

# Tackling bullying

Bullying is a common problem in schools and workplaces. Bullying can happen to anyone, but research shows that people on the autism spectrum are more at risk of being bullied.

Most of the research on bullying and people on the autism spectrum is focused in schools; however, adults on the autism spectrum also encounter bullying. The strategies highlighted in this factsheet can be adapted for adults in workplaces and other settings.

## What is bullying?


Bullying happens when one person is the victim of aggression by one or more people. The aggression may be physical or verbal and it can also be indirect hostility such as rumours about the person, or exclusion from a social group. Bullying can happen in the classroom, playground, and workplace or in cyberspace such as on Facebook, Twitter or other social media platforms.

## How bullying works

Bullying generally does not happen in isolation, it usually happens when peer bystanders are present - peers are present in 85% to 88% of all bullying episodes.<sup>1</sup> The high visibility of the bullying not only affects the victim but also provides social rewards for the perpetrators, such as laughing or cheering by the onlookers. Bullying can be driven by the desire to be noticed and to belong to a peer group and for that reason bullies and their actions need to be visible to the group.<sup>2</sup> Bystanders often reinforce the bully's behaviour by verbal or nonverbal cues. This encourages the bully to continue the actions, and if no one intervenes and defends the individual that is bullied, the peer group collectively believes that the situation is acceptable.<sup>3,4</sup>

## Bullying and autism

Children on the autism spectrum experience more bullying than their typically developing peers, and the victimisation associated with bullying can lead to low self-esteem and mental health issues for some individuals.<sup>5,6</sup>



Research now shows that school students on the autism spectrum take on various roles in bullying situations. These roles can include bully, assistant, follower, defender, outsider, and victim and can occur across a range of school settings.

Estimates of the prevalence of general school bullying experienced by school aged youth on the autism spectrum have been reported in fifteen studies worldwide, with a pooled prevalence estimate of 44%: 33% for physical bullying, 50% for verbal bullying and 31% for relational bullying.<sup>7</sup>

Estimates of general school bullying perpetrated by school aged youth on the autism spectrum have been reported in six research studies worldwide, with a pooled prevalence estimate of 10%: 16% for physical bullying, 28% for verbal bullying, 18% for relational bullying.<sup>7</sup>

Similarly, US studies report that 63% of children on the autism spectrum report that they have been bullied at any time, and 38% reported being bullied during the past month.<sup>8</sup> In the United Kingdom, the Department of Education reports that 40% of children on the autism spectrum have been bullied at school.<sup>9</sup>

In Australia, bullying has also been identified as a major concern for adolescents and adults on the autism spectrum. Results from Aspect's nationwide *We Belong* study of adults on the autism spectrum showed that 80% of the adults, on reflection, reported that they did not receive enough support for the bullying they experienced during their education.<sup>10</sup> A consequence of this was that many did not complete their education, and for some it has affected their ability to support themselves adequately in adulthood. Despite the introduction of school anti-bullying campaigns, Aspect's 2013 *We Belong Too* study into the needs of adolescents on the autism spectrum showed that 58% said they needed more support to cope with bullying.<sup>11</sup>

As children on the autism spectrum transition through school from age 5 through to age 16, the risk of bullying difficulties increases.<sup>8</sup> Researchers suggest this may be because younger children have simpler social groupings and may be more tolerant of different behaviours associated with being on the autism spectrum, whereas as children transition through their school years, gaining and maintaining social status at school become increasingly important.<sup>1,8</sup>

Rather than being seen as inevitable, bullying occurs when certain risk factors occur, and the extent to which these risk factors are buffered by protective factors.

For children on the autism spectrum, internal risk factors are associated with their difficulties in understanding and negotiating the social world, resulting in difficulties in communication and vulnerability in social interaction.<sup>12</sup> Sensory triggers and behaviour issues can also play a part. External risk factors include school culture, lack of awareness and understanding about autism, inadequate resources, and failure to deal effectively with bullying.<sup>13</sup>

Protective factors that provide a buffer for the child on the autism spectrum and ameliorate the impact of risk factors include self-esteem, resilience, disregarding or avoiding bullies, having supportive friends, school achievements, and having outside interests and talents.<sup>13</sup>

Research shows that children who show obvious symptoms of autism, those who have difficulty in making friends and students in mainstream schools are the most likely to be bullied.<sup>8</sup>

School-aged youth on the autism spectrum are significantly more likely to be targets of bullying victimization when schooled in regular education or mixed settings than in special education settings.<sup>7</sup> Researchers link this to the observation that students on the autism spectrum are more likely to be exposed to external risk factors in mainstream schools rather than in special education settings. This leads to students on the autism spectrum experiencing lower quality and frequency of peer interactions; a limited social network and less access to friends and social support; increased bullying and social rejection; and isolation and loneliness. This results in solitary behaviours and less motivation for social contacts in students on the autism spectrum and reduced opportunities for neuro-typical peers to learn about people on the autism spectrum.<sup>14</sup>

However, where the risk factors for children on the autism spectrum are minimised and the protective factors are effective, children on the autism spectrum can develop friendships and learn effectively, regardless of the type of school in which they are placed.

## Tackling bullying

Bullying is a social problem that needs to be addressed at the political, societal, cultural, community and organisational levels. Educating the whole school community, families and workplace colleagues, on what bullying is and how to prevent, needs to involve everyone. Active support from teachers, peers and family and learning appropriate ways of coping with bullies have been shown to be effective.

