

BULLYING AND AUTISM: DEVELOPING EFFECTIVE ANTI-BULLYING PRACTICE

**A guide for schools
and other educational
settings**



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1. INTRODUCTION

Disabled young people and those with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) are significantly more likely to experience bullying - including online bullying - than their peers. Children who have learning disabilities and autism are particularly at risk.

The guide has been produced as part of the United Against Bullying free whole-school anti-bullying programme funded by the Department for Education. It supports schools to reduce bullying and improve the wellbeing of all children, focusing on those most at risk, including those with SEND, those who experience racist and faith-targeted bullying, sexual bullying, homophobic, biphobic and transphobic bullying, looked-after children, young carers and those on free school meals.

This guide has been adapted from resources originally produced in partnership with the National Autistic Society (NAS) in 2014/15. It has been created with contributions from the Council for Disabled Children, Kidscape, Professor Peter Smith, and with support from the Ambitious Youth Network at Ambitious about Autism. The views of the young people involved, and associated quotations, are included throughout.

The guide is intended to support schools to improve their understanding of bullying and the impact it can have on autistic young people, and raise awareness of the duties owed to disabled pupils under the Equality Act 2010.

Responsibilities to young people with autism are underpinned by the disability duties in the Equality Act 2010 and the SEN duties in the Children and Families Act 2014. There is reference to the disability duties throughout this guide but the main focus is on practice. For a more comprehensive guide to the disability duties in the Equality Act, and for other resources, please see the useful resources and references section at the end of this guide.

For the purpose of this guide, we mean 'young people' to refer to all children and young people.

PLEASE NOTE

Before embarking on any anti-bullying work relating to groups of pupils more at risk of bullying, it's really important to consider and be aware of any biases or preconceived ideas that may influence how you deal with bullying and autism in your school or setting. Sometimes, knowing a pupil is autistic can lead us to jump to conclusions about them or what they might need. We might assume certain things that the pupil can or can't do, or how we should interact with them.

We have an online training course titled [Bullying and Difference](#) which can support you to think about biases and deficit approaches. We recommend taking this before embarking on any anti-bullying work that involves at risk groups of pupils.

2. SUMMARY

Young people with autism are significantly more likely to be bullied frequently with some research showing nearly one in two pupils with autism at risk of being a target of physical, verbal, or relational school bullying¹. There is clear evidence that bullying of autistic young people is widespread and has devastating consequences for the emotional wellbeing and learning potential of pupils. Below we have highlighted some of the key findings in this guide:

- Bullying rates are always extremely high with some research finding it as high as 94%².
- It's important to understand that autism can affect young people in many different ways. Having a good understanding of autism and neurodiversity is key.
- Understanding why autistic young people may be targeted, the types of bullying they experience, and that peers can sometimes deliberately provoke autistic young people if they have picked up on their sensory differences.
- The young people in our focus group reported that bullying made them feel lonely and isolated, have low self-esteem and poor mental health, and made them lose their sense of self. They also reported not feeling safe, not wanting to go to school, and not trusting teachers and adults.
- Studies have shown a huge increase in the number of school exclusions for pupils with autism over the last 5 years and that autistic pupils are twice as likely to be excluded than their peers.
 - ▶ It is important that the breadth of the definition of disability under the Equality Act 2010 is well understood. Otherwise, schools may not see a pupil's behaviour as being linked to the nature of their disability and may interpret it as naughty, disobedient or a failure to follow instructions.
 - ▶ Some actions often perceived, by others, as bullying may result from social misunderstandings. It's important for school staff to have a good understanding of how autism affects individual young people in their care, not jump to conclusions about what has happened, and really try to understand what lies behind the behaviour.

A multi-layered, whole school approach is likely to be most effective in enabling each pupil with autism to engage socially and be better understood by other pupils. This approach needs to be based on:

- improved autism awareness for everyone within the school community;
- increased understanding of the underpinning disability duties in the Equality Act 2010;
- a strong voice for pupils themselves;
- close partnership with parents;
- identifying appropriate support for autistic young people; and
- implementing effective bullying prevention and response strategies that address the most pressing autism-specific needs.

