

Bullying and Learning Disabilities

There is growing awareness that bullying can be a serious problem in our schools, playgrounds and wherever children gather. Children with learning disabilities (LD) are more likely than other children to experience bullying. Before deciding how to act, parents need to know when they are dealing with bullying.

Bullying is ...

Bullying is aggressive behaviour involving negative actions on the part of one or more children towards another child (victim).

It involves:

- A power imbalance: the bully or bullies are more powerful than the victim (they are bigger, older, more fluent, or two or more individuals join forces against another).
- It is usually repeated over time.
- The bully deliberately intends to hurt the victim.
- The victim is distressed (hurt, scared, humiliated).
- Bullying may be physical, verbal or social. It takes the form of verbal or physical aggression, threats, extortion, humiliation, insults, gossip and exclusion.

Bullying is usually not:

- Peer conflict where there is no power imbalance.
- Impulsive and unintentional.
- A misunderstanding of the hurtful impact on the victim. This may be regrettable aggression but is usually not bullying.

Children with learning disabilities are more at risk of experiencing bullying because:

- Being different from their peers can set children up for targeting by bullies.
- Peers may taunt children over their attendance in a special education program.
- Children with LD may feel less competent and less confident than their peers and therefore feel less able and less entitled to stand up for themselves. This may be aggravated by their difficulty expressing thoughts and feelings.
- They may have difficulty understanding the verbal or nonverbal communication and intentions of others. They may not follow the rules in games and the rules of conversations. They may not understand what others expect. In other words, they may be socially awkward.
- They may have difficulty managing their own behaviour and feelings. They may be too loud, hyper, disruptive, talkative etc. Peers may find this sort of behaviour irritating.
- Some children with LD are "too honest" and are unable to conceal their weaknesses and mistakes, thus leaving them vulnerable to others.

Strategies to cope with bullying

An environmental approach is essential. The Government of Canada's National Strategy on Community Safety and Crime Prevention states that "to be effective, bullying interventions must focus beyond the aggressive child and the victim to include peers, school staff, parents and the broader community" i.e., the child's social environment.

Provide emotional coaching for the victim. As parents you can confirm concern and support for the child who has been bullied. You can also acknowledge the courage that it takes to come forward and report

The adults responsible must establish that bullying is unacceptable. They must foster an attitude of respect for all regardless of differences, and support constructive methods for conflict resolution. They must be vigilant to discover when bullying is happening, not turning a blind eye or dismissing bullying as a natural occurrence in peer groups. Parents can do their part by bringing bullying to the attention of school and recreational staff and assertively asking that it be addressed.

Top six ways to address bullying: Working with your child victim of bullying

Children need you to affirm that bullying is never acceptable and that no one deserves to experience it. They also need your help to cope with or avoid it:

1. Encourage your child to find an adult who will listen. Help your child to report the bullying to school, or, as the parent, report it yourself. Also help ensure that there is an adult at school who will listen. Keep reporting the bullying until it is stopped.
2. Help your child to figure out in what situations he or she is most likely to be bullied and work with the school to implement a plan of safety that is responsive to these situations (e.g., enough adults strategically located in school yard).
3. It is understandably very difficult for many children to confront bullies. Help them to practice simply saying loudly "Stop that" or "Back off", and then quickly walk away.

4. Children naturally want to be accepted by peers who are popular. Some bullies are those popular children. Discuss with your child whether their desire to be "in" with certain kids is causing them to hang out with kids who bully them.
5. Help your child to choose at least one peer who is nice to him or her and could be a friend. Sometimes teachers have helpful advice about whom to choose. Your child will feel much better having a friend, and having a "buddy" will make him or her less vulnerable.
6. Your child may not pick up signals from peers that his or her behaviour is annoying. Help your child learn various ways that people signal their annoyance and try to stop what they are doing. E.g., When someone says "stop it", then you should stop.

Some ideas in this article are taken from [Perfect Targets: Asperger Syndrome and Bullying](#) by Rebekah Heinrichs and from the National Strategy on Community Safety and Crime Prevention website: www.prevention.gc.ca. Another helpful book is [Keys to Dealing with Bullies](#) by Barry & Francine McNamara.

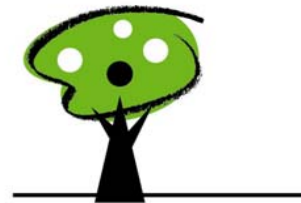
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Integra, founded in 1967 by parents and professionals, is an accredited Children's Mental Health Centre dedicated to helping children and adolescents who experience social, emotional and behavioural problems related to their learning disabilities. We are a charitable organization administered by a Board of Directors comprised of dedicated volunteers from the community.

Integra has an experienced and multidisciplinary professional staff that is dedicated to creating and implementing a range of programs. Integra serves as a centre for research, practicum placement and continuing education.

Integra is committed to the promotion of a community-wide understanding of the mental health needs of children and adolescents who have learning disabilities, and to improving community-based services for them and their families. A range of clinical services is provided by Integra, as well as related activities in research and evaluation, and in training, consultation, collaboration and advocacy.



TIPS FOR PARENTS

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