

## **Bullying of Children with Exceptionalities: Tackling It in Your School and Your Classroom**

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Bullying was once considered a normal, even unavoidable, part of school—a rite of passage, just “something kids do.” But thanks to new research and recent high-profile cases, the education community is now more aware of the damage it can cause.

The issue of bullying is particularly important for students with exceptionalities and therefore for special educators. It can be an unintended side effect of inclusion: when exceptional children are exposed to the general classroom, the risk of bullying increases. For example, a 2006 study published by the American Academy of Pediatrics reported that having a special health care need is associated with being a target of bullying while having a behavioral, emotional, or developmental issue is associated with bullying others *and* with being a bully/victim—that is, someone who both bullies others and is victimized by his peers.

Bullying is defined as behavior toward another person that is intentional, repetitive, and hurtful resulting in an imbalance of power between the bully and the target. Bullying can take many forms: physical, verbal, social, or emotional. It can be overt or covert, as simple as name-calling or as complex as social exclusion. It typically reaches its peak in the middle-school years but occurs at every grade level. Victims of bullying suffer from embarrassment, fear, and anxiety. These emotions can spiral into depression, which can then lead to absenteeism, poor academic performance, and, in the most extreme cases, suicide. The effects on a person’s self esteem can linger well into adulthood and even prevent someone from reaching his or her full potential.

Bullies target their peers based on real or perceived differences in appearance, behavior, or ability, and many children with special needs exhibit such characteristics. In addition, they may be too trusting or lack keen knowledge of social norms, rendering them particularly vulnerable. Smaller social circles can also be a factor, as having a high number of friends can protect someone against bullying. Moreover, students with cognitive disabilities may not have the ability to understand, identify, or report bullying when it occurs.

“Bullying behavior is unique in that it is a student-student interaction pattern, whereas most school interactions are student-teacher,” says Robert Horner, professor of special education at the University of Oregon. “This makes it more difficult for teachers to control.”

As school communities become increasingly diverse, it is more important than ever that teachers, administrators, parents, and students work together to create a tolerant school climate where each student feels safe and valued. The school must not only be safe—it needs to be perceived as safe and calm.

“As education professionals, we are obligated—commissioned, even—to provide free and appropriate public education,” says Carol Dinsdale, a teacher of elementary students with emotional and behavioral disorders in Florida and CEC’s 2005 Clarissa Hug Teacher of the Year. “Included in that is the concept of a safe environment.”

### **Bullying of Students with Disabilities**

The government-sponsored “Stop Bullying Now!” campaign indicates that 15 to 25 percent of school children are bullied with some frequency. But among children with disabilities, that number can be much higher. According to a 2007 study by Mencap, 80 percent of children with learning disabilities are bullied at school. The National Autistic Society reports that 40 percent of autistic children and 60 percent of those with Asperger’s syndrome have experienced it. Those with conditions that affect their appearance (for example, cerebral palsy, muscular dystrophy, or obesity) are particularly susceptible to name-calling. And while children with behavioral disorders such as ADHD are often assumed to be bullies, in many cases their classmates are “egging them on” in order to evoke a reaction. They are almost 10 times more likely as others to have been regular targets of bullies, according to a report in the *Journal of Developmental Medicine and Child Neurology*.

Often bullies believe their behavior to be funny and innocent—they fail to realize the harm they are inflicting. But bullying only intensifies the hardships that may come with having a disability and greatly affects students' well-being, though they may not be able to articulate these feelings as well as other children.

“Words hurt usually, in my opinion, more than physical abuse,” states CEC student member James E. Williams, who has Asperger’s syndrome himself. “A child can heal from broken bone, but they can never heal from a peer telling them they are worthless.”

The behavior of just a few children can wreak havoc on a school’s culture—and not just for children. In schools with severe bullying problems, morale among adults tends to be very low. It can also take its toll on teachers, leading to higher turnover rates and early retirements.

### **The Unique Needs of Gifted and Talented Children**

Gifted and talented students also experience higher incidences of harassment. In 2006, researchers at Purdue University discovered that two-thirds of gifted students encounter bullying by the eighth grade; 11 percent of the study’s participants reported experiencing bullying repeatedly. Name-calling and teasing were the most prevalent forms of bullying—and had the most lasting effects.

“Gifted students are just as ‘different’ as students at the other end of the spectrum,” explains Jean Peterson, the lead researcher in the Purdue study. “Differentness contributes to vulnerability.”

