

# Bullied for being different

**School can be a scary place for children with autism, and even more so when they become the target of bullying. Beth Reid explains why**

The impact of bullying children with autism can be devastating. In a recent survey, parents reported that bullying damaged their child's self-esteem, mental health and progress at school. Some children withdraw from school altogether and others never fully recover from their experiences.

The survey was by The National Autistic Society (NAS). It is campaigning to make school make sense for children with autism and to stop them becoming the victims of bullying.

## Vulnerable children

Bullying can take on many forms, from name-calling or being left out, to physical violence. Children with autism are particularly vulnerable. Shockingly, NAS research has revealed that over 40 per cent of children with autism have been bullied at school – both in mainstream and special schools.

As a lifelong social and communication disorder, autism can be very isolating and many children with the condition encounter negative reactions to typical behaviour associated with their disability.

Understanding and relating to other people is particularly difficult for children with autism, who often don't understand social rules and, as a result, act in ways which seem unconventional or strange.

Many have special or very narrow interests in certain topics and may not realise that others don't share their enthusiasm. Some may also have difficulties with eye contact and physical co-ordination, or have sensory difficulties, such as an under- or over-sensitivity to certain smells or noises. All this can significantly affect their ability to 'fit in' with their peer group and can make them more susceptible to being bullied.

Many children with autism may not have a circle of friends around them or may prefer solitary time during breaks, making them easy targets for bullies in the playground.

Social naivety is of huge concern to parents of children with Asperger syndrome in particular, who, our research shows, are even more likely to be bullied than children with autism. Children with Asperger syndrome are often eager to make friends but find the process difficult and in their willingness to integrate into a peer group may be vulnerable to being taken advantage of.

Problems handling difficult situations may also mean that children with autism get into trouble, because they may be easily provoked by bullies. A

prolonged period of low-level bullying and teasing may elicit a seemingly disproportionate response from a child with autism, which, if misinterpreted, can put them at risk of exclusion.

Children with autism may not always be able to identify when they have been bullied, especially when the bullying takes on more subtle forms. They also often have difficulty reading non-verbal behaviour and interpreting facial expressions and body language, so may well trust another child who appears to be friendly, even if they later act in malicious ways.

Conversely, children with autism may find it hard to distinguish between accidental physical contact and deliberate actions and so, unable to determine the severity of incidents, may overreact and report everything to a teacher. Peers can sometimes interpret this behaviour as 'telling tales', something which, ironically, can in itself lead to bullying.

When one autistic child was asked if he had been bullied at school, he replied: 'Depends really, there's some people I don't like. I don't get bullied as such ... I'm not really sure if I've got bullied or not. I know some people try to make fun out of me.'

## Negative effects

Three quarters of parents told us that bullying affected their child's social skills and relationships. A shocking 63 per cent also felt bullying affected their child's mental health. Many children with autism already experience high levels of anxiety and many



**Beth Reid**  
Policy Manager,  
National Autistic  
Society



## ‘He became suicidal at seven-years-old, and his anxiety levels were so high he became very hypersensitive and could not wear normal clothing’

parents say that the added distress of bullying has led their child to self-harm or to feel suicidal. One parent said: ‘He became suicidal at seven-years-old, and his anxiety levels were so high he became very hypersensitive and could not wear normal clothing.’

Children with autism may also struggle with understanding and expressing their emotions. This can lead to the child experiencing difficulties in communicating their experiences to parents and teachers and so increasing their feelings of frustration and isolation.

Bullying can also seriously disrupt a child’s education. Where children have been bullied, 62 per cent of their parents say that the bullying led to them having to miss or change schools or to their child refusing to go to school at all.

The long-term implications for a child’s self-esteem and future social interactions are very serious.

### A whole school approach

It is imperative that all school anti-bullying strategies are consistent. It is sometimes the case that strategies for tackling bullying on the grounds of disability focus more on helping the bullied pupil to cope, while bullying on the grounds of race, gender or sexual orientation is often directed at tackling the bully’s attitude and behaviour. While children with autism may well benefit from coping techniques, tackling the root cause of bullying is vital.

A whole school approach is needed and the message must be clear that bullying on the basis of disability is indefensible. Raising awareness of autism among other children can help them to understand why someone may act differently to them. It can encourage them

to act positively towards children with autism and discourage bullying among their peers.

It is also important that teachers and special educational needs co-ordinators (SENCOs) have the right training in autism so they are able to understand the condition and recognise when someone with autism is being bullied, even when the child themselves may not realise or is unwilling to report it.

Social skills training is a simple intervention which can help children with autism deal more effectively with social interaction, helping to prevent and alleviate bullying. It may also help children with autism who bully others to understand the impact of their behaviour and how to manage situations more appropriately.

Other approaches such as peer mentoring, befriending and buddying schemes, structured play activities during breaks and ‘circles-of-friends’ schemes can be effective methods of support and prevention. Simple changes to a child’s environment, such as providing a quiet area for them to use can also reduce anxiety brought about by noisy classrooms and hectic playgrounds.

One SENCO commented: ‘We have used circles-of-friends for seven children to address a whole range of issues including lack of friends, isolation, annoying classmates, getting into trouble, bullying and behaviour in general.’

### National guidance

The Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) recommends many of these approaches in its new guidance to schools, *Bullying Involving Children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities – Embedding anti-bullying work in schools*. The NAS was one of only two disability organisations represented on the group which advised the DCSF on this guidance, it did so after consulting with children and teenagers with autism and their parents to find out their concerns. As a result of their input (and lobbying by the NAS) the guidance now recognises that children with autism are particularly vulnerable to bullying. This is a big step forward, but it is now imperative that the guidance is disseminated effectively to schools and promoted among teachers.

Unfortunately, bullying does not stay within the realms of childhood for people with autism: 56 per cent of adults with autism say they have been bullied or harassed since the age of 18. This is why tackling bullying in schools is so important. Trying to make people understand what it might be like to have autism and the personal, social and educational challenges that it raises is vital. Increasing understanding of autism from an early age is the first step to promoting the social inclusion of people with autism and ensuring they can enjoy the same rights and freedoms as the rest of society.

For more information call 08450704004 or visit [www.autism.org.uk](http://www.autism.org.uk).

5to7

## Key points

- School can be a scary place for children with autism, and even more so when they become the target of bullying.
- Due to the nature of the disability, children with autism are particularly vulnerable to bullying and taken advantage of by others.
- The impact of bullying for people with autism can be devastating and can continue into adult life.
- A whole-school approach is needed to tackle bullying on the grounds of disability.
- Training and resources in autism can help teaching staff identify and support children with the condition who are being bullied.
- The right support can be simple and support other children too.
- With the right support all children with autism can succeed at school.