

Bullying Among Children and Youth with Disabilities and Special Health Needs

Bullying is unwanted, aggressive behavior among school aged children that involves a real or perceived power imbalance. The behavior is repeated, or has the potential to be repeated, over time. Both kids who are bullied and who bully others may have serious, lasting problems.

In order to be considered bullying, the behavior must be aggressive and include:

- **An Imbalance of Power:** Kids who bully use their power—such as physical strength, access to embarrassing information, or popularity—to control or harm others. Power imbalances can change over time and in different situations, even if they involve the same people.
- **Repetition:** Bullying behaviors happen more than once or have the potential to happen more than once.

What is known about bullying among children with disabilities and special needs?

Children with disabilities—such as physical, developmental, intellectual, emotional, and sensory disabilities—are at an increased

risk of being bullied. Any number of factors— physical vulnerability, social skill challenges, or intolerant environments— may increase the risk. Research suggests that some children with disabilities may bully others as well.

Kids with special health needs, such as epilepsy or food allergies, also may be at higher risk of being bullied. Bullying can include making fun of kids because of their allergies or exposing them to the things they are allergic to. In these cases, bullying is not just serious, it can mean life or death.

Through a small but growing amount of research, we have learned that:

- Although little research has been conducted on the relation between learning disabilities (LD) and bullying, available information indicates that children with LD are at greater risk of being bullied (Martlew & Hodson, 1991; Mishna, 2003; Nabuzoka & Smith, 1993; Thompson, Whitney, & Smith, 1994; Twyman, Saylor, Saia, Macias, Taylor, & Spratt, 2010). At least one study also has found that children with LD may also be more likely than other children to bullying their peers (Twyman et al., 2010).

- Children with attention deficit or hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) are more likely than other children to be bullied. They also are somewhat more likely than others to bully their peers (Twyman et al., 2010; Unnever & Cornell, 2003; Weiner & Mak, 2009).
- Children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) are at increased risk of being bullied and ostracized by peers (Twyman et al., 2010). In a study of 8-17-year-olds, researchers found that children with ASD had bully victimization scores that were more than three times as high as students in a control group with no special needs.
- Children with epilepsy are more likely to be bullied by peers (Hamiwka, Yu, Hamiwka, Sherman, Anderson, & Wirrell, 2009), as are children with medical conditions that affect their appearance (e.g., cerebral palsy, muscular dystrophy, and spina bifida). Frequently, these children report being called names related to their disability (Dawkins, 1996).
- Children with hemiplegia (paralysis of one side of their body) are more likely than other children their age to be victimized by peers, to be rated as less popular than their peers, and to have fewer friends than other children (Yude, Goodman, & McConachie, 1998).
- Children who have diabetes and who are dependent on insulin may be especially vulnerable to peer bullying (Storch et al., 2004).
- Children who stutter may be more likely than their peers to be bullied. In one study, 83 percent of adults who had problems with stammering as children said that they had been teased or bullied; 71 percent of those who had been bullied said it happened at least once a week (Hugh-Jones & Smith, 1999).
- Depression and anxiety, increased feelings of sadness and loneliness, changes in sleep and eating patterns, and loss of interest in activities they used to enjoy. These issues may persist into adulthood.
- Health complaints
- Decreased academic achievement—GPA and standardized test scores—and school participation. They are more likely to miss, skip, or drop out of school.

How does bullying affect children?

Kids who are bullied can experience negative physical, school, and mental health issues. Kids who are bullied are more likely to experience:

- Depression and anxiety, increased feelings of sadness and loneliness, changes in sleep and eating patterns, and loss of interest in activities they used to enjoy. These issues may persist into adulthood.
- Health complaints
- Decreased academic achievement—GPA and standardized test scores—and school participation. They are more likely to miss, skip, or drop out of school.

Is bullying of kids with disabilities covered by federal law?

Yes. Bullying behavior may cross the line to become “disability harassment,” which is prohibited under Section 504 of the *Rehabilitation Act of 1973* and Title II

of the *Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990*. According to the U.S. Department of Education, disability harassment is “intimidation or abusive behavior toward a student based on disability that creates a hostile environment by interfering with or denying a student’s participation in or receipt of benefits, services, or opportunities in the institution’s program” (U.S. Department of Education, 2000). This behavior can take different forms including verbal harassment, physical threats, or threatening written statements. When a school finds out that harassment may have occurred, staff must investigate the incident(s) promptly and respond appropriately.

Disability harassment can occur in any location that is connected with school: in classrooms, in the cafeteria, in hallways, on the playground or athletic fields, or on a school bus. It also can occur during school-sponsored events (Education Law Center, 2002).

What can I do if I think my child is being bullied or is the victim of disability harassment?

- Be supportive of your child and encourage him or her to describe who was involved and how and where the bullying or harassment happened. Be sure to tell your child that it is not his or her fault and that nobody deserves to be bullied or harassed. Do not encourage your child to fight back. This may make the problem much worse.
- Usually children are able to identify when they are being bullied by their peers. Sometimes, however, children with disabilities do not realize they are being targeted. (They may, for example, believe that they have a new friend, when in fact, this “friend” is making fun of them.) Ask your child specific questions about his or her friendships and be alert to possible signs of bullying—even if your child doesn’t label the behaviors as bullying.
- Talk with your child’s teacher immediately to see whether he or she can help to resolve the problem quickly.
- If the bullying or harassment is severe, or if the teacher doesn’t fix the problem quickly, contact the principal and put your concerns in writing. Explain what happened in detail and ask for a prompt response. Keep a written record of all conversations and communications with the school.
- Ask the school district to convene a meeting of the Individualized Education Program (IEP) team or the Section 504 team, a group convened to ensure that the school district is meeting the needs of its students with disabilities. This meeting will allow you to explain what has been happening and will let the team review your child’s IEP or 504 plan and make sure that the school is taking steps to stop the harassment. If your child needs counseling or other supportive services because of the harassment, discuss this with the team.

- As the U.S. Department of Education (2000) recognizes, “creating a supportive school climate is the most important step in preventing harassment.” Work with the school to help establish a system-wide bullying prevention program that includes support systems for bullied children.
- Sometimes children and youth who are bullied also bully others. Explore whether your child may also be bullying other younger, weaker students at school. If so, his or her IEP may need to be modified to include help to change the aggressive behavior.
- Be persistent. Talk regularly with your child and with school staff to see whether the behavior has stopped.

What if the bullying or harassment does not stop?

If your school district does not take reasonable, appropriate steps to end the bullying or harassment of your child, the district may be violating federal, state, and local laws. For more information about your legal rights, you may want to contact:

The U.S. Department of Education
Office for Civil Rights
Phone: (800)-421-3481;
or Web: <http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/complaintintro.html>

The U.S. Department of Education
Office of Special Education Programs
Phone: (202) 245-7468;
or Web: <http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/osers/osep/index.html>

The U.S. Department of Justice
Civil Rights Division
Phone: 1-877-292-3804;
or Web: <http://www.justice.gov/crt/complaint/#three>

References and Resources

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