“Bullying may arise if general education students believe GT students receive special treatment, instead of understanding that they *need* a modified curriculum,” says Kenneth Dickson, GT education coordinator for Baltimore County Public Schools. “Meanwhile, the GT kids want to fit in, just like everybody else. The worst is when gifted students work at mid-range and hide their accomplishments to avoid being bullied. High-achieving girls in math and science often have the hardest time.”

While students with gifts and talents may be cognitively advanced, they are still children and therefore not immune to the detrimental effects of bullying. In fact, this group of students can be particularly sensitive to criticism due to their own perfectionism and the high expectations placed on them. They may respond to small incidents with magnified intensity, or they may construct fears that aren’t actually present.

And yet, students with gifts and talents aren’t always the victims; Peterson also discovered that 16 percent of them bully each other. She surmises that this behavior stems primarily from competitiveness, the “social jockeying” that occurs as students strive for the top.

### **Cyber-Bullying: A New Concern**

A new form of bullying has emerged in recent years with the widespread use of cell phones and electronic media. Cyber-bullying involves harassing someone or spreading rumors about an individual through e-mail, chat rooms, text messages, instant messages, or social networking Web sites. As many as 42 percent of children have experienced bullying while online, according to a 2004 i-SAFE survey of 1,500 students in grades 4 through 8.

Children with exceptionalities may use the Internet as much as, if not more than, other students. In some cases, it may be their only social outlet. They should be taught to never reveal personal information online, to report improper or threatening conduct immediately, and to keep copies of inappropriate messages they receive but not respond to them.

### **How Educators Can Address Bullying**

The best approach to school bullying is two-fold, both proactive and reactive. Educators must establish an anti-bullying culture while addressing individual cases.

The first step is for schools to adopt a policy that bans harassment and discrimination of any kind, which should include what bullying is, why it is harmful, how to report it, and what the consequences are. Students are quick to

figure out what each adult will tolerate and what they can get away with in each classroom. Therefore, *everyone* in the building—administrators, teachers, students, custodians, cafeteria staff—must be aware of and enforce the school’s bullying policy. Consistency and predictability are key.

“The school needs a clear, unyielding statement that no act of aggression will be ignored and that it will be dealt with, if not immediately, then at the appropriate time and place,” advises Sheldon Braaten, Executive Director of the Behavioral Institute for Children and Adolescents in Minnesota.

“When you enter a school, you should know within five minutes what the rules are, what is expected, and that everyone is on the same page,” says Horner, who is also director of the University of Oregon’s Educational and Community Supports research unit, which has implemented positive behavioral intervention and support programs in more than 7,500 schools across 44 states. “The school culture comes first—you can’t solve these types of problems in an environment of chaos.”

With a policy in place, school personnel can take next steps as needed, resources permitting. You can designate a bullying task force, teach self-defense and assertiveness as part of the physical education curriculum, or develop a peer mediating program. As those closest to children with exceptionalities, special educators can play a central role in developing strategies and procedures.

With or without a formal school policy to fall back on, you can manage and prevent bullying in your own classroom. As the person most familiar with your classroom, count on your instinct to choose the program that will work best for your students. Feel free to involve the IEP and Section 504 teams in your school as well.

#### *Teach Your Children What Bullying Is*

The most important step in preventing bullying is to clearly define bullying in all its forms and discuss it openly. Emphasize that it is never the victim’s fault. Provide examples of good responses (walking away, telling an adult) and bad responses (retaliating with more name-calling or violence).

The best approaches are simple enough that they can be used any time and by anyone, including a student with disabilities. Special education students can be part of the solution to bullying and other behavioral issues—it follows from the inclusion philosophy. Horner recommends a stop-walk-talk model in which students are taught a universal response to problem behavior (such as saying “stop” and giving a physical hand signal). If it continues, they should walk away and tell an adult.

“If you give kids one solution that works in a million situations, they’ll be more likely to use it,” he explains. The idea is that if all students know and abide by this school-wide code, they can put an end to some conflicts themselves. This is especially important because, inevitably, most bullying occurs outside the presence of teachers. And in addition to being easy to teach, these methods eventually result in teachers and administrators spending less time disciplining students.

Role-playing activities can also be useful for this purpose, particularly with elementary-school students. There are plenty of free, effective instructional videos, cartoons, and other resources available to engage your students (see the resources at the end of this article). You can also choose examples from literature that demonstrate empathy, conflict resolution, and the golden rule and incorporate them into the language arts curriculum. Repeat these affective lessons once a week, if possible.

