

Bullying

Bullying is something anyone can be subject to at any point in their life, however, autistic people can be more at risk of being bullied because of the lack of understanding from others and societal judgements about what is considered to be normal.

Autistic people also have the additional vulnerability of maybe not being able to communicate what is happening to them or they may misunderstand the intentions of people around them. Bullying can happen physically, verbally, and online.

There is no legal definitive definition for bullying however it can usually be defined as behaviour that is repeated, intended to hurt someone physically or emotionally and often aimed at certain groups because of race, religion, gender, or sexual orientation.

Bullying may look like:

- Name calling
- Teasing
- Threatening behaviours
- Physical assault
- Ignoring or leaving a person out
- The person being taken advantage of

Bullying in the form of stealing a person's belongings, assault, damage to a person's property are criminal acts and can be reported to the police.

Bullying can happen at any time in life; however, bullying is likely to start for people as they grow up and their peers are able to notice differences. The long-term effects of bullying can be serious and detrimental to a person's mental health and emotional wellbeing.

Some tips to prevent bullying happening include:

- Teach what bullying is, what it might look like and what to do if it happens.
- Ensure there is a trusted person they can go to at home and in their educational establishment.

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- Teach the person the difference between different relationships, through tools like relationship circles. It is also important to explain that they don't have to be friends with everybody they meet; they may not realise it's ok for them not to be friends with some people who they don't find very kind.
 - Consider support in education: The school playground is a prime opportunity for bullies to pick on the most vulnerable. Autistic people are likely to be feeling at their most vulnerable at this time, also because these are unstructured times, and they may be left alone or unsupervised. Speak to those within the education setting about creating some structure in these times or arrange for the person to attend extracurricular activities.
 - Increase awareness, understanding and acceptance. A good way to do this is through the education setting. Talk to the head teacher about having autism information assemblies or lessons. If peers are educated on autism, it may prevent bullying.

If there are communication difficulties it can be harder for you to know that bullying is occurring as they might not be able to tell you. In this instance you must become a 'behaviour detective' and look for other clues as to whether they are being bullied.

Signs a person is being bullied include:

- Reluctancy to attend school.
- Teasing sudden changes in mood
- increase in self soothing strategies
- changes in the way they treat others
- falling behind at school
- unexplained body marks
- changes in sleep pattern
- changes in eating patterns



Tips on how to support someone who is being bullied:

- Make the person feel safe: Knowing they have a trusted person to go to can be helpful.
- Build up the person's self-esteem: Use praise or rewards for specific achievements. You could create a 'wow board' display in the house with particular certificates or work on it that you are proud of.
- Professional help: Some people may benefit from therapies or counselling to talk about what is going on in their lives. Speak to your GP about this.
- Social groups: These are a good way for a person to meet others particularly if they are specifically for autistic people where they may be able to share common experiences.
- Create regular opportunities to talk to the person: Ensure there is an open line of communication between you and them, and that they know this. Always offer reassurance and encouragement when supporting them to talk to you. Some autistic people may find it difficult to talk face-to-face, therefore, you may create a system such as a communication box where they can write things down and post it in for you to read.
- Regular contact with the education setting through meetings or telephone calls: When bullying is first identified arrange a meeting with the setting to discuss what they are going to do. They should put plans in place to support the person that is being bullied. If you are not happy with the support, you are getting you have a right to take your concerns further.