

# Bullying and Youth with Special Needs

## Background

- Youth with special needs include individuals with physical, developmental, emotional, and sensory disabilities, including but is not limited to individuals with ADHD, Autism Spectrum Disorders, epilepsy, hemiplegia, diabetes, language impairments, food allergies, learning disabilities, blindness, and/or deafness.<sup>1</sup>
- “Students with disabilities are both uniquely vulnerable and disproportionately impacted by the bullying phenomena”.<sup>2</sup>
- A number of factors associated with a disability may increase vulnerability or risk for bullying victimization such as physical vulnerability, social skill difficulties, and intolerant environments.<sup>1</sup>
- Youth with disabilities are 2 or 3 times more likely to be bullied compared to their typically developing peers.<sup>3</sup>
- Educational and health-related effects of bullying (e.g., lowered academic achievement<sup>1</sup>, increased anxiety<sup>1</sup>, loss of self esteem<sup>3</sup>, deterioration in physical health<sup>1</sup>, social exclusion<sup>1</sup>, and depression<sup>1</sup>) may be more likely in youth who have special needs and who also experience bullying.<sup>2</sup>

## Factors that Increase Risk of Being Bullied for Children with Special Needs

- Low frustration tolerance: leads to reaching a threshold more easily and frequently. This results in the youth standing out in social situations and being perceived as different.<sup>3</sup>
- Social skill challenges: difficulties in social communication or reading social cues may lead to peer rejection.<sup>3</sup>
- Motor difficulties: may lead to difficulties in reading, writing, and participating in gym class. Students are made fun of because they are unable to perform age appropriate motor tasks.<sup>3</sup> Physical impairments cause students to move slower and have less stamina. These may leave students with disabilities vulnerable to physical and/or verbal abuse.
- Assistive technology devices: Other students do not understand these devices and see them as “weird.”<sup>3</sup>

## Bullying Special Needs Youth and the Law

- P.L. 94-142 *Education for all Handicapped Children Act (1975)* states that school districts have a responsibility to take reasonable steps to ensure a safe environment and provide a “free and appropriate education” in the “least restrictive environment.”<sup>4</sup>
- Acts of bullying can become “disability harassment.”<sup>1</sup> “Disability harassment” is prohibited under section 504 of the *Rehabilitation Act of 1973* and Title II of the *Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990*.<sup>4</sup>
- The *Dignity for All Students Act (2012)* puts in place procedures for creating of school climates free of discrimination and harassment.<sup>5</sup>
- The U.S. Department of Education defines disability harassment as “intimidation or abusive behavior toward a student based on a disability that creates a hostile environment by interfering with or denying a student’s participation in or receipt of benefits, services, or opportunities in the institution’s program.”<sup>4</sup>
- Disability harassment can take place in any location connected with the school setting and consists of verbal harassment, physical threats, or threatening written statements.<sup>4</sup>

## What is Bullying Abuse?

- Bullying abuse is a form of aggressive behavior intended to cause harm. There is an imbalance of power between the peer (or group of peers) bullying and the target. Bullying usually happens over and over.<sup>6</sup>
- Bullying abuse can take both direct and indirect forms, including:
  - Physical bullying (hitting, kicking, shoving)
  - Verbal bullying (making offensive remarks, name calling, threats)
  - Relational bullying (ganging up, spreading rumors, gossiping)
  - Cyberbullying (harm inflicted through computers, cell phones, electronic means)<sup>7</sup>
- Different forms of bullying that are unique for youth with special needs<sup>3</sup>:
  - Manipulative bullying (being coerced and controlled by another student)
  - Conditional bullying (mistaken friendship consisting of bullying behaviors)
  - Exploitative bullying (features of the child's condition are used to bully)

## Recommendations for Parents

- Be your child's advocate by being aware, observant, and seeking help.<sup>1</sup>
- Stay focused on and be supportive of the child and the issue (encourage communication about bullying instance, do not blame the child or ignore the problem).<sup>1</sup>
- Continue to assess and monitor the child's educational functioning, safety, emotional health.<sup>1</sup>

## Recommendations for Educators

- Create a welcoming and safe school environment for students with disabilities.
- Modify anti-bullying programs to include special needs youth
- Use opportunities in the classroom to educate.<sup>3</sup>
  - Educate students about disabilities
  - Promote awareness of bullying
  - Provide curricula and resources that value diversity including disabilities
  - Know the school's anti-bullying policies, create school and classroom wide rules
- Address bullying with the child's Individualized Education Plan.<sup>3</sup>

## Resources for More Information

### Walk a Mile in Their Shoes: Bullying and Children with Special Needs

[www.abilitypath.org/areas-of-development/learning--schools/bullying/articles/walk-a-mile-in-their-shoes.pdf](http://www.abilitypath.org/areas-of-development/learning--schools/bullying/articles/walk-a-mile-in-their-shoes.pdf)

### Modifying Anti-bullying Programs to Include Students with Disabilities

Raskauskas, J., & Modell, S. (2011). Modifying anti-bullying programs to include students with disabilities. *TEACHING Exceptional Children*, 44, 60-67.

### U.S. Department of Education

[www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/504faq.html](http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/504faq.html)

[www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/dcl-factsheet-201010.html](http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/dcl-factsheet-201010.html)

## References

[1] U.S. Department of Health & Human Services (2012). Bullying and children and youth with disabilities and special health needs (tip sheet). Retrieved September 18, 2012 from <http://www.stopbullying.gov/at-risk/groups/special-needs/BullyingTipSheet.pdf>.

[2] Young, J., Ne'eman, A., & Gelsler, S. (2011). Bullying and students with disabilities. Retrieved from National Council on Disability:

<http://www.ncd.gov/publications/2011/March92011>.

[3] Ability Path. Walk a mile in their shoes: Bullying and the child with special needs. Retrieved on September 5, 2012 from [www.abilitypath.org/areas-of-development/learning--schools/bullying/articles/walk-a-mile-in-their-shoes.pdf](http://www.abilitypath.org/areas-of-development/learning--schools/bullying/articles/walk-a-mile-in-their-shoes.pdf).

[4] U.S. Department of Education (2012). *Frequently Asked Questions About Section 504 and the Education of Children with Disabilities*. Retrieved September, 13 2012, from <http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/504faq.html>.

[5] New York Civil Liberties Union (2012). The dignity for all students act. Retrieved September 19, 2012 from [http://www.nyclu.org/files/OnePager\\_DASA.pdf](http://www.nyclu.org/files/OnePager_DASA.pdf).

[6] [stopbullying.gov](http://www.stopbullying.gov)

[7] Hinduja, S. & Patchin, J. W. (2009). *Bullying beyond the schoolyard: Preventing and responding to cyberbullying*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.