If, however, the risks are allowed to predominate, bullying is likely to occur. Anti-bullying programs need to both promote a healthy school culture and increase children's resilience. Research shows that the most effective ways of preventing unacceptable behaviour are to 1) identify why a child is bullied, 2) teach skills about what to do and how to do it, and 3) inform and train peers.

- Peer training about bullying is now recognised as a key to preventing bullying in schools. Studies on school-based anti-bullying programs that emphasise bystander involvement in preventing victimisation have been shown to be successful in reducing bullying behaviour.<sup>15</sup>
- Researchers also emphasise the importance of parents and teachers working collaboratively to address the bullying that any child experiences<sup>16</sup>
- Providing children with skills for managing bullies also appears to be an important strategy for supporting students on the autism spectrum.<sup>16</sup>

Having higher levels of parent involvement and confidence have been shown to be associated with a reduced exposure to bullying for children of the autism spectrum. Parental confidence is considered to be important because parents of children on the autism spectrum who more actively engaged with their school influence local policy and practice and are more likely to report incidents of bullying to staff.<sup>6</sup>

## Guidelines for developing anti-bullying plans <sup>16</sup>

- Plan and develop a prevention program
  - identify the students need
  - develop an appropriate prevention plan
- Educate the child about bullying
  - discuss what bullying is
  - ensure the child understands how to identify it
- Teach the child how to cope and report bullying
  - provide multiple opportunities in controlled environments
  - use appropriate behaviour strategies e.g. video modelling, social stories, role-play
  - train how to report potential bullying incidents
- Teach how to use the skills in other situations
  - Provide opportunities to practice skills in a range of environments
  - Siblings and other students can provide practice opportunities
- Implement a monitoring system
  - Plan how to monitor the program
  - Develop a monitoring system with teachers/parents e.g. daily report card

## Social clubs

Building self-confidence and providing children with opportunities to practice social skills is an important part of building resilience in children who experience bullying. Aspect runs Social Clubs for children and young people aged between eight and 18 years. These clubs provide students with informal settings that promote mutual peer support through the sharing of experiences and feelings. An Australian Government funded evaluation of the program demonstrated that the Social Club program provides the children with benefits by offering a safe space for experiencing understanding and acceptance, building self-esteem and the opportunity to develop friendships in a non-judgemental environment. Further information can be found at the Aspect website.

<https://www.autismspectrum.org.au/content/asteen-social-club>

<https://www.autismspectrum.org.au/adultsocialgroups>

## Social skills training

The Secret Agent Society (SAS) is an evidence-based social skills program that is designed for children who find it difficult to understand their own emotions, and those of others, that has been successful in supporting children who are managing bullying. The SAS program helps children develop the skills needed to express their feelings in appropriate ways. The program uses role playing missions and computer games to teach children how to make friends, manage bullies and ask for help when needed. Research has shown that children who completed the SAS significantly improved their ability to recognise emotions in other students, express their own feelings and manage their anger and anxiety.<sup>17, 18, 19</sup>

<https://www.sst-institute.net/>

## Crisis support

If you or someone you know needs additional support for mental health issues, you can seek assistance from your local doctor or contact **Lifeline Australia** telephone 13 11 14, Lifeline offers 24 hour support and suicide prevention services, across Australia.

## Contact Aspect customer service

Telephone **1800 277 328** or **(02) 8977 8377** 9am-5pm Monday to Friday

Web <http://www.autismspectrum.org.au/>

Email [customerservice@autismspectrum.org.au](mailto:customerservice@autismspectrum.org.au)

## Resources

The following resources give information about how to support someone who is dealing with bullying.

**Positive Partnerships** provides free workshops, information and resources for parents, carers, educators. Two webpages that provide information on bullying are:

- How your child socialises – <http://www.positivepartnerships.com.au/fact-sheet/how-your-child-socialises>
- Online Learning for Educators – <http://www.positivepartnerships.com.au/learning-online-for-teachers>

**Bullying No Way** is an Australian website developed by the Department of Education and Training. It contains resources for teachers, parents and students. <http://bullyingnoway.gov.au/>

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The **Australian Government Department of Education and Training** and **state Education Departments** across Australia are tackling bullying using the latest evidence-based research. The Department of Education and Training have a website that provides information about bullying research projects that are addressing bullying in schools. For more information on Australian Government funded bullying prevention programs: <https://education.gov.au/bullying-research-projects#prevalence-and-effectiveness-of>.

**NSW Public Schools** website has information about their anti-bullying policy and advice on bullying and cyberbullying.

<http://www.schools.nsw.edu.au/studentsupport/behaviourpgrms/antibullying/index.php>

**Lawstuff** is a website that provides easy to read information about bullying at school and what to do if you are being bullied. It provides information on how to report bullying and how to seek protection. There is a webpage tab for each state and territory in Australia that provides up-to-date information relevant to that region. [http://www.lawstuff.org.au/nsw\\_law/topics/bullying/bullying-at-school#](http://www.lawstuff.org.au/nsw_law/topics/bullying/bullying-at-school#)


**Australian Human Rights Commission** – Support is available for adults who are bullied. The Australian Human Rights Commission has fact sheets and information on discrimination and bullying and the responsibilities of employers. There is an extensive section on where to get help.

<https://www.humanrights.gov.au/workplace-bullying-violence-harassment-and-bullying-fact-sheet>

**Secret Agent Society**, Solving the Mystery of Social Encounters. <http://www.sst-institute.net/>

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