

The Significance of Autism Spectrum Disorder in School Bullying Prevention Programs: Strategies and Resources

“People with autism spectrum disorders are potentially ‘perfect victims’ for bullying because their social and communicative deficits often make them less likely to realize when they are being victimized and whose desperation for friendship and reduced social judgment may result in inappropriate behavior.”

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The New Jersey “Anti Bullying Bill of Rights” law serves as the foundation for prevention, identification, and managing bullying in school communities. This legislation mandates each school to have a comprehensive and effective plan which protects all students from being victims of bullying. Students with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) have unique attributes which can greatly affect their safety and those of other students.

Each person with an ASD is unique and therefore, behavioral responses and challenges should not be generalized to all students on the spectrum. Commonly, those with an ASD may communicate and/or exhibit behaviors in ways that can be misinterpreted. These individuals may also react to environmental sensory challenges. Social deficits also play a significant role in their perception and understanding of appropriate, safe social interactions. As the bullying legislation clearly specifies that the rights of students with disabilities should not be reduced or altered, it is important to realize these factors and develop strategies to handle situations to protect all individuals.

It is imperative that each school’s assigned anti-bullying safety team includes members most familiar with ASD as well as those who have direct interaction with students in this population. Some of these members include therapists, behaviorists, psychologists, transportation supervisors, and special education administration. In addition, all school staff should receive education relating to common characteristics of ASD, particularly social skill and communication deficits.

The following page contains some autism-related attributes that can influence student interactions. Alongside this list are associated considerations and strategies to assist the school anti-bullying team and faculty in handling these challenges. It is important to remember that not all approaches work with every student or in every situation. Individualized assessment and consultation may be needed.



Attributes and Situations	Recommendations
<p>Difficulty handling unstructured, less supervised situations (breaks, recess, lunch, class changes, bathrooms, etc.) This may increase opportunities for bullying</p>	<p>Counsel students with ASD to play or socialize near adults during lunch, recess, and breaks. Arrange for class aides to have lunch at a different time so that qualified support is available at these times. Implement peer mentor programs. Students can help witness, distract, and report episodes in unstructured settings (should NOT be expected to take primary responsibility).</p>
<p>Gross/fine motor challenges and repetitive, stereotypic behaviors may increase harassment (e.g. on playground, gym class, sport teams)</p>	<p>Work with all students with social skill techniques aimed at preventing bullying during recesses and unstructured periods. Provide training to staff and playground monitors with methods of guiding pro-social, cooperative play behaviors and less rough and competitive play. Institute and enforce playground rules and expectations. Have school aides and playground monitors actively supervise specific locations of the play area. Provide a structured, inclusive, and monitored activity each day to promote positive social interactions.</p>
<p>Inability to recognize intimidation tactics; malice may be disguised by perpetrator as a game; misunderstands motivation behind actions/words</p>	<p>Arrange role playing scenarios with students. Include as part of social skills goals in IEP. Assign each student an anti-bullying representative ("go-to person") who can be a safe contact.</p>
<p>Insensitive; may be blunt and make offensive comments (e.g. "Why are your teeth so crooked?")</p>	<p>Incorporate social skills and positive conversations techniques within IEP goals. Use video modeling and/or scripted dialogue to help guide sensitivity in conversations.</p>
<p>Difficulty verbalizing/describing details of situations</p>	<p>Encourage use of pictures, written words, computer, etc. Avoid recounting the situation in front of peers to avoid embarrassment or disclose confidential details.</p>
<p>Communication and emotional deficits (subsequently may not report problems)</p>	<p>Incorporate specific bullying prevention and safety as goals in student IEP (e.g. communication skills; anger management; self-advocacy skills; elimination of inappropriate touching; recognition of troublesome actions and responses such as "no", "stop", "go away", "help"; methods to prevent and respond to intimidation such as redirection; methods to report bullying; feeling expression; social skills such as sharing, taking turns, or thinking before acting.</p>
<p>May not identify feelings or be able to express them appropriately; Lacks emotional competencies</p>	<p>Use video modeling to illustrate and explain emotions. Model socially appropriate ways to express feelings.</p>
<p>Impulsivity; may not understand consequences</p>	<p>Incorporate self-regulation strategies within student's IEP goals. Work with all students on self-discipline techniques. Re-evaluate zero tolerance rules.</p>

