



# Walk **A** Mile **In** Their Shoes

Bullying and the Child with Special Needs



A Report and Guide from AbilityPath.org



# Walk *A* Mile In *Their* Shoes

*Bullying and the Child with Special Needs*



“This important report confirms the presence of a **silent epidemic** in our schools and communities. Hundreds of thousands of children with differences are being subject to humiliation and isolation week in and week out around the country. **It is time to bring this problem to light** and marshal a call to action to our young people to put an end to it. This report shows us that what you say matters. I hope young leaders around the country will act on it by joining, sharing and leading the Spread the Word to End the Word campaign on March 2, 2011. ”

*-Timothy Shriver - Special Olympics*



“As this report illustrates, **bullying** - in the form of name-calling, exclusion, or violence - is an issue that many individuals with special needs cope with on a daily basis. The resulting humiliation, isolation and pain is something that affects not only these individuals, but also all those around them, including parents, care-givers and teachers. So, **I hope that the awareness this report creates**, coupled with the valuable suggestions and tips that it offers, **leads to an increase in the acceptance and inclusion of individuals with special needs, ultimately putting an end to bullying** ”

*-Anthony K. Shriver, Founder and Chairman, Best Buddies International*



“**Bullying is every parent’s fear**. For parents of children with special needs that fear is exacerbated. Very little is available to support these families, which is why AbilityPath.org dedicated resources to raise the level of awareness and include children and youth with special needs in national discussions. “Walk a Mile in Their Shoes” is just the first step in our campaign to Disable Bullying. We have seen the power of what can happen when families, schools and communities as a whole join together. **It is up to all of us to end years of name calling, teasing and physical abuse.** Let’s take back our schoolyards and even the internet to make them safe for ALL kids! If we don’t speak out to Disable Bullying, who will? Share this report with everyone you know, post it to your blog, Facebook page or print out and give it to your elected officials. **No act is too small, too simple or can happen too soon!** ”

*-Sheryl Young, CEO AbilityPath.org*



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## *The Overview*

# Walk a Mile in Their Shoes

*Julia Nimir, a young woman with Down syndrome and subject of the documentary “Walking in My Shoes,” was bullied most of her life. She shared through her personal experience that the most important thing in ending the bullying of a child with special needs is “having people learn to walk a mile in their shoes.”*

The journey addressing the issue of bullying and children with special needs began when **AbilityPath.org** identified the need to provide information to parents who all too often struggle to find ways to help their child with bullying. Over the course of several months, **AbilityPath.org** staff and writers interviewed experts, educators and parents regarding this escalating issue facing children with special needs. It became apparent that the demographic most vulnerable to bullying also had the fewest resources.

A voice for these families is missing from the national dialogue. This report and guide is an effort to make that voice heard. These children and parents are desperate for resources, advocates and awareness so the physical and emotional toll their children experience may be prevented. They need their children’s classmates, teachers and community to “walk a mile in their shoes.”

**AbilityPath.org** is an online hub and special needs community for parents and professionals, which provides over 90 years of experience serving individuals with disabilities through the nonprofit that created it, Community Gatepath ([www.gatepath.com](http://www.gatepath.com)). Their staff and network of doctors, therapists and early childhood specialists are experts in serving the needs of adults and children with disabilities; however, it was realized that very few in their industry are experts when it comes to bullying and the child with special needs.

In recognizing the need for this critical issue to be addressed, **AbilityPath.org** created this report and guide to achieve the following:

- Educate all parents on the issue. Both parents and experts shared with **AbilityPath.org** the limited information that is available specific to the issues faced by children with special needs.
- Empower parents and educators to take action and apply meaningful change in the classroom and these children’s lives by providing educational as well as legal options in an effort to prevent and/or fight back against the actions bullies.
- Assist the actions of policy makers, school administrators and professionals in a team effort to ensure that this issue is at the forefront in the public arena when bullying is discussed, researched or legislated. It is clear that the U.S. is nearly a decade behind other nations when implementing, legislating or researching policies regarding bullying and children with special needs.





## *The Testimonials*

### **A First Hand Perspective From Parents And Children**

*“My daughter is a wonderful, adorable, sweet child with Down syndrome. The bullying she encountered started in elementary school and has followed her to middle school. Everyone makes a big deal about their children being bullied at school and it is a big deal. However, it is always the ‘normal’ children that you hear about. Who stands up for the children who are like my daughter? What about those children who have to deal with bullying and count on teachers and bus drivers to stand up for them because they can’t speak up for themselves?”*

*- Mother of an 11-year-old girl with Down syndrome*

During the course of this report, AbilityPath.org researched several high profile media reports involving bullying and a child with special needs. The emotional and physical toll these parents and their children face serve as only a small representation of a much larger population. Some reports estimate that nearly 85 percent of children with special needs experience bullying. We encourage you to read their stories at AbilityPath.org and more importantly share your own. Only through strength in numbers can we Disable Bullying.

#### **KEVIN KANETA: BULLIED SINCE THE THIRD GRADE**

Kevin Kaneta was born with cerebral palsy, a neurological disorder that affects body movement and muscle coordination. During an interview with a Denver, Colo. television station, he shared his experience as a bullying target since the third grade, and each year, it gets worse.

“They go after me because they see me as a vulnerable target,” said Kevin. Kevin walks slower than most children and drags his feet because of his disability. His mother, Tyleen Wilson, fears for his safety each day at school. “I worry if he’ll come home today,” said Wilson. “What if they really hurt him?”

Wilson stated she’s notified school administrators, as well as the Colorado media, that her son’s classmates have tripped and pinned him down and force fed dog food into his mouth. In late December 2010, Wilson noticed a Facebook picture that enraged her. It was of Kevin with his hooded sweatshirt tied tightly around his face.

“I thought it was a joke,” she said. “I prodded Kevin to tell me about the picture.” Kevin’s classmates had tied his sweatshirt tightly around his face and forced him to walk around the playground, barely able to see through the small opening. After taunting and teasing, the kids ripped the sweatshirt off, cutting his eyelids.

Another picture showed Kevin against the playground fence trying to break free. Both arms of the sweatshirt were tied to the fence post. “They just watched me struggle to get out,” said Kevin. “They put it on Facebook and now everyone knows it.”

### HARRISON WARREN: TARGET OF A CYBERBULLY

Harrison Warren, age 13, is a young boy with special needs. He came home from school and was very excited, telling his parents, Jeannie and James Wilson, that his friends at school created a Facebook fan page. Already, 50 school children joined as his “friend” and followed the activities on the Web page. To be a part of this online community meant a tremendous amount to Harrison.

Jeannie Wilson wanted to share in Harrison’s excitement and asked her son to share the Web page. What she discovered was not a compilation of “friends on Facebook,” but a digital portrayal that branded Harrison as a “retard.” The photos publically ridiculed the middle school student who only desired to fit in and make friends at school. The students’ derogatory comments were easily shared online to their profile pages and social networks. One comment particularly frightened Harrison’s father.

“One child’s posting (read) ‘this page is, in fact, a hate group on Harrison because he is this way,’” said James Wilson.

### AUSTIN AVERY: A MOTHER’S WORST NIGHTMARE

*“My child almost died.” - Sharlene Avery*

Austin Avery’s premature birth resulted in the diagnosis of a developmental disability. His differences with his peers and desire to make friends made him an easy target for bullies. His mother, Sharlene Avery, said the bullying of her child had gone unnoticed by adults for too long. In April 2010, Avery received a call from Austin’s school and realized immediately something terribly wrong had happened.

“We had a call from the school to come pick him up cause he was hallucinating,” said Avery. She placed him in the car and drove to the emergency room, where doctors told her something that she never imagined. Her son was intoxicated. “I just don’t understand how your child goes to school and comes home in a drunken



stooper,” she said. “The doctor said that his blood alcohol level was way over the legal limit. Now, can you imagine a 14-year-old child and what kind of damage that can do to his brain?”

The hospital then notified local authorities. Avery immediately tried to action at the school, where she believes bullies had spiked her son’s drink.” One of the little kids had told us, ‘Ma’am, they have been poisoning him ever since January.’ And we were like, ‘Are you serious?’ All I can do is just ask ‘why, why?’” said Avery.

While waiting to hear from officials, Avery says that she’s afraid of what could happen next. “What everybody doesn’t understand is that it’s my child today, but it could be their child tomorrow. And if this stuff is not stopped, somebody’s gonna die because my child almost died.”





## LAUREN POTTER: NAME CALLING IN PUBLIC

The world knows Lauren Potter as the character of Becky Jackson from the hit television series, “Glee.” Cheered on by thousands of fans, Potter, a young woman with Down syndrome, has never been defined by her disability. Yet, growing up she was reminded of her “differences” by others. She was bullied as a child by children as well as adults through name calling, teasing, pranks and jokes.

She tells a story that is all too often experienced by children with special needs. “I remember as a teenager, walking through a department store and someone behind me yelled ‘Look at that retard!’” said Potter. “It was hurtful. I remember turning around and saying ‘That’s just not ok! What you called me was just not ok.’”

This experience was merely one of many bullying incidences Potter recalls from her youth.

**Video:** Watch more with Lauren Potter at [www.youtube.com/abilitypathchannel](http://www.youtube.com/abilitypathchannel)

## TYLER LONG: A LIFE IS LOST TO BULLYING

*“I met with multiple teachers and principals several times each year to complain about the bullying.”*

- Tina Long

Tyler Long’s diagnosis with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) caused unique personality traits that made him unpopular in school. His mother, Tina Long, says being different made him a target of bullying. Classmates took his things, spat in his food and called Tyler names.

“Tyler was very fixated on rules,” she said. “If someone talked in class, I know that he would say ‘you’re not supposed to be talking. That’s the rule.’ I’m sure this innocent fixation led to some of the bullying.”

On October 17, 2009, 17-year-old Tyler’s battle with the bullies led to a tragic end. Depressed, he hanged himself before school and committed suicide. It devastated his family and engulfed a community to seek answers.





## SHANIYA BOYD: KICKED OFF HER CRUTCHES

*“She is only 8...she just wanted to get away from the bullying.” - Geneva Biggus*

Geneva Biggus says that her 8-year-old daughter with cerebral palsy, Shaniya Boyd, tried to jump out of a window at school. Shaniya told her that “she just wanted to get away” after she was teased, kicked in the forehead by a boy and knocked off of the crutches she needs to walk.

“Three people were fighting me; two girls and one boy. The boy kicked me in my forehead for no reason, and then they hit me,” Shaniya said. The abuse had been going on for some time and Geneva stated that “the school did little to stop it.”

“They tried to separate them and put them in different classes, but it still happened in the hallway or cafeteria or outside when they had play time - stuff like that,” said Geneva. “They still managed to get their hands on my child.”

## CHATARI JONES: BULLY ON THE BUS

*“I’m thinking, I’m going to talk to the bus driver; that was my initial intent.[But] I’m seeing the bus coming 20 minutes late, people just yelling and arguing and hanging out of the windows. It was chaos -- no control. And I was like, ‘How am I supposed to put my daughter, standing here crying, on this bus?’ “ – James Jones*

The video of a father charging onto a school bus to defend his middle school daughter with cerebral palsy against bullies became national news in fall 2010. Appearing on NBC’s “Today Show,” Chatari Jones and her father James Jones, told co-host Matt Lauer that she started to worry about the bullying a week prior to her father’s confrontation on the bus. She eventually told her parents in fear the situation would just get worse.