1 - Maïano et al (2015) <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/aur.1568>
Morton, H. E. et al (2019) <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1362361318813997>
2 - Humphrey, N. et al (2015)

3. WHAT IS BULLYING?

Longitudinal research shows that bullying can have a significant impact on a young person's life well into adulthood. To ensure we can prevent bullying, act quickly when it takes place and avoid misidentifying or missing bullying, it is vital that schools and other settings have a shared definition of bullying. This should be understood by the whole school or setting including parents, young people, and all staff.

While there is no legal definition of bullying, the Anti-Bullying Alliance and its members have an agreed shared definition of bullying based on research from across the world over the last 30 years.

The Anti-Bullying Alliance (ABA) defines bullying as:

Bullying is the **repetitive, intentional hurting** of one person or group by another person or group, where the relationship involves an **imbalance of power**. It can happen face to face or online. Bullying can be physical, verbal or psychological. It can happen face-to-face or online.

3.1 TYPES OF BULLYING

There are different types of bullying, including:

- physical bullying such as hitting, slapping or pushing someone
- verbal bullying, for example name calling, gossiping or threatening someone
- non-verbal abuse such as hand signs or text messages
- emotional abuse, including threatening, intimidating or humiliating someone
- exclusion, such as ignoring or isolating someone
- undermining including constant criticism or spreading rumours

- controlling or manipulating someone
- making silent, hoax or abusive calls³

Being bullied because of disability, race, sex, gender identity, or sexual orientation could also constitute discrimination under the Equality Act 2010.

Bullying can range from being very overt and easy to identify (when witnessed) to incredibly subtle and hard to distinguish from friendly jokes or 'banter'. Having a clear definition of bullying helps to identify it.

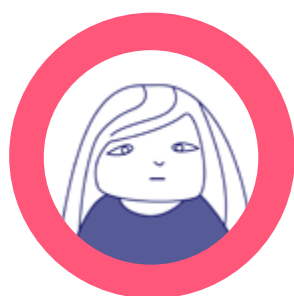
3 - NSPCC. Available at: <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/what-is-child-abuse/types-of-abuse/bullying-and-cyberbullying/>

Bullying happens for a variety of reasons and pupils from a variety of backgrounds can experience it, however when people are or perceived to be different, or receive different treatment, this can sometimes make people stand out and be targets of bullying behaviour. However, differences are not the only reason and it's important we don't give out the message to young people that they are bullied because of who they are. Bullying happens for a number of reasons. While the autistic young people we spoke to said the bullying they experienced was due to difference and standing out because of their differences, or the additional support given to them, they also raised that it was also to do with a general lack of understanding and empathy about autism, the way the school environment was set up, as well societal factors.

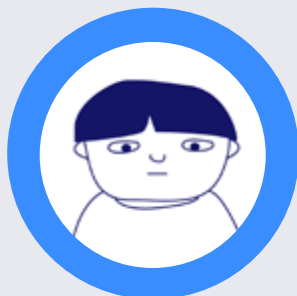
3.2 BULLYING AS A GROUP BEHAVIOUR

In Christina Salmivalli's groundbreaking participant role work in the 1990's that showed bullying as a group phenomenon, a number of roles that young people play in a bullying scenarios were identified and it highlighted that anti-bullying work should not necessarily focus on the 'ringleader' but on breaking

down the power dynamics of the group by acting on 'assistant' and 'reinforcer' roles as well as building support through 'bystander' and 'defender' roles⁴. This can be particularly empowering when thinking about approaches working with the peer group.



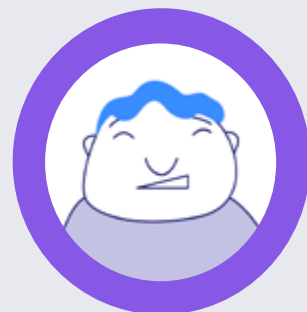
'Bystander'



'Target'



'Ringleader'



'Assistant'



'Defender'



'Reinforcer'

⁴ - See here for an overview of the roles involved in bullying:
<https://youtu.be/IRnNMT4fac>

4. WHAT IS AUTISM?

Autism is a spectrum condition (also referred to as Autism Spectrum Disorder or ASD) and a developmental disability affecting how people communicate and interact with the world⁵. There are currently estimated to be around 700,000 people with autism in the UK. Around 1 in 100 young people have autism which equates to 1 young person in every 3 classrooms.

