

Helping Kids with Special Needs Avoid Bullying

Recent tragedies in western Massachusetts (the suicide of alleged bullying victim Phoebe Prince) have reminded us that bullying can have heartbreaking consequences for children in our schools. For parents of special needs children, the threat of bullying is a particularly urgent concern. Unfortunately, these children are more likely to be bullied than their typically developing peers because they *are* different and because they're less likely to have the skills needed to seek assistance and avoid bullying.



Our state's recent anti-bullying legislation helps define bullying, mandates anti-bullying education, and holds school staff accountable for reporting bullying incidents. This is a step forward, but there are many ways parents can help their child avoid bullying.

Bullying prevention should start when students are very young. Parents of students with disabilities in primary school education classes can help typically developing children understand their child's disability. The parents or school psychologist can speak to the class in a positive, developmentally appropriate way about the child's disability. If children in the school community learn early about how to interact with and accept classmates with special needs, they may be less apt to bully students and more likely to report bullying if they see it.

Parents should try to observe their child's school and extra-curricular activities frequently, develop trusting relationships with school personnel, and get to know the child's peers. This way, they'll be more likely to find out about potential bullying and be able to address it.

Unfortunately, many children with special needs might not recognize that they *are* being bullied or be able to communicate that fact. They need to be taught how to identify bullying and learn that it's unacceptable. If a child reports that he is being bullied, it's essential that parents work with teachers and administrators to assess the situation. They should encourage the child to seek adult help and avoid telling him or her to fight back.

Although we should never blame the special needs child for being a bullying victim, some strategies will make that child less likely to be targeted. First, some children with autism and other developmental disabilities can be taught social skills to help them form positive relationships with peers and learn social conventions, impulse control and how to

appropriately build friendships.

Children with disabilities also need to learn specific skills to respond to bullying. For example, a behavior therapist might have children role play a bullying situation, practice appropriate responses and get adult assistance.

Parents may want to help children with disabilities make age-appropriate clothing and toy selections. A teenager with autism may enjoy wearing a pumpkin hat at Halloween, but that choice could make him a bullying target in a middle school environment.

A behavior analyst can work with children with special needs to help reduce problem behaviors that may interfere with being accepted by their peers. I once worked with an adolescent who drooled frequently and was not well received in a high school cooking class. We developed an intervention to reduce the frequency of his drooling and helped him learn to wipe his mouth appropriately when he drooled. Consequently, his fellow students stopped making negative comments and were more accepting.

Working together, school administrators, educators and parents can teach special needs children to identify bullying, seek assistance and learn social skills to thwart bullies for a happier, more productive school experience. ♦

Shannon Kay, Ph.D., is Director of the May Center for Child Development. The May Institute (www.mayinstitute.org) provides educational and behavioral health services to individuals with autism spectrum disorders (ASD), other developmental disabilities, brain injury and mental illness. May Institute operates four schools (three in Massachusetts) for students with ASD and other developmental disabilities.