Dinsdale has adapted the old folktale “Cool Ride in the Sky” to teach her students about treating others with respect. She relies on the cast of characters as metaphors for behavior: the vulture bullies the other animals and while the chicken simply gives up, the eagle is courteous and tries his best to help his friends. The story’s key message, “Straighten up and fly right!”, has become her motto for encouraging appropriate behavior.

“I have pictures of eagles hung up all around my classroom,” Dinsdale explains. “When I want them on their best behavior, I just point and say ‘be an eagle’ and they get it. They are understanding what leadership qualities truly are.”

You can also work with your students to set a simple code of conduct for your classroom, i.e., no name-calling, no saying “shut up.” They will feel more invested in the rules if they help form them. Use the last few minutes of each school day for reflection: Did the class have a good day today?

#### *Rely on Teachable Moments*

But these affective lessons should not be limited to the occasional 15-minute exercise. Whenever you spot an instance of bullying in your classroom, make an example of it in a way that doesn’t embarrass the students involved. Challenge them to think about how they should react or could have responded better. This will help them understand proper behavior and eventually implement it on their own.

“Unfortunately, you can’t assume that a student comes to school knowing how to behave,” says Beverley Johns, a former teacher who now serves as a teacher educator and consultant on behavioral disorders in Illinois. “Many need appropriate behavior explicitly modeled for them.”

Johns recalls one incident involving “Darren,” a fifth grader with Asperger’s syndrome. He was enrolled in a program for students with significant behavioral disorders and did well enough that he was integrated into the general education classes at his home elementary school. One day, seemingly out of the blue, he punched another student. When asked about what happened, Darren reported that the other student had called him a very negative name the year before and he had never forgotten it.

“It was interesting that he had held the grudge and did something about it a year later,” says Johns. “We used the incident as an opportunity to teach him that revenge wasn’t appropriate.”

#### *Let Them Know They Can Come to You*

The most common reason students don’t report bullying is that they don’t believe school personnel will help. Establish a clear protocol for reporting bullying and convince your students that you take it seriously by following up on every claim. Children may fear being labeled a tattletale; be sure to explain the difference between reporting and tattling. (Tattling is to get someone in trouble, whereas reporting is to keep someone safe.)

#### *The Bystander’s Dilemma*

In any case of bullying there are three actors: the bully, the victim, and the bystander. In a school where bullying is tolerated, everyone is responsible. Teachers and students alike have an obligation to act whenever they witness someone being bullied.

Horner’s team has found that up to 70 percent of the time either the bystander or the victim himself will reward the bully with the attention he or she is seeking. Their reaction is what gives the bully power; if they call it out or walk away, that power is not granted. Impress upon your students that someone who laughs at bullying behavior or ignores it is just as culpable as the bully himself.

#### *Work in Small, Homogenous Groups*

In the case of students with gifts or learning disabilities, it may be wise to separate your class into more homogenous groups for certain subject instruction such as math or reading. By leveling the playing field, you will decrease the likelihood of bullying.

“I’ve found it helps to group kids more appropriately, when feasible, so the differences among them aren’t so great,” Dickson says.

#### *Educate the Class about a Student’s Disability*

If a child with disabilities is being victimized in the general education classroom, it’s possible the behavior is simply a manifestation of the bully’s discomfort. With student and parent permission, you can educate the class about the student’s condition and invite them to ask questions in an open-minded setting. Young children are very curious and have a remarkable capacity to accept disability issues. Empathy can grow from understanding. Orchestrate interaction between general and special education, and labels will start to fade away.

“Empathy is the single most important tool,” according to Braaten, “because it is the antithesis of aggression.”

Among older students, this can segue into a discussion about the Americans with Disabilities Act and how disability harassment is not just wrong—it’s illegal.

From there, you can help your students build friendships with both general education and fellow special education students. By enlarging their social circle, you will help safeguard them against bullying and generally improve their school experience.

#### *Teach Self-Advocacy*

With direct instruction, special education students can learn to recognize bullying and stand up for themselves. This is particularly important for those who are easy targets because of their impulsive behavior. Work with them on anger and stress management, self-control, and knowing the signs of when they’re being set up by their peers. These skills will improve their overall social competency.

#### *Keep Your Eyes Peeled*

Bullying tends to occur during times where students are unattended: at lunchtime, in restrooms, on the playground, on the bus, and so on. Recruit fellow teachers to monitor the hallway during class changes and the playground during recess. You won’t be able to watch them every second, but it will help. Children are less likely to misbehave in the presence of a teacher.