Chatari had begun to emotionally shut down just days after starting sixth grade. Her dad realized it wasn’t until he waited for the school bus with his daughter, that it was the students on the bus that were making her life “a living hell.”

“As the involved parent of a child who suffers from cerebral palsy, it broke my heart,” said Jones in a statement released by the Associated Press. “When I walked my daughter to the bus that morning, she broke down in tears and finally told me about the bullies who had tormented her on the school bus. She was afraid. I did not intend to ‘go ballistic’ on the alleged bullies, but when the bus pulled up to the curb, I witnessed ‘a bus gone wild.’”

Though she started the “Today Show” interview with a smile, Chatari broke down in tears when sharing what she had to endure on the bus. “They would poke me with pens, call me all kinds of names, spit in my hair and throw condoms at me on the bus,” Chatari said sobbing.



## *The Targets*

# Why Children With Special Needs Are Frequent Targets

*“For over 13 years, I have been a practicing attorney and advocate for families of children with special needs. There is not a week that goes by where I do not learn of a case of bullying directed toward a child with special needs.”*

– Anonymous

Bullying certainly isn't a new problem; it has existed for generations. Historically, many have seen it as a rite of passage, a type of de facto hazing. According to Dr. Peter Raffalli, a pediatric neurologist at the Children's Hospital in Boston, Mass., this attitude is, in many cases, more dangerous than the bullies themselves. “No matter how you look at it, bullying is a form of abuse victimization, plain and simple,” said Dr. Raffalli. “It's a case of the strong - or at least the stronger - preying on the weak. It says volumes about where we are as a culture and race.”

Bullying has negative effects on all its victims, but kids with special needs are especially vulnerable, according to Nancy A. Murphy, M.D., FAAP and chair of the American Academy of Pediatrics Council on Children with Disabilities Executive Committee. “Since these children already struggle with self-esteem issues,” said Dr. Murphy. “Bullying has a greater impact and they desire to fit in, and are less likely to stand up for themselves.”

According to researchers, children with special needs often have a lower social standing among the other students in the classroom which may lead to them so frequently becoming the targets of bullying (Pepler & Craig, 2000; Dubin, 2007).

“Because of difficulties with social interaction and the inability to read social cues, children with autism and Asperger's syndrome have higher rates of peer rejection and higher frequencies of verbal and physical attacks,” said Robin Kowalski, a psychology professor at Clemson University in Clemson, S.C.

For children with special needs, and their parents, these trends present unique challenges that can, at times, overwhelm. “Many parents have a hard enough time dealing with the day-to-day challenges of life with a special needs child. Add bullying into the mix and everybody is just completely overwhelmed,” said one parent.

Overall, researchers have concluded that children with special needs are bullied more because:

- They may have a low frustration tolerance. When frustration increases and reaches a threshold, it can lead to a meltdown, which makes the person stand out as being different.

- Students with developmental disabilities may have difficulty paying attention to more than one piece of information, which may cause them to stay “stuck” in a conversation. Such actions can have adverse effects on their social skills and make it difficult for them to hold conversations and make friends.
- Children with motor difficulties have difficulty reading, writing and participating in gym class. As such, they are often made fun of on the playground and in class because they are unable to perform age-appropriate motor skills, such as kicking a ball to the right person or coloring in the lines.
- Children with communication disabilities often have assistive technology devices that other students do not understand and, as such, the other students view them as “weird.”
- Students with physical impairments may move slower, have less stamina and an unsteady gait. These conditions, as well as others, may be viewed as signs of weakness and precipitate physical or verbal abuse.

## What Does Research Show?

*“I have a 10-year-old daughter with cerebral palsy, said the father of a child with special needs. “Several days ago, I walked into my daughter’s school cafeteria unannounced. The ‘normal’ kids were throwing food at the children with special needs.”*

*- Anonymous Father of Child with Special Needs*

Research conducted has demonstrated conclusively that children with disabilities are significantly more likely than their peers to be the victims of bullying. The statistical rate of bullying for this demographic is wide ranging. A study in the British Journal of Learning Support (2008) found that 60 percent of students with disabilities reported being bullied compared to 25 percent of the general student population. According to researchers Wall, Wheaton and Zuver (2009) only 10 studies have been conducted in the United States on bullying and developmental disabilities. All studies found that children with disabilities were two to three times more likely to be victims of bullying than their non-disabled peers. In addition, the researchers found that the bullying experienced by these children was more chronic in nature and was most often directly related to their disability.

In a landmark study conducted in 1994, researchers found that children with visible physical conditions or disabilities, such as cerebral palsy and Down syndrome, are more likely to be called names or aggressively excluded from social activities (Olweus, 1994). Other researchers have discovered that students with





disabilities were more worried about school safety and being injured or harassed by peers, compared to students without a disability (Saylor & Leach, 2009).

In 2009, the Massachusetts Advocates for Children in a survey of nearly 400 parents of children with autism across the state found that 88 percent of children with autism have been bullied at school ranging from verbal abuse to physical contact.

In Connecticut, Julie Swanson, an advocate for families with special needs and her colleague, Jennifer Laviano an attorney in private practice who represents children and families with special needs, joined forces with other parents to persuade the State Department of Education, to begin to track the number of incidents of bullying and the child with special needs. Julie stated that while there is no “official” data being kept on the incidence of bullying among kids with disabilities, the incoming call data reflected a disturbing trend: more than 50 percent of the complaints involved a student with an IEP, or a disability. The unofficial conclusion is that there is a disturbing, disproportionate occurrence of bullying among students with disabilities.

*All studies found that children with disabilities were two to three times more likely to be victims of bullying than their non-disabled peers.*

“This is the exact type of data I attempted to identify as an unmet need in special education in my involvement of the State Advisory Council,” said Swanson. “However, the state did not recognize this as an unmet need that warranted money allocated to officially track the incidence among kids with disabilities.”

Special education programs and inclusion efforts have opened doors for thousands of children with special needs. Yet, those very doors may have also made them vulnerable to bullying. Special classes, extra help and visible assistance given to such students makes them different from other students. As a result, other students too often characterize children with special needs as not smart or too different to be included.

Jerome J. Holzbauer at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (2008) reported occurrences of harassment of students with disabilities witnessed from 90 special education teachers in a large public school district. Overall, 96.7 percent of the teachers reported that they observed more than one incident of school-related disability harassment conduct.

Many classmates choose to not be friends with these children, thus leaving them purposely out of the social fabric in the classroom. Simply stated, students with disabilities stand out by virtue of behavioral, vocal or physical challenges (Carter & Spencer, 2006).

The Statistics

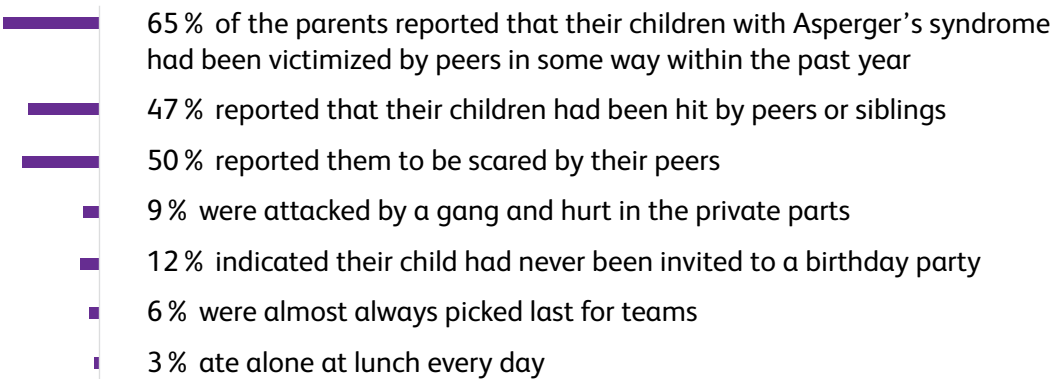
## A Snapshot of Bullying, Schools And A Child With Special Needs

Sixty percent of students with disabilities reported being bullied compared to 25 percent of the general student population.

Source: British Journal of Learning Support (2008)

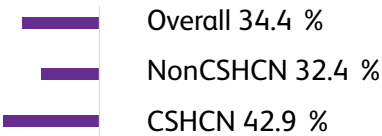
Only 10 studies have been conducted in the United States on bullying and developmental disabilities. All studies found that children with disabilities were two to three times more likely to be victims of bullying than their nondisabled peers.

Source: Disabilities: Insights from across Fields and around the World (2009)



Source: Issues in Comprehensive Pediatric Nursing (2009)

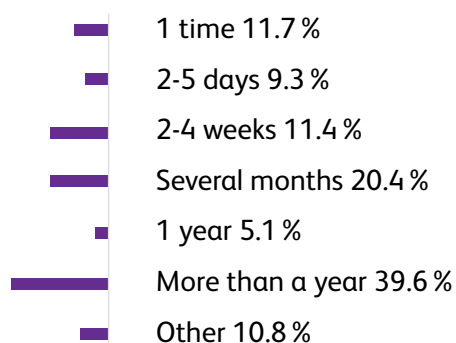
Comparison of Children with Special Health Care Condition Needs (CSHCN) compared to NonCSHCN being bullied by other children (age 6-17 years)



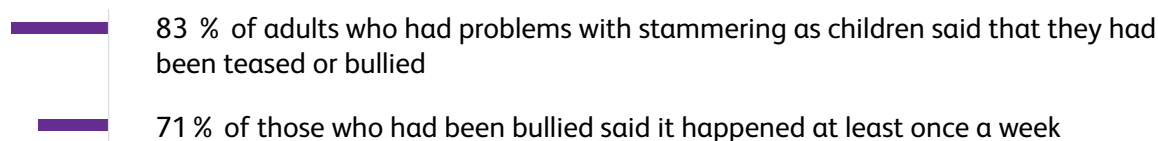
Source: Pediatrics (2006)



Length of time bullying occurred when asked of parents with children on the autism spectrum:

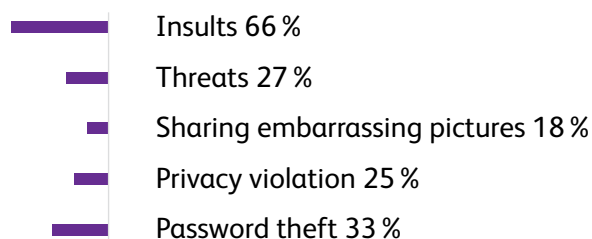


*Source: Massachusetts Advocates for Children (2009)*



*Source: British Journal of Educational Psychology (1999)*

Percentage of all youth reporting bullying online (e.g. message boards, IM, e-mail, cell phone, chat rooms, blogs, profile sites):



*Source: Journal of School Health (2008)*



## *The Signs*

# What Every Parent Should Know About Bullying

Parents should familiarize themselves with the different forms of bullying that a child with special needs may experience:

**MANIPULATIVE BULLYING:** This form of bullying occurs when a child with special needs is actually being coerced and controlled by another student.

