

Bullying: a guide for parents

I freely admit this is 'nicked' from the National Autism Society's website and can be found at: www.autism.org.uk/18331

So all credit goes to them for this useful article!

A child with autism can be at more risk of being bullied than their peers. However, they may not be able to communicate this to you. In this section, we explain the term bullying, the signs to look out for if your child is being bullied, but cannot communicate it to you, and how it might affect your child.

As well as perhaps being bullied at school, your child may experience cyberbullying - a new form of bullying via the internet and mobile phones.

We tell you what you can do about the bullying - whether it is bullying in the school playground or 'cyberbullying' - from talking to your child's school about the bullying and trying a range of approaches to help you help your child. We also tell you how to take your complaint further, if you are not satisfied the school has done enough to stop your child being bullied.

What is bullying?

The Department for Children, Schools and Families (formerly the Department for Education and Skills) (UK) defines bullying as being:

- deliberately hurtful
- repeated over a period of time and
- difficult for victims to defend themselves against.

Bullying falls into three main categories:

- physical: hitting, kicking, taking belongings
- verbal: name-calling, insulting, making offensive remarks
- indirect: spreading nasty stories about someone, exclusion from social groups, being made the subject of malicious rumours, sending malicious emails or text messages on mobile phones.

As well as bullying during school, new ways of communicating such as the internet and mobile phones now enable bullies to bully others in different ways and out of school hours.

Cyberbullying includes bullying via text messages, emails and chat forums, websites and instant messaging. The media recently reported how bullies set up pretend profiles of a child and

encouraged other classmates to leave hurtful messages. Another form of bullying called 'happy slapping' has also been reported in which a mobile phone video recording of an innocent person being hit or bullied is sent around to their friends.

In a recent UK study, one in five pupils was bullied via the internet or mobile phone. However, a third of these pupils never told anyone. This means that bullying is now no longer left at the school gates, but can continue into the evening and weekends as well.

Children with special educational needs or additional support needs are three times more likely to be bullied than their peers. Children with special needs are also more likely to be a bully themselves. Bullying is not limited just to mainstream schools. According to one study, children in specialist placements can also be at risk of being bullied or of becoming a bully themselves.

Bullying and children with autism

Children with autism can be at more risk of being bullied. One study of 400 children with Asperger syndrome found that the children were at least four times more likely to be bullied than their peers. This is often because the different ways in which children with autism communicate and interact can become more apparent to their peer group, especially as they get older. Because children with autism find it hard to read facial expressions and body language, they can't tell when someone is being friendly or if they are trying to hurt them. They also find it hard to put themselves in someone else's shoes and therefore don't understand another child's intentions.

Cumine, Leach and Stevenson (1998) state that children with autism may appear to be naïve and trusting, unable to discriminate between friendly approaches and those approaches which are intended to wind them up.

Gray (2000) describes how in one of her classes, a child with autism was offered two quarters in return for a dollar (double the money offered). The child with autism thought that this classmate wanted to be friends. Some children with autism will try to fit into their peer group by doing things other children suggest when bullies suggest things. It can often be something that can hurt the child with autism or get them into trouble with school staff.

Playground behaviour

A child with autism is an easy target in the playground as they often prefer to play alone in the playground. As a result, other children find it easy to pick on them as they do not have a support structure around them. Other children may also pick on children with autism if they see them doing 'odd' things such as hand flapping or making inappropriate comments.

Being a bully

Children with autism can also become a bully themselves. Some children will become aggressive when a game is not being played the way they want and will try to take control of the situation. They may also become frustrated at being left out in the playground and try to make children become friends with them (Gray, 2000).

How to tell if your child is being bullied

The difficulty for you, as a parent, is that it is not always easy to tell if your child is being bullied. Because of problems with understanding others intentions, children with autism may not always realise they are being bullied (Attwood, 2005). Communication difficulties can also make it difficult for them to tell you or school staff about an incident. As a result, you may need to look for other clues as to whether or not your child is being bullied. ChildLine suggests looking for the following as potential signs of being bullied:

- coming home with dirty, damaged or missing clothes, bags or books, with bruises or scratches, without money they should have or asking for more money the next day
- arriving at school or getting home late because they have changed their route to or from school
- a reluctance to go to school and making excuses to miss school
- being stressed, depressed, unhappy or unwell
- a deterioration in concentration or the standard of schoolwork reported by their teacher(s) (ChildLine, 1994).

A child with autism may also show sudden changes in behaviour, which may be due to bullying at school. This may include increased anxiety, increased difficulty in sleeping or outbursts at home (Attwood, 2005). Some children with autism may mimic the acts of bullies at home by bullying their siblings because they don't understand that such behaviour is unacceptable (Attwood, 2005). To them, they are simply acting out what their peers are doing.