up before going to school because of the anxiety and fear of being bullied at school.



- Not wanting to go to school, demonstrated by not dressing up for school or not wanting to get out of the car.
- Unexplained injuries, bruises, or scratches.
- Difficulty sleeping, frequent nightmares, or signs of sleeping problems including noticeable dark circles around the eyes and increased morning grogginess.



- Lower grades at school or loss of interest in school work.
- Lack of interest in extracurricular activities or sports.

- Self-destructive behaviors including running away from home, self-harm (biting, hitting, cutting), or talking or writing about suicide.

- Talking or writing about hurting others.

*** If your child is in danger of hurting himself or others, DO NOT ignore the problem.

GET PROFESSIONAL HELP RIGHT AWAY.

Negative consequences of bullying

- Problems at school, including higher truancy and drop-out rates, lower academic achievement
- Poor peer and family relationships
- Feelings of alienation, loneliness, or depression
- Higher rate of childhood psychiatric disorders, including almost 5 times greater risk of young adult depression and almost 15 times greater risk of developing a panic disorder (*JAMA Psychiatry*)
- More bullying: bullied children often become bullies to other children and “victim-bullies” often experience the worst effects (*JAMA Psychiatry*)



Image from wingatewildernesstherapy.com

Bullying and harassment

When is bullying considered harassment? If your child is being bullied because of his or her



Image from rootedinrights.org

disability and the bullying creates a hostile environment at school, this may be a case of “disability harassment.” If he or she is receiving verbal abuse (name-calling, slurs), graphic or written statements, threats, or has been physically assaulted, this can be considered harassment — and disability harassment is a civil rights issue.

Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), students with disabilities must receive a free appropriate public education (FAPE). Schools have an obligation to ensure that your child who is being bullied continues to receive FAPE as outlined in his or her individualized education program (IEP). In other words, a child cannot be removed from the

general education classroom and be placed in a more “protected” setting, as that would deprive your child from FAPE; rather, school districts must address the source of the problem, i.e. the stigma, prejudice and ableism. To learn more about federal laws that protect your child against disability harassment, see the [Dear Colleague Letter](#) on bullying from the U.S. Department of Education.

How to prevent bullying

Help prevent bullying before it starts.

- 1. Educate yourself.** You’re already taking the first step! By learning about bullying, you’ll be better prepared and can minimize the risk of your child being bullied.



- 2. Educate teachers and administrators.** Schools are the primary place where bullying happens. It’s important that your child’s teachers and school administrators understand your child’s special health needs and his or her risk of bullying. Children with disabilities often have Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) or Section 504 plans that can outline preventative measures for bullying; however, youth with special health needs (such as food allergies or diabetes requiring insulin regulation) often do not have IEPs or Section 504 plans. In such cases, make sure the school administrators and teacher know your child’s health needs in detail. Your child’s school needs to play an active role in establishing a supportive and safe environment where all students are accepted and know how to respond when bullying happens.
- 3. Educate classmates and students.** If your child’s classmates understand your child’s special health needs, they will be more likely to feel compassion and empathy toward your son or daughter. Teachers and administrators need to stress that children with disabilities have similarities with nondisabled children. If your child is in

elementary school, ask the teacher if he or she can read a children’s fictional book about a character with a disability to the classroom; or, inquire if you can go into the classroom to share with the class about your child’s special health needs — as well as the many fun and cool things your child enjoys just like other kids. You can also contact your child’s school and ask that an “anti-bullying club” be started with the hope of teaching youth how to be more tolerant of others and that they too can advocate on behalf of bullied children.

Image from autism.lovetoknow.com



4. Educate your child.

Explain bullying, why it is not right, and how your child can “speak up” if he or she is being bullied. Depending on your child’s age or cognitive ability, you may have to be a bit creative, such as explaining bullying through a picture book instead of through words.

Bullying is not “something all kids go through.” Communicate to your son or daughter that having a disability does not merit bullying and that he or she deserves respect. Moreover, remind your child it is not his or her responsibility to fix the bullying situation; rather, your kid should seek the help of an adult first.

What to do if you discover your child is being bullied

Write a letter to your child’s IEP 450 14, the principal, or the district’s Section 504 or Title II Coordinator if you believe your child is being bullied. This will ensure that your message is



Image from alfrediamariani.tk

communicated clearly and accurately, and that you have a written record were you to need it for legal purposes. For links to sample letters, see the resources section of this document. Furthermore, the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights (OCR) investigates complaints of disability discrimination in schools and has issued a "[Dear Colleague Letter](#)" that explains what public schools must do under federal law to respond when students with disabilities are bullied. Contact the OCR to learn more about civil rights laws and how to file a complaint.

YOU CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Your child has the right to an education and life free of bullying and harassment because he or she has a disability or health condition. As a parent, you can make a difference in minimizing your child's risk of being treated unfairly. By no means allow for your child to be bullied or harassed; if your school is not taking the necessary steps to prevent and stop bullying, look into more professional help to address the bullying situation.

Definitions and Acronyms

Ableism: discrimination or social prejudice against people with disabilities

IDEA: acronym for the **Individuals with Disabilities Education Act**; a law originally enacted by Congress in 1975 to ensure that children with disabilities have the opportunity to receive a free appropriate public education, just like other children.

FAPE: acronym for **free appropriate public education**; an educational right of children with disabilities in the U.S. that is guaranteed by the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the IDEA Act.

IEP: acronym for an **individualized education program**; a written document developed for each public school child with a disability that is eligible for special education. A team composed of but not limited to the child's parent(s), teacher(s), a representative from the school district or other professional, meet together to create each child's unique IEP that outlines how the student learns, how the student best demonstrates that learning, and what teachers and other providers will do to help the student learn more effectively. The team then reviews the IEP at least once a year to ensure all learning and educational goals are being met.

RESOURCES:

[PACER Center's Sample Letters for Parents to write to School/District](#)

[Laws on Disability Harassment — US Department Of Education](#)

[U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights \(OCR\)](#)

Phone: 800-421-3481 (TDD: 800-877-8339)

Email: OCR@ED.gov

[National Website on Disability: StopBullying.org](#)

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