**CONDITIONAL FRIENDSHIP:** This form of bullying occurs when a child thinks that someone is being their friend, but the times of “friendship” are alternated with times of bullying.

**EXPLOITATIVE BULLYING:** This form of bullying occurs when the features of the child’s condition are used to bully them either by other classmates or via technology and social media networks.

The Matrix Parents Network, a nonprofit in Marin County, Calif., serves as a resource to parents in the education and prevention of bullying. It was founded in 1983 when three mothers gathered around a kitchen table to share the challenges, heartbreak and frustrations of raising children with special needs. At that time, no organizations existed for a family in crisis to turn to for compassion, encouragement, support or information. Forming a network of parents, they decided to educate, support and encourage families who were facing the same challenges that they had faced alone.

*Stay focused on the child and the issue. Though a parent will likely be upset and/or angry for the child, over reacting (or under reacting) can make things more stressful for a child.*

Stephanie Steiner, the director of The Matrix Parents Network stated that “without timely and appropriate intervention, students with disabilities who experience bullying will have increased problems that will likely make it more difficult to meet their special needs. Parents must always intervene.”

Matrix was founded upon the belief that parents can and must be the primary managers and advocates of their child with special needs. It is one of 100 Parent Training and Information Centers (PTIs) nationwide, which provide training and information to parents of infants, toddlers, children and youth with all types of disabilities – physical, cognitive, emotional and learning.

The following are best practices for parents recommended by The Matrix Parents Network:

- **BE AWARE** that students often feel that adult intervention is infrequent and unhelpful and, as such, fear that telling adults will only bring more harassment from bullies.

- **BE OBSERVANT** of a child's behavior, appearance and moods, particularly if one thinks that a child is 'at risk' for being bullied. If a child is reluctant to attend school, investigate why and consider a negative social experience as one reason.
- **IF A PARENT SUSPECTS SOMETHING IS WRONG, TALK WITH THE CHILD.** Children can be reluctant to speak up for fear of retaliation or because they don't want to "tattletale." Whether it's a parent or the child who initiates the conversation, speak openly and honestly – and listen! Keep the conversation at a level a child can understand. Remember that every child is different, what may not bother one child, might be extremely detrimental to another.
- **DON'T BLAME THE CHILD.** Be supportive, loving and patient. Take his/her story seriously. Let him/her know that it's not his/her fault and that appropriate action will be taken.
- **GET DETAILS FROM THE CHILD ABOUT THE INCIDENT(S).** Try not to direct his/her responses, but ask pertinent questions about what happened and how he/she felt/feels. Let the child know that appropriate confidentiality will be kept, but that keeping bullying a secret is not good for anyone. Tell the child that he/she has the right to be safe.
- **STAY FOCUSED ON THE CHILD AND THE ISSUE.** Though a parent will likely be upset and/or angry for the child, over reacting (or under reacting) can make things more stressful for a child. Allowing emotions to 'take over' can also make an objective assessment of the situation more difficult. Keeping an emotional response in check will help one better support and advocate for the child.
- If appropriate, **PROBLEM SOLVE OR BRAINSTORM INTERVENTION STRATEGIES WITH THE CHILD.** Giving him/her relevant information, such as the definition of bullying, at a level he/she can understand, can be helpful as well.
- **BULLYING SHOULD NEVER BE IGNORED.** Intervene immediately. Children are easily emotionally wounded and often have few skills to cope. Follow up with the school as soon as possible. If needed, seek help from outside sources.
- **TALK WITH ALL PERTINENT SCHOOL STAFF.** Find out what they know and what actions, if any, they've taken. Make sure that they understand the child's disability and the possible impact his/her disability might have on the social dynamics which set-up the bullying. The staff may not be aware of a problem, but, once they are, work collaboratively on how best to help the child. On-going communication and the continued monitoring of resolved bullying issues is often necessary.
- **MAKE SURE THAT THE STAFF SPEAKS WITH THE BULLY AND VICTIM SEPARATELY.** Depending on the age and needs of the child, a parent may want to be a part of the initial discussion that the staff has with the child.



- If needed, **ASK FOR A GENERAL OR AN IEP MEETING** to discuss the situation and solutions. Document the incidents in writing. Include the conversations with the child, staff, etc.
- **RECORD DATES, WHO WAS INVOLVED, WHAT WAS SAID**, names of possible witnesses, the adverse effects on the child and the school's responses and interventions. Stick to the facts.
- **A WRITTEN COMPLAINT** to the district may be appropriate if the problem proves to be severe.
- **SEEK THE HELP OF OUTSIDE PROFESSIONALS**, such as a pediatrician or mental health provider. Depending upon the degree of the problem and your child's vulnerability, utilizing professional assistance sooner rather than later may be important.
- **CONSULT WITH OUTSIDE ORGANIZATIONS**. Violence prevention agencies can provide information on how to protect the child. Organizations familiar with the child's disability and its unique characteristics may have some specific intervention ideas.
- If physical signs of the bullying exist (torn clothes, cuts, bruises, etc.), **TAKE A PHOTO**; police involvement may be needed.
- For the younger child, **VOLUNTEERING** in his/her classroom might help one better understand the social dynamics and the underlying problems.
- **DISCUSS THE ISSUE OF BULLYING** with other parents, individually or in a support group. Talking with the parents of the bully, or the bully him/herself, is not recommended.
- **CONTINUE TO ASSESS AND MONITOR THE CHILD**. Is he/she physically and emotionally safe? If not, what further steps need to be taken? Provide on-going opportunities for continued open discussions, checking in with the child regularly. If the child becomes more withdrawn, depressed or reluctant to go to school, and/or sees a decline in his/her academic performance, then take the issue back to the school. If the school does not use appropriate actions, then one may need to go higher up in the administration or take other actions, such as making a formal complaint.





## *The Cyberbully*

# Bullying In The Age Of Facebook And YouTube

Marcia Jones experienced first-hand the number one fear of all parents in America: cyberbullying. Her son, Jacob, was the victim of a schoolyard bullying incident that was videotaped and posted online for all to see.

In the video, Jones' son, a 12-year-old with autism, is trying to avoid a confrontation on a middle school playground. A boy flashes by the camera lens, jumps and tries to kick Jacob, who appears to deflect the kick before trying to walk away. Then, another boy jumps into view of the camera and lands a hard kick to the boy's stomach, knocking him to the ground. "Those boys just drop-kicked me out of nowhere," Jacob said. "It was just awful." Once Jones and the city police chief saw the video on YouTube and Facebook, three young schoolmates were charged with felony assault and now face time in juvenile detention.

**Video:** <http://www.kfor.com/news/local/kfor-news-autistic-bullied-felony-charges-story,0,77523.story>

"Cyberbullying occurs when an individual uses the Internet, cell phones or other devices to send or post text messages, videos or photos intended to hurt or embarrass another person," according to The National Crime Prevention Council. Cyberbullying involves harassing someone or spreading rumors about an individual through e-mail, chat rooms, text messages, instant messages or social networking Web sites. Top researchers in this newly emerging field state that "We feel reasonably confident in estimating that about 20 percent of teens have been the victim of cyberbullying at some point in their lifetime (Smith, Mahdavi, Carvalho, Fisher, Russell, & Tippett, 2008).

*...bullying and cyberbullying have eclipsed kidnapping as the greatest fear that parents have regarding their child's safety.*

According to a national survey commissioned by Care.com, Inc., bullying and cyberbullying have eclipsed kidnapping as the greatest fear that parents have regarding their child's safety. Nearly one in three (30 percent) parents of children 12- to 17-year-old fear bullying and cyber bullying over kidnapping, domestic terrorism, car accidents, suicide or any other incident. Of parents whose children are under 12-year-old, more than one in four (27 percent) parents say that they fear bullying and cyberbullying only slightly less than kidnapping (30 percent).

Children with special needs may use the Internet as much as, if not more than, other students. Four out of 10 adults with disabilities conduct business and personal activities online, spending an average of 20 hours per week on the Internet which exceeds the average general use (U.S. Census Bureau 2007). While the technology

provides a more fluid means of interacting with peers and opens up a new potential pool of social contacts, researchers also know that it provides a completely unfiltered method for bullies to attack and harass students with special needs outside of the classroom. More research is necessary to gauge what kind of a threat cyberbullying is to children with special needs.

Dr. Sameer Hinduja, co-director of the Cyberbullying Research Center in the School of Criminology and Criminal Justice at Florida Atlantic University says that, in some cases, the use of computers and technology may be a child with special needs only social outlet.

“I am particularly interested in this population,” says Hinduja. “These youth are especially susceptible because of the difficulty they have with conversation, social convention and integration, and response to nonverbal cues. In addition, they struggle with motor clumsiness, a difficulty articulating a need for help and a resistance to change. Finally, Internet-based communication is absolutely essential in meeting their daily relational needs because online interaction eliminates many of the conversational nuances that they wouldn’t pick up on (in face-to-face conversations).”

“Not only do these factors (and others) cumulatively lead to children with special needs being cyberbullied online, many are easily manipulated by mischievous bullies who goad them to cyber bully others, download child pornography or hack into other computers – and they agree to do it, simply because they want to fit in and be well-liked,” said Hinduja.

“We definitely have a large proportion of very vulnerable youth who are in need of our help. We also need to realize that what may seem normal to us – in terms of social interaction – is not normal to children with special needs, especially children on the autism spectrum,” says Hinduja. “We have to venture into their definition of ‘normalcy’ to fully empathize with how they are struggling. The traditional ways that we help neurotypical children may not bear much fruit when working with this population, just like it is useless to implement multicolored lights on an instrument panel when the operator is color-blind.”

“Personally speaking, I have found that children with Asperger’s tend not to ask for help, not because they prefer isolation or independence, but because it does not naturally occur to them that another person will have a different perspective, different experience/knowledge and, thus, might find a different or better solution. I always advise parents and teachers to encourage children with special needs to tell you how they are feeling, even though they may not respond. If they can’t answer directly, perhaps they will share their thoughts on how the same instance of cyberbullying might make another person feel. That might clue you in to the emotions they are wrestling with.”

Dr. Hinduja recommends when a parent is trying to share advice or suggestions of prevention and response, repeat the message often for reinforcement and heavily use logical explanations. It may be wise to create and use simple flowcharts to depict human behavior. These can show actions, the way in which the actions



affect others and the way in which others' responses then affect the subject to aid their decision-making processes. For example, 'if I do X, it will cause effect Y on other people, which will cause them to respond to me with Z.'

When working with cyberbullying victims, it may be useful to jointly analyze stories, characters, plots and motivation in fiction, point out tropes and story cues and figure out why characters act as they do. Also, try using comic books or comic strips, which often convey some of the story through characters' emotion-laden expressions, but in simplified "cartooned" art that is easier to comprehend. Comic strips with humor that relate to real life situations are especially good as they teach typical motivations, reading faces, understanding humor, decision-making and coping/response mechanisms all at once.