Similarly, it may be wise to seat vulnerable students at the front of the classroom. Closer proximity to an authority figure should help protect them from bullies. Children tend not to like assigned seats, but it can be an effective way to alleviate conflict in the classroom.

#### *Make Yourself Available to Parents*

Parents are becoming better informed of behavioral issues and are more assertively defending their kids. The teacher-parent team can be a powerful one in the fight against bullying, whether their child is the bully or the bullied. You’ll establish a consistent message at home and at school.

“All of my kids’ parents have my cell phone number,” says Dinsdale. “They know they can reach me at any time. Not one of them has abused the privilege.”

#### **Addressing the Bully**

It is crucial that you not only protect the victim, but also determine what led the bully to act in the first place. What need it is fulfilling for them? What underlying emotions are they expressing? If you can find out why they are bullying, you can then address the cause.

“You can’t demonize the bully,” Horner stresses. “In fact, the ‘bully’ label may be dangerous. We need to be open to these children, find a place for them, and find ways to help them.”

“Behavior is communication,” Johns explains. “What are they saying to you?”

Address bullying as you would any other behavioral problem. A zero-tolerance approach is usually unrealistic and therefore ineffective—you can’t keep punishing the bully and expect his behavior to change. You want to teach students skills and values, not just manage their behavior. Also, extinction procedures don’t work well in bullying situations, as the behavior will get worse before it gets better and that isn’t fair to the victim. What does work is a tiered Response to Intervention (RTI) approach that establishes a continuum of consequences and concentrates efforts on the students who don’t respond to primary and secondary prevention.

The key, Johns advises, is to intervene when a child displays low-level aggression in an attempt to curb it before it escalates. It is important to also reinforce positive behavior by applauding the child’s acts of kindness. When a

student receives more attention for what he does right than for what he does wrong, he will be inclined to continue the positive behavior.

“It’s important to instill a sense of self-discipline,” says Dinsdale. “These aren’t just skills for school, they’re skills for life.”

“It’s not really about ‘how not to be a bully’,” Horner points out. “What you really want to teach is the concept of respect, what respectful behavior is and what it is not.” And these concepts are indeed teachable.

### **Measuring Your Success**

The last piece of the puzzle is regularly monitoring your results. One measure that is easy to track is the number of office discipline referrals—did it go up or down? But the data-gathering doesn’t need to be complicated. Every month or so, ask yourself two questions: Am I doing what I said I would to prevent and address problem behavior? Are my efforts helping my students?

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According to some, harassment in schools will likely follow the same trajectory as sexual harassment did 30 years ago: increased awareness, followed by the institution of federal laws, followed by widespread intolerance.

“I definitely feel we are moving in that direction with bullying,” says Peterson. “We’re approaching a critical mass of understanding.”

### **Resources**

[CEC’s policy on safe schools](#) released in April 2008.

[View](#) CEC’s anti-bullying resources.

#### **Books:**

Coloroso, Barbara. *The Bully, the Bullied, and the Bystander*. Collins Living, 2004.

Ludwig, Tracy. *My Secret Bully*. Tricycle Press, 2005.

Ludwig, Tracy. *Just Kidding*. Tricycle Press, 2006.

#### **Web sites:**

[AutismSpot](#) – This five-minute video, starring CEC student member James E. Williams, is geared toward the bullying of autistic children but is just as suitable for the general education classroom.

[Behavioral Institute for Children and Adolescents](#) – Based in Arden Hills, Minnesota.

[The Committee for Children](#) – Offers a “Steps to Respect” program for schools with a comprehensive curriculum kit.

[Educational and Community Supports Research Center](#)– Housed at the University of Oregon.

[i-SAFE](#)– A non-profit foundation whose mission is to educate and empower youth to make their Internet experiences safe and responsible.

[National Center for Bullying Prevention](#)– A Web site for elementary-age students sponsored by the Pacer Center with an emphasis on children with disabilities.

[National Technical Assistance Center on School-Wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports](#) (PBIS) – This office is part of the Department of Education’s Office of Special Education Programs.

[Peaceful Schools](#) – Offers programs, products, and services developed to promote a school community that engages students and staff in positive productive conflict resolution.

[Stop Bullying Now!](#) – This Web campaign, sponsored by the Health Resources and Services Administration, offers tools to help in handling individual bullying problems and for creating bullying prevention programs at the school or community level, including public service announcements and animated “webisodes.”

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