

Bullying and ASD by Helen Marginson

Bullying is a serious issue facing millions of children around the world; indeed, UNICEF notes that the problem affects more than one in three children aged 13 to 15. Statistics indicate that most bullying occurs at schools, commencing in primary school, peaking at middle school and waning somewhat in high school. Bullying is defined as repeated, unsolicited, aggressive behavior in which there is a real or conceived imbalance of power. It can involve physical or verbal violence, threats, insults, etc. and can also involve the use of social media networks to harm another person (i.e. through cyberbullying). Studies have shown that certain groups are at a particularly high risk of being bullied: these include members of the GLBT (Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender) community, as well as children with disabilities or learning difficulties.

Children with ADHD are also more likely to be bullied, as are those with Asperger's Syndrome and Autism. A national survey carried out by The Interactive Autism Network (IAN), published in 2012 and revised in 2014, has shown that children with ASD in particular are bullied at a very high rate, and are often intentionally 'pushed' into meltdowns or aggressive reactions by their schoolmates. Some 63 per cent of the 1,167 children with ASD aged six to 15 who were surveyed, had been bullied at some points in their lives.

Parents and educators need to possess great awareness of bullying, since the practice has serious and long-term consequences for victims, including greater risks of depression, anxiety, headache, and stomach ache. One interesting study found that adults who had been bullied at school had higher levels of C-reactive protein, a sign of inflammation and a potential risk factor for heart disease.

In children with ASD; bullying occurred at all age levels, though the peak period seems to be between Grades 5 and 8 (between 42 and 49 per cent of children in these grades had been bullied in the month prior to being surveyed). Rates were worse in public than in private schools (42 per cent vs 28 per cent); In special education public schools, 30 per cent of children with ASD were bullied, while in special education private schools, 18 per cent suffered this fate. The smaller the school, the less likely bullying was to occur.

The survey showed that there also seemed to be a difference between types of ASD diagnosis. Some 61 per cent of children with Asperger's were bullied, compared with 28 per cent of those with autism and 37 per cent of those with other ASDs.

Bullying is a particularly prevalent issue for those with Asperger's, who tend to be denied services because they are articulate and perform well at school. It may not be evident, but they often have the same problems with social understanding as other children with ASD, which may make them more vulnerable to bullying.

Studies have also shown that those facing other issues in addition to ASD (such as ADHD, depression and anxiety) can also be at a particularly high risk of being bullied.

Some of the traits associated with an increased chance of being the victim of bullying include clumsiness, poor personal grooming, rigid rule following, continued talking about topics other children may not find interesting, frequent meltdowns, and a lack of flexibility.

If you suspect your child is a victim of bullying, talk to them first, showing patience and support, and letting them know you believe them. Educate them on the nature of bullying and try to come up with a strategy to avoid it. Ineffective advice includes telling children to ignore the bully, or to stand up to them. Typically, calling the bully's parent is also ineffective, as is confronting the bullying child.

Rather than taking matters into your own hands, it is recommended that you contact your child's school. SpecialNeeds.TheBullyProject.com has useful advice and resources, including a student action plan, conversation starters for talking to your child, and template letters to notify authorities at your child's school (always communicate with the school in writing first). Aim to work alongside your child's teachers and school authorities, so particular strategies can be devised to nip the bullying behavior in the bud. Useful practices may include discussing bullying and its

effects in class, and carrying out role plays activities, in which the bully takes on the role of the victim.

Nobullying.com, [Bullying Statistics 2014](#), accessed April, 2015.

Forbes.com, [The Psychological Effects of Bullying Last Well Into Adulthood](#), April, 2015.

NationalGeographic.com, [Bullying's Long-Term Effects Seen in Both the Bullied and the Bully](#), accessed April, 2015.

Iancommunity.org, [IAN Research Report: Bullying and Children with ASA](#), accessed April, 2015.

[Specialneeds.thebullyproject.com](#), [Parent Resources](#), accessed April, 2015.

PsychGuides, [ADHD \(Attention-Deficit/Hyperactive Disorder\)](#), accessed April, 2015.

Pnas.org, [Childhood bullying involvement predicts low-grade systemic inflammation into adulthood](#), accessed April, 2015.