All children with special needs should be taught some basic fundamentals about online activities:

- **TEACH A CHILD TO NEVER REVEAL PERSONAL INFORMATION ONLINE.** According to Jodee Bianco, a leading expert on bullying in schools, "parents should view the tools of technology as 'lights on in your bedroom with the drapes wide open.' Everything is visible for the world to see." Help children understand why it is important not to reveal details others should not "see."
- **LIMIT A CHILD'S ONLINE TIME.** Set firm rules as to when and how long a child can be online. It's a good idea to only allow a child to go online when parents are home to supervise their activities. Installing Internet security filters and other protection software is also a good way to regulate a child's online experience.
- **THROUGH ROLE PLAYING OR SOCIAL STORIES,** teach a child what improper photos, videos or threatening conduct might look like or feel like. If such instances occur, impress upon a child the immediate need to not respond to the messenger, but, instead, to report it to a parent or another adult.
- **KEEP COPIES OF INAPPROPRIATE MESSAGES,** but, as a parent, do not respond.
- **DO NOT DISSUADE A CHILD FROM USING TECHNOLOGY** such as cell phones for text messaging or Facebook for communication with peers. These tools are becoming increasingly a part of the way in which youth communicate and to leave them out of such communication streams isolates them more. Instead, teach them the proper use for the tools and always insist that a parent become your child's friend on Facebook.
- **RESEARCH SCREENING PROGRAMS** that allow one to "see" all the dialogue that your child has online.
- **CHECK TEXT MESSAGES** on cell phones frequently to make sure that derogatory messages are not being sent to a child.



## *The Teachable Moment*

# Opportunities In The Classroom To Educate

When Juliette Wallen, a mother in San Marcos, Calif., heard that her son, “J,” was being bullied at school, she quickly reached out to people at BrainHighways.com, who provide presentations and one-on-one training sessions to assist students like “J” to feel more of a part of the classroom community.

“They came in and helped everyone understand why a lot of these kids did the things that they did,” Wallen explains. “That kind of insight is invaluable; all of a sudden, some of the bullies were saying, ‘Oh, OK. The bullying isn’t even fun anymore.’”

Finding these teachable moments also helped Julie Hertzog. Currently, Hertzog directs PACER’s National Center for Bullying Prevention, which educates communities nationwide to address bullying through creative, relevant and interactive resources. Hertzog led the development of PACER’s interactive and innovative Web sites, KidsAgainstBullying.org and TeensAgainstBullying.org, designed to inspire students to end bullying.

Hertzog’s own personal experience as a mother to a child with Down syndrome inspires her current work with PACER’s efforts. “My 14-year-old son, David, was born with Down syndrome,” Julie said. “Before he turned 3, he had undergone three open heart surgeries and a tracheotomy, and his breathing required a ventilator. Heading into kindergarten, David was nonverbal, had delayed cognitive abilities and received his nutrition from a feeding tube. There was no doubt about it; my son wasn’t like his peers.”

“Because of his differences -- and research showing children tend to single out peers with characteristics like his -- I feared that David could become a poster child for children expected to be the targets of bullying. We live in a small community, where David has known all of his classmates since kindergarten and will eventually graduate high school with most of them. They have the same classes, eat lunch at the same time and attend field trips together.”

“For all of these reasons, I decided the best way to address my concerns about David would be to become his advocate -- not only with adults, but with his peers. During his first year of school, I started visiting David’s classroom to talk with his classmates about Down syndrome. I discovered that most children weren’t concerned about his cognitive issues; they were actually more fascinated with why he didn’t talk. At this time, I also networked with his teachers, his paraprofessionals and even made sure the lunchroom workers knew me. I hoped the more these people felt comfortable with me, the more information they would share,” said Hertzog.

Now, years later, David has just started the eighth grade. He’s not bullied, and more than that, he loves school. It’s the place where his peers give him high fives in the hallway, ask him to sit by them at lunch and, best of all, genuinely accept him.

“The concept sounds simple, but because my son can’t tell me what happens during the day, I depend heavily on these peers to act as his voice,” said Hertzog. “Now, what started as four kids in sixth grade has evolved to a school wide project with more than 40 students volunteering to become peer advocates so they can help David and other students who are different. I know all too well that not every parent of a child with a disability has this good fortune. Although I’ve found that power comes from sharing and being direct, I realize this approach won’t work in every classroom where bullying exists. But there are always ways that parents, teachers and students can develop strategies and begin to teach young people the importance of inclusion, acceptance and -- most important -- respect.”

*“The concept sounds simple, but because my son can’t tell me what happens during the day, I depend heavily on these peers to act as his voice,”*

An important strategy for parents to implement with their children whom are victims of bullies is to help them communicate. Many parents rehearse scripts that children with special needs can recite to bullies after an incident. Others encourage their children to tell a teacher or aide the moment that they feel uncomfortable.

Julie Hertzog and The PACER Center For Bullying Prevention recommend the following to create teachable moments in the classroom:

- **HELP EDUCATE CLASSMATES** about a child with special needs specific disability, or disabilities in general.
- **DISABILITY AWARENESS** is often not considered when taught to children about respect, but it should be. Insist that the school creates a campus environment that is sensitive to disabilities.
- **PROVIDE CURRICULUM STRATEGIES** and resources that value diversity, including disabilities.
- If the school’s current anti-bullying/respect programs are not addressing the specifics of disabilities, **LOOK TO OTHER PROGRAMS** that will do so (e.g. PACER’s bullying intervention program). A good program will be utilized school-wide on an on-going basis and weave or embed disability education into the classroom curriculum and throughout the school’s culture.
- **ENCOURAGE THE SCHOOL** to have up-to-date and timely in-service training for staff to help them best handle and recognize bullying problems and potential disability harassment. It’s not only important for staff to know how best to intervene, but also to understand the impact of their role as role models. Make sure that the training sessions include areas specific to the particulars of student disabilities and that all the relevant staff, including teachers, yard duties assistants, bus drivers and sport coaches receive training.
- **SUGGEST THAT YOUR SCHOOL CONSIDER USING STUDENT SURVEYS.** These surveys often reveal problem areas and allow students to anonymously express their concerns or fears.



- **KNOW THE SCHOOL'S ANTI-BULLYING/HARASSMENT POLICIES AND PROCEDURES.** Find out if they are adequately and appropriately communicated to parents. Work with the school to make sure that all parents are informed of these school policies.
- **ENCOURAGE A SCHOOL PROGRAM THAT HAS STUDENT INVOLVEMENT.** A general lack of leadership by youth to prevent bullying and teasing contributes to the problem (Bowman, 2001). A good program should include empowering bystanders to speak up. In many instances, bystanders, and even the bully's followers, though not directly targeted, are also victims of the bully.
- **ENCOURAGE THE CREATION OF NEW CLASS/SCHOOL-WIDE RULES.** Teachers can work with their students to develop rules against bullying. Challenge the teacher who says, "We're all friends here," this may be an incomplete picture of the social climate in his/her classroom.
- **ASK THE SCHOOL TO PROVIDE A SOCIAL SKILLS OR "LIFE SKILLS" GROUP,** if they don't already have one. Even if such a group isn't appropriate for your child, it may benefit others, including the bystanders who may be afraid to speak up.
- **RAISE AWARENESS OF BULLYING** in the school community **BY SPEAKING AT PTA** meetings or before your school board. Prompt the creation of an anti-bullying or diversity oversight or coordinating group, either school- or district-wide. This group can generate anti-bullying materials and strategies as well as review, manage and evaluate policies.
- If a special education class isn't appropriately integrated into the school's physical settings, **CONVENE A MEETING** to discuss how the campus/classes can be reconfigured. By isolating certain classes, schools may inadvertently be providing a potential bully with an 'exclusion is o.k.' message, as well as negatively impacting the self-esteem of the special education students.
- The school may recommend peer mediation in order to resolve bullying incident(s). This strategy is not appropriate as the bullied child is the victim of an imbalance of power. The child's special needs may also make mediation more stressful and unequal. Even with adult supervision, **FACING THE BULLY IS USUALLY AN INTIMIDATING EXPERIENCE** and unlikely to produce a healthy outcome.





## *The IEP*

# Addressing Bullying With A Child's IEP

Although they may be targets, children who are bullied do not have to remain victims. With the appropriate tools and support systems in place, a child can be a part of changing the situation. One critical tool available to parents is the Individualized Education Program or IEP.

A child's team - parents, educators, therapists and/or psychologists and school officials - should work together to make the IEP reflect the child's unique needs. A school psychologist may be involved in writing social-emotional goals that are measurable and relevant. Including the child in the IEP decision-making process, if appropriate, can also lead to better outcomes.

Goals for the IEP team to consider include:

- Social skills work, both individual and group
- Speech and language skills
- Self-advocacy skills
- Self-awareness and strength building skills

### THE FOLLOWING ARE EXAMPLES OF IEP GOALS AND INTERVENTIONS THAT CAN DIRECTLY OR INDIRECTLY HELP ADDRESS BULLYING ISSUES:

- **IMPROVE SOCIAL UNDERSTANDING BY HAVING GOALS FOCUSED AROUND SHARING**, taking turns or thinking before acting (PACER Center, 2003). Use concrete "real world" situations. The focus of this goal should not be to teach the child to be less "teaseable," but should be interpersonal skill building.
- **PARTICIPATE IN A SOCIAL SKILLS GROUP**. By being given the opportunity to practice social situations, role playing, social stories and other techniques, with school peers, under adult supervision, the child may better identify and understand difficult situations when they occur. Groups such as this one can also facilitate friendships and a sense of not being alone.
- **INCREASE SELF-ADVOCACY SKILLS** so that the child can say "stop that" or walk away.
- **HELP THE CHILD DEVELOP AND LEARN A BRIEF/NON-CONFRONTATIONAL VERBAL RESPONSE** to the bully. Practice both direct and indirect ways to react to, handle or avoid bullying behavior