Attributes and Situations	Recommendations
Inappropriate social skills (as a result of limited social interactions within school environment and in extracurricular activities)	Develop inclusive programming and social events that engage students of all abilities. Include social skill development within IEPs. Encourage and facilitate social interactions.
Intimidator may purposefully provoke vulnerability to rouse responsive behaviors	As stakeholders in the anti-bullying program, provide children with opportunities to help create the curriculum.
Reporting mechanism may be too complex	Use school-wide use of recognizable picture communication symbols to represent safety issues.
Bullying occurs during class changes	Give permission for student to leave class early with a buddy or class aid. Assign school monitors in hallways.
Difficulty expressing what has happened unless directly asked; difficulty verbalizing/explaining details	Encourage use of pictures or simple words. Avoid open-ended questions. Guide conversation without influencing (use of prompts, cues, visual aids). Use role play and puppet techniques.
Person with ASD may have fewer friends/advocates	Offer opportunities for students to serve as “buddies” for students with disabilities during class, lunch, or recess, or as a volunteer tutor for younger students with disabilities. One-on-one interaction encourages familiarity, understanding, and empathy and helps students become vested in each other’s successes. Involve students in creating rules against bullying in order to develop personal responsibility. Incorporate social skills exercises as part of general school curriculum. Develop networks of support without violating privacy issues.
Focused, limited interests may fuel frustration and aversion in other students	Motivate, redirect, and facilitate interaction in common interests and activities. Prompt and fade supervision to encourage natural pro-social relationships. Provide students with opportunities to identify similarities rather than differences.
Challenges with interpreting gestures, facial expressions, body language, figurative language, sarcasm, vocal tone	Use video modeling to illustrate facial expressions, emotions, non-verbal gestures, conversation approaches, etc.
Preference to be by self	Identify and arrange quiet, safe places (e.g. library) for students.
May not understand that “private body parts are off limits”	Address touching rules in IEP goals. Identify private body parts. Establish that this is applicable for all people and to report instances of violation.
Students make fun of attributes such as repetitive behaviors, inappropriate social skills, lack of eye contact, unusual communication, etc.	Implement student awareness programs about autism, encouraging acceptance of differences and recognition of all abilities. Facilitate friendship development. (e.g. Friends Like You. Friends Like Me. program)

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Sensitivities to touch, sounds, proximity of people, lighting, etc. may trigger reactive behaviors	Work to identify trigger(s) (proximity of others, change in routine, noise level in the classroom) of negative behavior. Make appropriate changes to prevent problem behavior.
Other students may ignore or disparage a person's unusual talents or seemingly small achievements	Develop school-wide programs and/or events which call for the use, expression, recognition, and collaboration of the talents of each student.
Student has trouble generalizing anti-bullying strategies to different situations	Teach skills in a variety of scenarios and assorted participants.
Clothing choices may be related to sensory issues; ostracized for unpopular clothing choices	Encourage open discussions about individual style and personal comfort. Provide student activities that emphasize uniqueness and acceptance.
Problems with students' family members understanding autism, related behaviors and accommodations	Provide educational resources to parents, professionals, and community partners. (e.g. Make Friends with Autism program).
Administrative response to bullying. Uncertainty of outcome; fear of reciprocity.	Provide victim and family with individualized plan of action. Approach and support victim in method which he or she is comfortable and can feel safe

References and Resources

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Jerry Tanenbaum, Esq., Schnader Harrison Segal & Lewis LLP, NJ Coalition for Bullying Awareness and Prevention

<http://njbullying.org/documents/BULLYINGANDSTUDENTSWITHSPECIALNEEDS.doc>

Bullying at School: What We Know and What We Can Do

Olweus, D. (1993). Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, Inc.

Bullying, Autism, & Asperger's Syndrome – Current Findings & Prevention Strategies

Helping Hands Children Services

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Laura Parker-Roerden, David Rudewick, and Donald Gorton (2007).

http://www.mass.gov/Eeohhs2/docs/dph/com_health/violence/bullying_prevent_guide.pdf

Friends Like You. Friends Like Me.

Children's Specialized Hospital

www.childrens-specialized.org

The Individualized Education Program (IEP) and Bullying

Pacer Center, Inc. (2003)

<http://www.pacer.org/publications/bullypdf/BP-4.pdf>

Operation Respect: Don't Laugh at Me

www.operationrespect.org

Perfect Targets: Asperger Syndrome and Bullying

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Promoting inclusion for young children with special needs on playgrounds

Nabors, L., Willoughby, J., Leff, S. S., & McMenamin, S. (2001). Journal of Developmental and Physical Disabilities

Sticks and Stones will Break My Bones, and Names Hurt Too

Jed E. Baker, Ph.D.

<http://www.poac.net/download/resources/BakerBullyartilce.pdf>

Strategies to Address Bullying of Children with Autism

Northwest Regional Education Service District Hillsboro, OR

<http://www.nwresd.k12.or.us/autism/StrategiestoAddressBullyingofChildrenwithAutism.html>

Targeted Taunted Tormented - The Bullying of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder

Massachusetts Advocates for Children (2009)

<http://www.massadvocates.org/documents/Bullying-Report.pdf>

Walk a Mile in Their Shoes – Bullying and the Child with Special Needs

<http://www.abilitypath.org/areas-of-development/learning--schools/bullying/articles/walk-a-mile-in-their-shoes.pdf>

www.childrens-specialized.org

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