Bullying is a topic of great concern to parents of children who are bullied and also to parents of children who are accused of bullying. Children on the autism spectrum and children with special needs are frequent targets for bullying and sometimes they are accused of bullying themselves.

Children who are most frequently targeted by bullies are children who have few friends, poor social skills, are physically weaker than others, and who have academic difficulties. This describes many children with special needs. However, it should be noted that even if a child does not fit into any of these categories, they still can be a victim of bullying.

Bullying is usually defined as something that is intentionally hurtful, is repeated, and involves an imbalance of power (such as a bigger child bullying a smaller child). However, sometimes children on the autism spectrum misunderstand what is happening around them socially. This means they might misinterpret casual comments as bullying or they might not understand that they are being bullied or taken advantage of.

What can parents do?

If you suspect your child has been bullied at school or by other students away from school, you need to report it to school officials. Start with your child’s teachers, but reports will have to be made to school administrators as well. You may want to make the report in writing.

The best action to take is to stop the bullying. Parents, teachers, and administrators need to create an action plan to reduce the chances your child will be in a situation where he or she will be bullied again. Involve your child in the plan as appropriate. As you make this plan, there are many factors to consider:

- Where is the bullying taking place? Most of the time, it is in an
unsupervised setting. Increase supervision, or arrange your child’s schedule to minimize time in an unsupervised setting.

- **Who is doing the bullying?** Intervention for the child doing the bullying can reduce the chances of future bullying for all students, not just your child.

- **How do peers react?** One of the most effective methods for reducing bullying is empowering bystanders to act to stop the bullying. With programs such as peer advocacy training, peers know what to do and can stop bullying as it happens. This is a strategy that can reduce bullying school-wide and protect all students.

- **How can I protect my child from further bullying?** One of the best protective factors against bullying is having a friend. Although children on the autism spectrum typically have difficulties with friendships, there are often fellow students who share schedules and classes who can be coached to spend time together for mutual protection and social skills practice. Peer tutors and peer advocacy programs can sometimes provide a peer to accompany your child in unsupervised settings such as lunch, PE, or the bus.

- **What if my child is accused of bullying?** It may be difficult to get the whole story about what happened from your child. If aggressive actions are not typical for your child, suspect that something happened to trigger the aggression and work with teachers to find out what is going on. Work with behavioral specialists on reducing aggressive behaviors. A functional behavioral assessment (FBA) can be conducted to see what is triggering the aggression and suggest ways to reduce the chances of the behavior occurring again. Sometimes children with disabilities are targets of bullying because they “melt down” and lash out with little provocation. Work with the school psychologist, teacher, outside therapists, and peer tutors to help your child be better prepared to cope with mild provocations before they escalate into something more hurtful.

- **What should I do if my child is suspended for bullying?** Work closely with school administrators and teachers so everyone understands that a social communication and behavioral disability such as autism spectrum disorder puts your child at a social disadvantage. It is the school’s responsibility to keep all children safe at school, and there are certain acts, such as bringing a weapon to school, that are always punishable regardless of disabilities. When a child with an Individualized Education Program (IEP) is suspended, however, parents can call an IEP meeting to discuss what
happened and how the child’s IEP and behavioral plans might need to be changed to reduce the chances of another incident. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA, 2004) has rules about suspensions longer than 10 days. If the suspension is planned to be 10 days or longer, you need to call for a Manifestation Determination hearing. The purpose of this meeting is to determine whether the student’s actions were a result of his or her disability.

Related Articles:

- Bullying
- Cyberbullying
- Friendship, Teenagers, and ASD
- Making Friends
- Functional Behavioral Assessment: What is It?
- School Discipline

Additional Resources:

- Bullying Prevention Resources

Further Reading:

Perfect Targets: Asperger Syndrome and Bullying — Practical Solutions for Surviving the Social World, by Rebekah Heinrichs

The Center for Autism Research and The Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia do not endorse or recommend any specific person or organization or form of treatment. The information included within the CAR Autism Roadmap & trade; and CAR Resource Directory & trade; should not be considered medical advice and should serve only as a guide to resources publicly and privately available. Choosing a treatment, course of action, and/or a resource is a personal decision, which should take into account each individual's and family's particular circumstances.