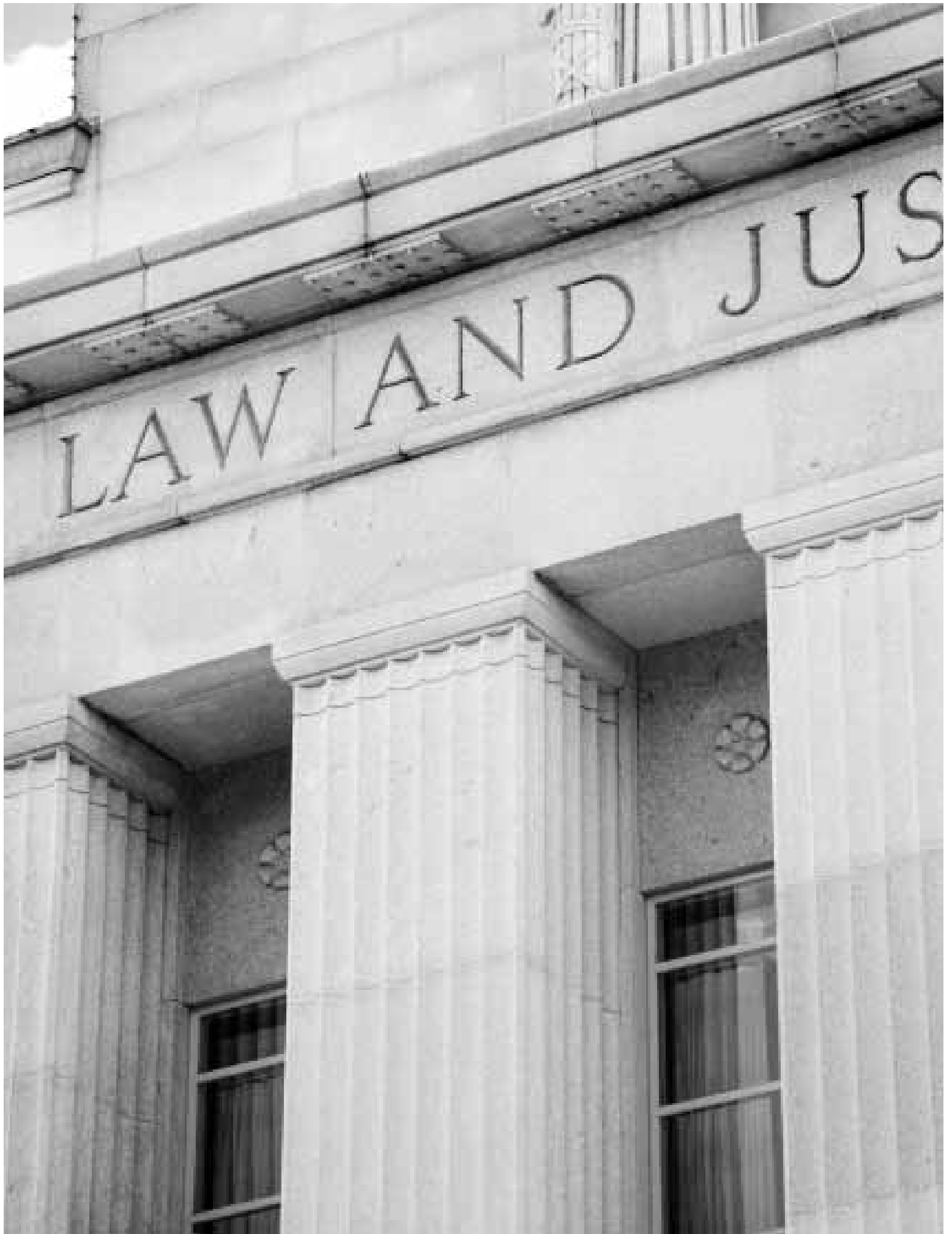
- **SPEECH AND LANGUAGE GOALS** should be set with the help of a **SPEECH AND LANGUAGE SPECIALIST**. These goals should focus on articulation, speech intelligibility and language pragmatics.
- **INCREASE THE CHILD'S SELF-AWARENESS ABOUT THEIR DISABILITY**. Learning their strengths and feeling proud of who they are and their accomplishments, while also understanding how their disability may impact them, particularly in social situations, is often important.
- **HELP THE CHILD IDENTIFY BULLYING** as well as how and to whom to report it. Keep in mind that some children may have a difficult time determining that they are a target of bullying behavior.
- Goals that help educate the child on the **DIFFERENCE BETWEEN REPORTING AN INCIDENT AND RATTING/TATTILING** as well as identifying the difference between playful teasing and hurtful teasing/bullying may be needed.
- **TEACH THE CHILD A SIGNAL SYSTEM** to use when in need of friend or adult intervention.
- **IDENTIFY AND FACILITATE A RELATIONSHIP WITH A SCHOOL STAFF** person who can help the child make reports of incidents and who will provide the child with additional intervention and support.
- **IF SOCIAL SITUATIONS ARE IMPEDING THE CHILD'S ABILITY TO ACCESS THEIR EDUCATION**, then it must be appropriately remedied. Being the target of bullying can bring some children's social needs into sharper focus. In addition to new goals, a new assessment may be appropriate.





## OTHER SUPPORTS, ACCOMMODATIONS AND STRATEGIES FOR THE IEP TEAM TO CONSIDER ARE AS FOLLOWS:

- **MONITOR AND SUPERVISE UNSTRUCTURED TIME.** Increase hallway, bathroom, lunchroom and playground monitoring by staff. Adult monitored “safe zones” or having an adult ‘shadow’ the child during these times is sometimes necessary.
- **EDUCATE THE STAFF AND OTHER STUDENTS ABOUT THE CHILD’S ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY, 1:1 aide, interpreter and other items that are ‘different.’** Create a better understanding of the child’s disability and the necessary support that go with it with staff.
- **AVOID CERTAIN SITUATIONS OR LOCATIONS** that can be ‘loaded’ for a student.
- **KEEP THE CHILD AWAY FROM THE BULLY**, or the bully away from the child, until things are resolved.
- **CONSIDER SEATING THE STUDENT AWAY FROM STUDENTS WHO MIGHT TEND TO BULLY.** Remember, that being proactive can prevent incidents from occurring in the first place.
- **ALLOW THE CHILD TO LEAVE CLASS EARLY** to avoid hallway incidents.
- **TAKE RECESS OR LUNCH IN A DIFFERENT SETTING**, but still with some peers.
- **CONSIDER KEEPING THE CHILD FROM HIGHLY CHARGED COMPETITIVE SITUATIONS.**
- **DESIGNATE A PEER BUDDY** or have the classroom teacher foster a friendship between the child and a ‘safe’ child. A classroom with cooperative learning activities is one mechanism to facilitate positive social interactions.
- **SET-UP REGULAR APPOINTMENTS WITH THE SCHOOL’S PSYCHOLOGIST**, or another “safe” person on the campus, with whom your child can ‘check-in’ as an outlet, allow for classroom breaks (either in or out of the classroom).



## Parents' Rights In Combatting Bullying

Since 2005, the issue of bullying has become so important that 45 of the 50 states have passed laws against it. In 2010, several states have intensified their bullying laws with the passage of legislation that calls for training in the schools. Unfortunately, very few of these laws address the specific issues and needs of children with special needs.

Attorney Judith C. Saltzman practices special education law on behalf of the Ohio-based firm Hickman and Lowder, Co., LPA. Judith has written many articles on the law and children with special needs and frequently addresses parents and professionals on the issue. She offered parents the following advice on bullying:

- **KNOW YOUR ALLIES.** Parents have a powerful ally in the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights (OCR). In a Letter to Colleagues issued on October 26, 2010, OCR informed all public schools in the U.S. that bullying and harassment, including harassment of one student by another, can be a form of prohibited discrimination. Schools that know about, but fail to stop such harassment, may be in violation of federal civil rights laws that prohibit discrimination on the basis of race, color, national origin, sex, gender or disability.

The OCR letter can be found at <http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/letters/colleague-201010.html>. Some school districts have anti-bullying policies, but merely having such a policy does not necessarily fulfill the school district's responsibility under federal law. Be sure to read the school's policies.

- **ORGANIZE.** Get together with other parents whose children have been bullied, read the OCR letter and ask whether the school is meeting OCR's requirements. If appropriate, share the experiences and concerns with the school board and request changes. OCR's letter recognizes that effective prevention may require training, not only for the perpetrators of the harassment, "but, also, for the larger school community to ensure that all students, their families and school staff can recognize harassment if it recurs and know how to respond." Consider whether measures such as this could be effective in changing the school climate and ask the board of education for the programs, services and protections that will help the children.
- **ASK FOR HELP FROM THE OCR.** One can file a complaint with OCR, including an online form. OCR investigates such complaints, whether or not a lawyer files them for an individual. One can file a complaint about what has happened with an individual child, and, if one so chooses, also explain how other children have been similarly affected (i.e., how the child is representative of a group of children). Parents with similar concerns can file similar complaints. Complaints should be filed promptly – within six months of the incident(s). For instructions on how to file OCR complaints, see <http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/howto.html>.

- **KNOW THE LAW.** The laws prohibiting harassment in schools are as follows:

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, which prohibit discrimination based upon disability;

Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibits discrimination based on race, color or national origin; and

Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, which prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex or gender (i.e. sexual preference).

- **GET THE FACTS:** If a child has been targeted, get the facts as quickly and accurately as possible. Save all communications from the school, the child or others which relate to the incident(s). Make a written request for the child's educational records. One can obtain copies of these records (possibly for a fee) if needed to enable one to effectively review them outside of the school with a spouse or partner, a child's counselors and others from whom one may seek input. If the child can't tell an adult what happened, then one may need to enlist professional support. School officials, teachers, other school employees, other parents and even students can also be an important source of information, particularly if a child is non-verbal.
- **USE THE IEP PROCESS:** Bullying or harassment may decrease a student with a disability's ability to benefit from his/her education and deny a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE). See the OCR letter issued on July 25, 2000 (<http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/disabharassltr.html>). Hence, if a child has (or should have) an IEP (or even a Section 504 plan), then one can request a meeting to address the child's harassment. A meeting will not only give one the opportunity to gain more information, but, also, to brainstorm with teachers about adding goals, objectives and services to the child's IEP that will fortify the child against being bullied. Some areas to consider include social skills work, self-advocacy skills, speech language development, coping strategies, and enhanced supervision and aide services. An IEP meeting will also give one the opportunity to request a change of placement. This may be the best practical solution for protecting a child in cases where other students have created a hostile environment. It is a good idea to have a recording of this meeting or, failing this, to send a confirmation letter afterward.
- **PUT SCHOOL OFFICIALS ON NOTICE ABOUT THE PROBLEM:** Request corrective action, in writing, from school officials. Send a letter to all school officials in a position to protect the child, informing them of what has or is occurring and asking them to advise the steps that are needed to protect your child. Be factual and complete -- don't assume that they already know about the harassment. Such letters can go (preferably by certified mail, return receipt requested) to the members of the board of education, superintendent, principal, assistant principal, guidance counselor, teacher and any other school employee in a position to stop the harassment of the child. School employees who fail to take action in response to such a

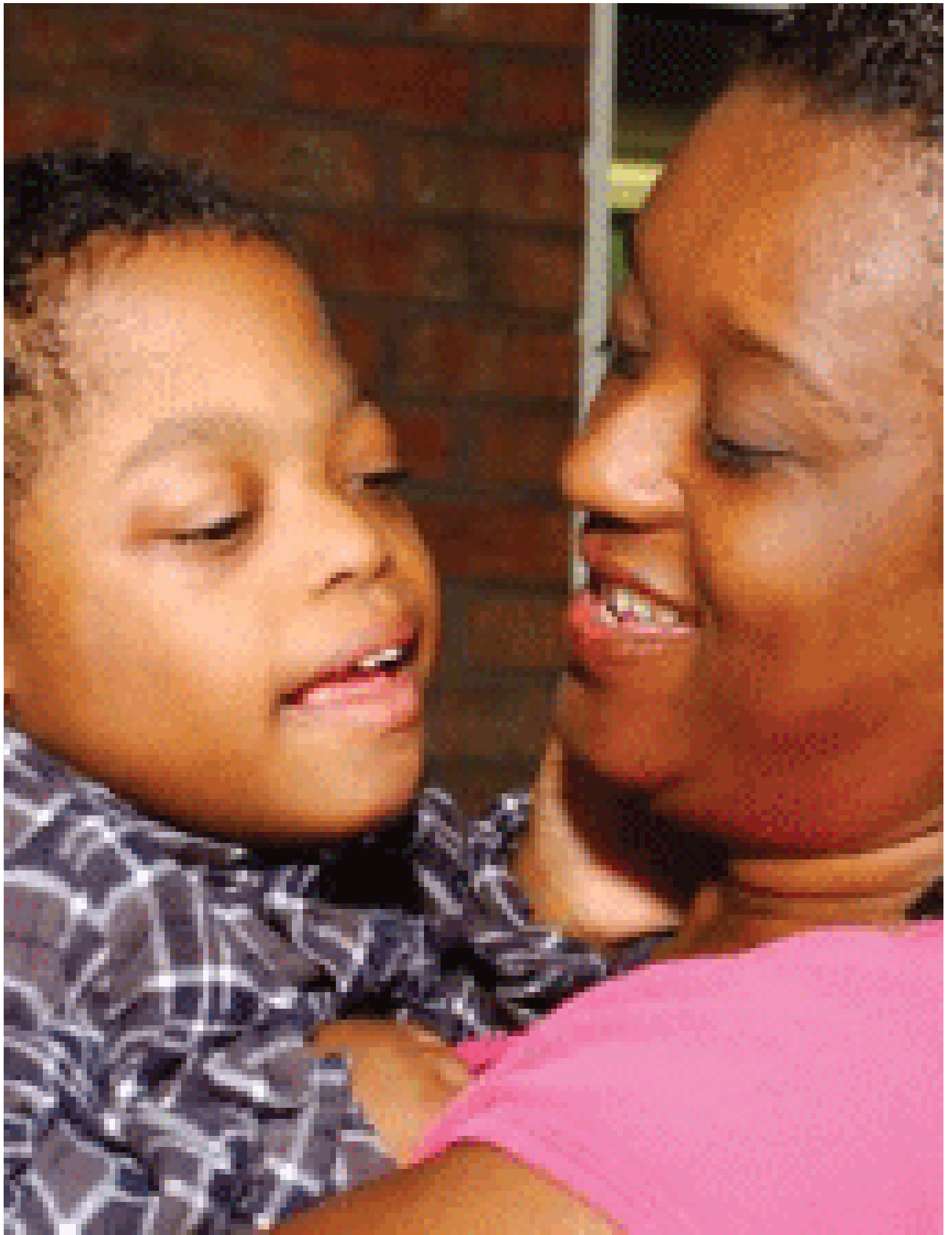




letter may be demonstrating “deliberate indifference,” a factor that may expose them to damage claims later under federal civil rights laws if the child is harmed. Hence, the goal of the letter is to motivate quick, corrective action that prevents harm, or further harm, to the child.

It is always a good idea for parents to meet with the school principal and/or superintendent to discuss the facts of the child’s harassment, and ask for the solution desired, either before or after sending the written notice described above.







*The Experts*

## Learning Best Practices From Parents Of Children With Special Needs

Bullying resources, specific to the experience of a child with special needs, are scarce. Despite numerous attempts to seek direct quotes, tools, research or knowledge from childhood or bullying experts, very few could contribute to this report. Many experts opted not to participate, citing lack of background material as a debilitating factor.

Parents who have lived through the experiences of their children being bullied are often times the best experts. Their personal experiences, how they chose to manage the situation can be helpful for other parents in similar situations.

### KIM STAGLIANO

Kim Stagliano is the best-selling author of “All I Can Handle: I’m No Mother Teresa,” which captures the everyday life of raising three daughters with autism. She shared that the quote “rely on the kindness of total strangers” carries special meaning to her. “All parents have fear when their children are sent out into the world,” said Stagliano. Yet, my children do not have the skills in terms of verbalization that neurotypical children do to tell me what happens to them when they leave our home. Thus, I am completely reliant on the kindness of strangers to protect and defend my children.”

*“You almost must become Sherlock Holmes,”*

“You almost must become Sherlock Holmes,” Stagliano says. “In our case, the bullying had gone on for a long time and the only sign that we had was when one child had bruises. That was just the tip of the iceberg in regard to discovering what was going on with my child when she was out in the world. I tell parents to demand better training in the schools. Ask for video surveillance cameras on the buses and also make sure that someone is reviewing the video. Chances are that no one is even checking them.”

“Raising a child with special needs forces a parent to always be thinking far ahead into the future. The ‘what if’ statements never end, but you have to learn to think that way in order to protect your child. I also tell parents that they have to remain sane and not let worrying overtake you.”

*...become as visible and as large a part of the community as possible. Make the child visible as well.*

According to Stagliano, another important tool against bullying is to become as visible and as large a part of the community as possible. Make the child visible as well. “I’m a big fan of inclusion,” she said. “I believe that the more a part of the community and classroom we are as a family, the less my children will be vulnerable to bullies. The teachers know me. The school administrators know me. The kids know me.”

“I know firsthand that being the mom to a child with special needs makes it doubly difficult to ‘get out,’ but you have to. Go to church and involve your children in the church. Be a full participant in your community and get your children involved, too. Hillary Clinton was right when she said it takes a village to raise a child. I count on that village every single day to help protect my children when they are out in the world.”

## RACHEL MCCUMBER

Rachel McCumber, much like Kim Stagliano, has also had to face the fears that every mom carries when it comes to bullying and a child with special needs. She had the following conversation one afternoon with her son, Daniel:

“At first, I thought he was tense because he had struggled with his morning routine, leaving the house without a shower or lunch,” said McCumber. “However, that evening, as he stood in the kitchen making the next day’s lunch, he burst out in angry tears.”

“I don’t know what’s wrong with me today,” he exclaimed. “Everything is upsetting me and I just feel like crying!”

McCumber paused her piano playing to turn toward the kitchen.

“Don’t worry Daniel, in the grand scheme of life, a missed shower and lunch isn’t a game changer” she said while trying to reassure her son.

“It’s not that!” he replied quietly, “Nobody likes me. They think I am weird.”

She waited. He seemed to be struggling, so she walked over to the kitchen and asked him, “What do they say?”

“That I am gay. That I have a PSP,” he blushed.

“What is a PSP?” she asked.

“A pretty small penis.”

She was both instantly angry and stifling a laugh. “Who says this? Is it just words or more?”

Slowly, painfully, the story came out. A boy in Daniel’s math class had been verbally abusing Daniel daily. He called Daniel “gay,” that he wanted to “suck on guys’ penises;” language shocking to McCumber that it would



come from other sixth grade boys. When the teacher stepped out of the room, the bully would kick Daniel in the shins or hit him. The physical attacks had happened four to five times.

Immediately, she assured Daniel that this kind of behavior had no reflection on him. “A bully doesn’t bully because of the person he is hurting. He or she bullies because of how they feel about themselves and their own lives,” she explained.

“But I am weird,” Daniel replied, his head bowed.

“We are going to deal with this immediately,” she promised him. “Talk to your teacher if it gets physical again and ignore the words as much as possible because they don’t reflect on you, but rather on the boy saying them. More than anything know that we all love you and like you a lot.”

*“Nobody likes me. They think I am weird.”*

“I must admit, my first reaction to this bullying episode was an overwhelming fury, but I was also very afraid for my child,” said McCumber. “Quite frankly, I did not know what to do. As the parent to a child with special needs, you spend so much of your time dealing with why things are different. The child may be awkward around his/her peers and may need additional help in the classroom, which contributes to the child and the family feeling out of place.”

“My first line of defense was to make sure that my son did not think that there was anything wrong with him. He is a terrific child. Kind and caring. In fact, most people in our town of Venice, Fla. think that he is pretty cool!”

“My second line of defense was to make sure that the school district - teachers and administrators - were aware of the issue. Although I was furious, I knew that it was in my child’s best interest that I approach the school in a rationale manner with very little emotion. Emotion causes reactions. Human beings, including teachers, administrators and principals, will react to your emotions and everyone will be less effective. Also, if you react with emotion on the first meeting, you have nothing left in your arsenal to escalate to if the bullying continues. I try to channel Jackie O. I always liked how she greeted the world with calmness, a smile and conciseness, yet she was able to fight for what was important to her.”

“When you approach the school you must be very clear on all of the evidence that you have gathered,” she said. “Make them aware that you know that they have a legal obligation to provide a safe environment for your child. Be proactive and make sure that you put everything in writing. A paper trail is very important. Be very clear that you believe your child’s disability has singled him or her out for bullying and state how far the bullying has gone.”



### *The Anti-Bully Program*

## Do Anti-Bullying Programs Work For Children With Special Needs?

Across the nation, entire industries of consultants and businesses have formed with curriculums, workshops and pep talks to combat bullying in schools. Although well-intentioned, a new “war on bullying” will have limited success for the same reason our earlier “wars” have come up short. Such “wars” lack a coordinated strategy. They focus on symptoms instead of causes and short-term interventions instead of the needs and capacities that emerge throughout the long arc of a child’s growth and development.

In fact, a thorough examination by Rachel C. Vreeman and Aaron E. Carroll in the *Pediatric Adolescent Medicine Journal* demonstrated only four out of 10 most widely-used anti-bullying curriculums decreased bullying (2007). While the evidence shows that much more scientific research needs to be done to develop effective ways to reduce bullying of the child with special needs, there are tools and programs that show promising results. Here are examples of programs or approaches that demonstrate success in reducing the rate of bullying against children with special needs through coordinated efforts.

## What Works?

### SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING CURRICULUMS (SEL)

Social and emotional learning (SEL) assists children to develop fundamental skills to effectively handle school, relationships and personal development. Examples may include managing emotions, caring for others, decision making and handling situations ethically. New research provides dramatic evidence that social and emotional learning can be taught, just like geometry and Spanish.

Child Development published the most scientifically rigorous review of research ever done on social and emotional learning interventions for children aged 5-18. The review, by a team of researchers from Loyola University, the University of Illinois at Chicago, and the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), synthesizes the results of more than 200 independent studies on the impact of SEL programs and represented a group of 270,034 students (2010).

The findings showed great promise. High-quality SEL programs led to significant improvements in students’ social and emotional skills, in attitudes about self and others, and in classroom behavior. Programs were also associated with substantial decreases in conduct problems and emotional distress such as anxiety and depression—all of which are part of the bullying phenomenon. Academic scores also improved significantly—

by as much as 11 percentile points. Educators realized that SEL doesn't interfere with academic learning but helps it.

Because social and emotional components factor into why children bully other students, the ability to teach them behavioral skills, many of which are part of SEL, can reduce the incidence of bullying – no matter if the victim is a child with special needs or neurotypical student. Vreeman and Carroll (2007) concluded in a report that the most effective anti-bullying programs are those that take a “whole-school approach” such as SEL. Social awareness and relationship skills also aid in the prevention of bullying, either by the better understanding of a student's differences or intervention by bystanders to support the victim.

The state of Illinois was one of the first to institute SEL in their classrooms (2011). Illinois established three broad goals towards their Social Emotional Learning Standards: develop self-awareness and self-management skills to achieve school and life success; use social-awareness and interpersonal skills to establish and maintain positive relationships; demonstrate decision-making skills and responsible behaviors in personal, school and community contexts. Team members felt SEL was vital not only towards a child's behavior but also in preparing them for a 21st Century workforce. Pilot schools' results demonstrated students were “calmer about things” with significant drops in behavior referrals.

School and staff support is critical towards the success of SEL programs. For Illinois, 75percent of school principals supported SEL; more than 90 percent in the late stages of implementation. CASEL's findings also concluded it was not only the execution of SEL programs, but well-executed programs that demonstrated the best results. These strong findings and case studies have led other states to follow Illinois' lead - Washington, Kansas, Tennessee, Pennsylvania and Oklahoma - despite budget shortfalls and programs cuts.

## INCLUSIVE COMMUNITY PROGRAMS AND ORGANIZATIONS

Bullying expert Jodee Blanco, author of the New York Times best-selling book “Please Stop Laughing at Me,” first took steps to ‘walk in the shoes’ of children with special needs as a 17-year-old high school student.

“It began in high school,” Blanco said. “At that time, children with special needs were taught in separate classes and I volunteered to tutor many of them. The majority were young teenagers with Down syndrome and I discovered, in conversation, that they wanted to attend the high school prom. Naturally, I believed that certainly the school would let them attend. I was wrong. The principal said that the students could not attend and so I decided to help them have their own prom. As a result, the local press covered the prom that we created, much more so, than the regular high school prom. Much to my surprise, I was ostracized by my classmates for helping to create it. Several days later, in my high school, I witnessed one of the students with Down syndrome being tormented. Two students were kicking dirt into his face. I intervened and, later that



day after school, a group of students ambushed me and I was beaten for defending the child with Down syndrome.”

Bianco says that what she experienced in high school has led to her lifelong efforts to reduce the bullying in lives of children with special needs. She advises parents and advocates to:

- Form a coalition of concerned parents by reaching out to all others who are parenting children with special needs. Meet monthly to discuss concerns and bring the concerns as one voice to the PTA, school board and community.
- Understand the 504. (Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990). This important piece of federal legislation outlines rights to a safe learning environment for a child.
- Demand that anti-bullying policies be in place in the school district and that the issue of children with special needs be addressed in all outreach.
- Make sure that the parent aggressively seeks out all forms of social outlets in the community and schools for their child to participate in. These events help foster a child’s social skills and offer opportunities for him/her to foster friendships. Such things can help a child become less of a target for bullying.

Beyond individual actions such as Bianco’s, a majority of cities offer existing programs that are a great resource for families with children with special needs to engage in their communities. Two great examples are Special Olympics and Best Buddies.

Special Olympics provide the “dignity, acceptance, and chance to reach one’s potential.” By empowering individuals with intellectual disabilities in more than 180 countries to participate in sports, they not only provide opportunities for the athletes, but engagement with the community to see the humanity and joy of these individuals. Their programs break down myths and fears that are associated with disabilities.

For children, the playing field can sometimes serve as a unifying place when it doesn’t occur on the playground. Neurotypical children can connect to the same love of sports that they may see when watching children with special needs participate at a Special Olympics event. Encouraging children of all abilities to attend and support these events, in person or on television, brings awareness to students. Through their school outreach program, Special Olympians visit thousands of students each year to educate them on what “different abilities” they offer. Special Olympic events also provide volunteers, both youth and adults, to work side-by-side with individuals with disabilities and better understand their needs and behaviors.

Name calling, such as the use of “retard” which is all too often used as a descriptor of children with special needs on the playground and in schools, is both hurtful and dehumanizing and reinforces existing stereotypes. Most recently, Special Olympics launched the “Spread the Word to End the Word” Campaign to change the

conversation and eliminate the demeaning use of the word “retard(ed).” In lightning speed, this awareness campaign spread like wildfire. As a result, both children and adults now think twice before uttering this hurtful word.

“It’s not so much that the word is such an important thing, but it’s finally a chance to talk about humiliation,” stated Special Olympics CEO Tim Shriver in an interview with the Washington Post. “This ‘thing’ has gotten more attention for the underlying issues than anything. A Rosa Parks moment or a March on Washington moment -- this population hasn’t had that anywhere.”

Research shows that when children with special needs are included as friends in their social environments, bullying can be reduced. Programs such as Best Buddies can break down the barriers in building such friendships. Best Buddies is a global nonprofit that creates one-to-one friendships, employment and leadership development for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. This international organization positively impacts 700,000 people worldwide each year. Their programs may be found on middle school, high school and college campuses. Perhaps the program with the most potential to grow is e-Buddies, an e-mail pen pal program for children with disabilities ages 10-year-old and older. These children are paired with peer mentors through a secure online setting that helps foster social, literacy and computer skills.

## SUCCESSFUL TOOLS AT HOME

Communicating with a child is an important tool in detecting and preventing bullying. Some children with special needs may not recognize they are being bullied, while others may be afraid to tell a parent. Asking the right questions and recognizing changes in behavior may present the first signs that a problem exists. Experts recommend asking questions including “Do your friends have nicknames for you?” or “Who do you spend time with at school?” which may lead you to the discovery of bigger issues.

PACER Center is one of the leading experts and resources regarding bullying and children with special needs. Their website, [www.pacerkidsagainstbullying.org](http://www.pacerkidsagainstbullying.org), provides coloring books, contests and videos for parents to share with their child. Through a series of cartoon characters and interactive games including “Pip’s Clever Clue Clarifier,” a child can learn what it means to be bullied. The child guesses different “clues” that in the end adds up to a score and provides advice if the child is a victim.

The games and contests are interactive with parent participation to encourage communication and dialogue between parent and child. The website isn’t just for children with special needs, but for any child, including youth that may become bullies. The website’s ability to help children recognize signs as well as learn about their difference, provides an effective tool for parents, all within the confines of their home





Learn more about these programs at  
[www.specialolympics.org](http://www.specialolympics.org) or [www.bestbuddies.org](http://www.bestbuddies.org).





## *The Call to Action*

# What Each of Us Can Do To Disable Bullying

Elijah Vetma's letter to the editor of his local hometown newspaper sparked a conversation that changed his community; a conversation needed in cities around the world. Elijah shared why he is a little bit different.

"Please help me," wrote Elijah. "I am 12 and I have Asperger's syndrome. At school nearly every day, I'm teased and laughed at when I make faces, which is one of my tics that I cannot help doing. Other kids have bullied me since I was in grade three. For over four years, I have had to put up with being bullied and teased and hated by everyone in the school. I've been called all sorts of names like germ boy, gay and retard just to name a few. And kids don't let me join their groups when we had to do team activities."

Video of Elijah's video letter: <http://www.geelongadvertiser.com.au/extras/video/elijah/index.html>

"During school mornings, I walk around all alone. I try really hard to make friends, but the people that make fun of me turn them against me. I don't know why they do this, maybe to be popular. People think that I'm not the same as them, but I'm exactly the same, just a little different as everyone else."

"Just because I have a disability, doesn't mean I don't still have the same feelings of wanting to belong, have friends and be liked. I have feelings of sadness, anger and confusion inside from being alone and hated. I put hated in as that is how I see others see me. People have even stolen from me and harassed me so much that I get really stressed and anxious. I've sort of got used to being bullied and teased and, each morning before I go to school, I think of what's going to happen today. Nothing I have tried to do has stopped it."

"My mom and dad always stick up for me by going to the school and talking about how they can help. I think the people who tease me are the ones with the problems. As my mom says if they were happy with their own lives they wouldn't have to pick on others to make themselves feel better."

"I hope this letter will help people understand how I and other people with disabilities feel about being bullied and what it's like to be just a little different."

As 12 year old Elijah demonstrates, change often begins at kitchen tables and PTA meetings. Over half of the U.S. states offer legislation that protects students from bullies; many of which wouldn't exist without letter writing campaigns and parent grassroots movements. Some legislation includes comprehensive programs in the curriculum; others document and track the incidents of bullying for students with IEPs.

Regardless of the flag that flies over the state capital, parents, teachers and professionals need to know what rights exist for children that are the victims of bullies. More importantly, they need to identify if new laws are needed to protect them. Visit [AbilityPath.org](http://AbilityPath.org) to view what legislation may exist or is being passed for your state and how to contact legislatures to voice your opinion.



## ABILITYPATH.ORG'S FIVE ACTION STEPS TO DISABLE THE BULLYING OF CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS:

**EDUCATE.** Change starts with each individual. Stereotypes and misconceptions about disabilities and special needs still exist in our classrooms and communities. Parents, educators and community leaders should lead by example so others can follow in demystifying myths which perpetuate the problem. Learn about different special needs at [www.abilitypath.org](http://www.abilitypath.org) or disability awareness programs including [www.pacer.org/bullying](http://www.pacer.org/bullying) and [www.gatepath.com/disthis](http://www.gatepath.com/disthis).

**ASK QUESTIONS.** Many youth with special needs sometimes aren't aware they are being bullied. Or because of their language and speech delays, it may be difficult for them to communicate when a bullying incident occurs. Caregivers and educators need to frame questions to children that allow insight into schoolyard or online activity. Refer to the parent and teacher toolkits in this guide for sample questions.

**SPEAK UP.** If one suspects or witnesses a child with special needs being bullied, speak up, notify educators, parents, politicians or community leaders. Don't be a bystander. A zero tolerance for bullies should exist in our communities. Write to local media, principals, legislatures or share your story on [www.abilitypath.org](http://www.abilitypath.org).

**Build CommUNITY.** Children with special needs and their families are important member of each community. Invite them or their parents to participate in book clubs, PTA meetings, church groups, block parties, play dates and birthday parties. Get to know the neighbors regardless of their ability; it benefits the family, child with special needs AND the entire neighborhood as well. Students can create community by creating disability awareness programs or simply becoming a friend to a student with a disability. Civic leaders should always keep in mind this vulnerable demographic when voting or creating legislation to protect students.

**DISABLE BULLYING.** Share the possibilities and successes of people with special needs through each person's social network. Examples include raising funds for AbilityPath.org's awareness and support programs, joining Special Olympics' "Spread the Word to End the Word" petition or posting Glee's Lauren Potter's "Disable Bullying" video on Facebook.

View Lauren's video at [www.youtube.com/abilitypathchannel](http://www.youtube.com/abilitypathchannel)



## PARENT TOOLKIT

### SIGNS THAT YOUR CHILD WITH SPECIAL NEEDS MAY BE A VICTIM OF A BULLY

- Be observant of your child's behavior, appearance and moods, particularly if you think that your child is 'at risk' for being bullied. If your child is reluctant to attend school, investigate why and pay close attention to answers related to social experiences with peers.
- Children are sometimes emotionally sensitive. If your child exhibits these behaviors, be aware and ask them why they are upset or what incident upset them.
- Observe your child's daily routines. Has their diet or lack of appetite changed? Are they having trouble sleeping, or want to sleep all the time? For some children, this may be a common occurrence due to their disability. But if changes occur, try to determine if it could be related to problems at school, emotional issues or physical stress.
- Look for physical signs including torn clothes, cuts and bruises.
- Ask your child about their friends. What nicknames do they call each other? Do their friends hit or push them? Do their friends expect them to buy lunch or give them money? Some children aren't aware they are being bullied or that the names other children call them are offensive. A little investigative work can go a long way when physical or emotional signs aren't as obvious.
- Watch your child's behavior around other children; how do they interact and vice versa. Volunteering in his/her classroom might help you better understand the social dynamics and potential problems.
- If your child declines in his/her academic performance, talk to teachers or aides. Be sure it isn't due to behavioral issues or teasing from other students.

Additional resources and tips are also available at [www.stopbullyingnow.hrsa.gov](http://www.stopbullyingnow.hrsa.gov). To learn more about your child's emotional and behavioral development, visit [www.abilitypath.org](http://www.abilitypath.org).

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## PARENT TOOLKIT

### FIVE STEPS PARENTS CAN TAKE TO PROTECT THEIR CHILD WITH SPECIAL NEEDS FROM BULLIES

1. Reach out to the parents of other children in your school whose children are diagnosed with special needs. Form a coalition and begin supporting one another through suggestions and recommendations to the PTA, the school board and your local legislature on the topic of bullying and children with special needs.
2. Become familiar with statistics on bullying and children with special needs. Educate your school district, teachers and community on the issue. Bring in speakers to address such topics.
3. Be visible by taking part in community functions and figuring out ways to give visibility to your children. Research shows that when students with a disability or chronic illness were restricted from participating in school activities, they had a 30 % additional risk of being bullied.
4. Demand that any anti-bullying projects adopted by your school district adequately addresses the issues of children with special needs.
5. Write letters to policy-makers on bullying and children with special needs, requesting that federal and state funds be used to expand the research on the topic. Request that anti-bullying programs used in the schools be effective in reducing the vulnerabilities of children with special needs.

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## PARENT TOOLKIT

### TEN TIPS TO PROTECT YOUR CHILD WITH SPECIAL NEEDS ONLINE

1. Teach your child to never reveal personal information online. Help children understand why it is important not to reveal details others should not “see.”
2. Limit your child’s online time. Set firm rules as to when and how long your child can be online. It’s a good idea to only allow your child to go online when you’re home to supervise their activities.
3. Through role playing or social stories, teach your child what improper photos, videos or threatening conduct might look like or feel like. If such instances occur, impress upon your child the immediate need to not respond to the messenger, but, instead, to report it to you or another adult.
4. Keep copies of inappropriate messages, but, as a parent, do not respond.
5. Do not dissuade your child from using technology such as cell phones for text messaging or Facebook for communication with peers. These tools are becoming increasingly a part of the way in which youth communicate and to leave them out of such communication streams isolates them more. Instead, teach them the proper use for the tools and always insist that you become your child’s friend on Facebook.
6. Research screening programs that allow you to “see” all the dialogue that your child has online.
7. Check text messages on cell phones frequently to make sure that derogatory messages are not being sent to your child.
8. Review the security settings on your computer or child’s social networks. Be sure restrictions are placed on what information or images are viewed by friends as well as the public. Be sure your child can’t access adult only content or respond to scams in email requests.
9. Check your child’s Facebook page or other social networks and observe their actions as well as their friends.
10. Use resources such as [www.safetyweb.com](http://www.safetyweb.com) to know what information is available online about your child and the most recent news or resources available to protect them.

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## PARENT TOOLKIT

### SOCIAL SKILLS AND HELPING YOUR CHILD WITH SPECIAL NEEDS MAKE FRIENDS

Humans are social creatures by nature. But for many parents of children with special needs, spotting delays or teaching your child about the important developmental area of social skills can be tricky. Unlike some delays that are easier to physically identify - such as learning to crawl or walk - social emotional delays can be much more subtle in their presentation, and once they are identified, finding strategies to help your child may seem difficult.

Many parents search for ideas to help their children learn these important skills starting as early as 2-year-old. It is common for children that are victims of bullying to express the need for “making friends.” It is one more reason why developing these social skills are vital to the emotional and behavioral health of the child.

#### HERE ARE A FEW TIPS TO KEEP IN MIND ABOUT SOCIAL SKILLS AND MAKING FRIENDS FOR YOUR CHILD:

**START YOUNG.** Development, in general, follows sequential patterns with one skill building on another. This means that building and maximizing social skills from the beginning is very important. Social development also follows a somewhat predictable pattern and your child can be observed for signs of developmental readiness for friendship and play very early. Watch your child for signs of interest in other children and the budding ability to share (at least a little), take turns and use some form of communication to interact with friends. Most children start to show these skills with same age peers at approximately 24 months, but this can vary. When your child does show these signs it is a good time to start something that allows them to have peer to peer interaction. This could be as simple as play date with a neighbor, a community based “mommy and me” class, or even a few days of preschool where teachers can help to facilitate interaction.

**STAY IN TOUCH WITH YOUR CHILD.** It goes without saying that the most important thing is to talk to your child daily about their experiences and thoughts. It is true that sometimes things are just difficult, but a supportive and helpful parent can make a big difference. All children have “quirks,” so get to know about your child’s needs and help others to understand them as well, but allow your child to grow and explore knowing there will be bumps along the way.

**WORKING WITH SPECIALISTS.** If you’re worried about your child’s development because they are not showing signs of interest in peers, or are having trouble interacting, this is a good time to look for help. Consider specialized groups and assistance, programs or preschools that can assist your child in capitalizing on the skills they do have. Additionally, consider specialized services that can help you as a parent to learn and understand about your child’s needs and assist you in carrying over techniques at home. This parent education piece should be an essential part of any service you choose.

**FAMILY INVOLVEMENT.** As your child grows older, help them to continue developing and learning new skills as well as maintaining social contact with peers. Look for ways to keep your child involved. Get to know your neighborhood, and if possible, establish some “buddies,” plan activities with siblings and relatives like hiking, walks, playing games, or try group experiences like organized sports, girl/boy scouts and social groups.

**COMMUNITY SUPPORT.** Stay as involved as possible and keep your child’s needs visible by working with the schools and community. Talk to the school immediately about your child’s needs and ask about finding mentoring programs as well as programs emphasizing disability awareness for other children in the school. Work with the school to establish supports that provide peer mentors/models for your child.

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## PARENT TOOLKIT

### SNAPSHOT PROFILE ABOUT YOUR CHILD WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

To better explain your child's behaviors to school personnel, create a snapshot profile of your child to distribute to teachers and specialists. This information will assist in their interactions with your child and potential conflict resolution between your child and their peers.

Your Profile should be a simple, bulleted pointed, easy-to-read description of your child that can easily fit into a file folder. Here is a list items you may want to include in your child's profile.

- **NAME, AGE, FAMILY MEMBERS**

- **STRENGTHS**

Create a positive profile of your child listing their strengths to encourage a positive relationship with your child and teacher. This allows the teacher to recognize your child's skills. Examples:

- Loves to draw and uses his/her illustrations to tell a story.
- Very good on the computer and navigating with a mouse.

- **LIKES**

Inform how best to redirect your child to a positive activity or reward for good behavior. Examples:

- Jump roping is a good 'break' for them to reduce anxiety
- Mini Pretzels are a good reward for them

- **DISLIKES**

Describe what creates anxiety in your child that may lead to possible anger or outbursts. You may also want to elaborate on how this anxiety manifests itself in your child with a conversation to the teacher.

Examples:

- Loud noises like school alarms
- Games that move fast with lots of rules like four-square

- **CHALLENGES**

List academic and social challenges for your child that may cause them anxiety and too act out. Examples:

- Fine motor is delayed so handwriting is difficult
- Difficulty with approaching peers appropriately to ask them to play; may need guidance on approaching them

- **IEP GOALS**

List current IEP goals to help build a complete profile of your child. Goals are often the last pages of an IEP and don't always get read by everyone that is working with your child.

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## TEACHER TOOLKIT

### BULLYING AND YOUR CLASSROOM

Teachers and special educators sometimes serve as “first responders” when bullying occurs in the classroom. It is important that the following tips are kept in mind to protect a child with special needs:

**EDUCATION AND TRAINING.** Make yourself and your staff aware to the physical or behavioral needs of your students with a disability. Some children exhibit sensory issues and have issues related to this such as being touched, not tolerating noises or being surrounded by groups of children. For children with autism, it may be difficult for them to express emotion or make friends with same age peers. Children with cerebral palsy may experience communication delays and other physical delays that make it difficult to participate with peers. Learn more about the symptoms and characteristics of these special needs at resources including [www.abilitypath.org](http://www.abilitypath.org) and [www.whatworks.ed.gov](http://www.whatworks.ed.gov). Talk to your class about how each of us has different abilities and how to be a supportive friend no matter what kind of help another child needs. Or consider implementing disability awareness programs such as Pigmillion at the school.

**MONITOR STUDENTS’ USE OF CAMERAS AND VIDEO.** The use of cell phones by students has escalated the number of cyber bullying incidents; many of which involve children with special needs. Educate and encourage all staff to watch how both neurotypical and students with special needs use these technology devices. Educate students about privacy and closely watch what they post or view if logged onto a social media network. If an incident occurs, notify the parents of the victim, school officials and potentially local law enforcement immediately.

**TALK TO STUDENTS.** Many children with special needs sometimes aren’t aware that they are being bullied. Ask students about their friends and their activities. Who do they sit with at lunch? What do their friends call them? Do they have a nickname? Do their friends push or hit them? Do their friends ask them to do something they don’t like? Sometimes it takes a little investigation from parents and teachers to realize what is happening when adults aren’t around.

**ESTABLISH PEER MENTORING.** Creating peer mentoring activities as early as elementary school has been shown to be effective in decreasing bullying of children with special needs.

**HELP STUDENTS MAKE FRIENDS.** Research has shown that the majority of children with special needs who experienced bullying, reported it was their friends that provided a prominent influence over their well-being in school. Bullies are less likely to target students if they know they have a support system or someone to defend them. Identifying a peer or friend that provides support as well as advocacy is vital to the child’s ability in making new friends and defending themselves against bullies. Such programs as Circle of Friends and Best Buddies help break down the barriers that children with disabilities have in the schools and often foster friendships.

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## About AbilityPath.org

**AbilityPath.org** is an online hub and special needs community for parents and professionals to learn, connect and live a more balanced life - through all phases of a child's growth and development. The website combines social networking features with expert content from AbilityPath.org's team of educators, parents, therapists and medical professionals.

Content is available in English and Spanish and features advice, tool kits and other practical day to day living tips so families can learn, laugh and live a more balanced life. AbilityPath.org's community blogs, forums, events and groups allow parents to connect and share experiences and stories, providing an outlet of support and encouragement throughout their parenting journey.

AbilityPath.org was created by Community Gatepath, a nonprofit with over 90 years of experience serving families and children with special needs. Community Gatepath fosters hope, dignity and independence among children and adults with disabilities. It is one of the largest providers of services for people with disabilities in the San Francisco Bay Area. Over 8,500 individuals annually receive support or direct care through Community Gatepath and its comprehensive menu of services including: childhood early intervention, a Family Resource Center, inclusive preschool, transition for young adults services, employment services and social business enterprises.

AbilityPath.org is funded through private donations, foundation grant support and corporate partnerships.

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