Every autistic person is unique and has their own challenges and strengths.

Autistic people may share certain traits, but autism is on a spectrum and every autistic young person has their own profile. There can be a range of challenges for autistic people in living in a neurotypical world. Some autistic people live an independent life, while others have complex needs and may need additional support throughout their lives.

'Neurodiversity' is the umbrella term to describe neurological differences and alternative ways of thinking such as Autism, Dyslexia, DCD (Dyspraxia), Dyscalculia, and ADHD, and refers to a world where these differences are recognised and respected⁶.

4.1 HOW AUTISM CAN AFFECT PEOPLE

Autism affects people in different ways but some people with autism may⁷:

- Have different communication needs
- Have different sensory processing, such as under- or over-sensitivity to sounds, touch, tastes, smells, light or colours
- Find it difficult to understand other people's intentions and express their own feelings
- Be sensitive to changes in routine and unfamiliar situations
- Find it difficult to understand jokes/sayings/slang
- Have anxiety and get overwhelmed
- Repeat movements e.g. self-soothing activities such as rocking or clapping
- Have highly focused hobbies and interests
- Have different ways of interacting with others

This can all have an impact on daily life.



5 - You can watch this video from NAS to find out more: <https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/what-is-autism>

6 - For more information see: <https://www.neurodiversityweek.com>

7 - Ambitious about Autism: <https://www.ambitiousaboutautism.org.uk/information-about-autism/understanding-autism/what-is-autism>

The autistic young people we spoke to said that often people don't realise that autism affects people in different ways. For example, one young person told us: *"Oh. You don't seem autistic' I've heard this at least 10 times"*

"A lot of people are unaware of the sheer size of the autistic spectrum and we're all different, simply linked by the fact we have differently wired brains to the general lot. They think we should fit to their definition of autistic, and get angry when we don't"

- Autistic Young Person

A few of the autistic young people we spoke to felt that there was a lack of understanding and awareness about autism and their differences and the support the young people got from the school sometimes drew attention to their differences:

"They may act differently, be misunderstood by others, do things that aren't the social norm, misunderstand social norms and customs and have different interests"

"For not understanding jokes/saying/slang and seeming like the 'odd one out'"

- Quotes from Autistic Young People

It's important to be aware of how autism can affect people but not to make assumptions about how it impacts individual young people.



4.2 AUTISM AND THE DEFINITION OF DISABILITY IN THE EQUALITY ACT 2010

A person has a disability if they have a physical or mental impairment, and the impairment has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on the person's ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities⁸.

Young people with autism are likely to be covered by the definition of disability in the Equality Act 2010. This means that schools and service providers have specific responsibilities to them. In particular, 'reasonable adjustments' must be made for disabled pupils so that they can join in all the activities of the school. Schools must anticipate the need for adjustments before young people are left out or marginalised.

It is important that the breadth of the definition of disability is well understood. Otherwise, schools may not see a pupil's behaviour as being linked to the nature of their disability and may interpret it as naughty, disobedient or a failure to follow instructions.

Research by Birmingham University⁹ found that every region in England has seen a huge increase in the number of school exclusions for pupils with autism of between 45% and 100% over the last 5 years and that autistic pupils are twice as likely to be excluded than their peers. Research from the DfE also shows that bullying or being bullied was found to be a trigger for exclusion¹⁰.

For example, an autistic young person in our focus group said:

"When I got bullied in secondary mainstream, I was the one who got a fixed term exclusion for a whole term!!"

- Autistic Young Person

Young people with SEND might have a diagnosed condition, or they might not. Some might be waiting for a diagnosis, or concerns might not have been raised yet.

Sometimes, diagnoses can lead us to jump to conclusions about an individual young person. We might assume certain things that they can or can't do, or how we should interact with them.



8 - Gov.UK, Equality Act 2010: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/section/6>

9 - Birmingham University (2022): <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/news/2022/autistic-pupils-twice-as-likely-to-be-excluded-from-school-study>

10 - DfE, Graham et al (2019) https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/800028/Timpson_review_of_school_exclusion_literature_review.pdf

5. WHAT DOES EVERYONE IN THE SCHOOL NEED TO KNOW ABOUT BULLYING AND AUTISM?

5.1 AUTISTIC YOUNG PEOPLE AND BULLYING

Bullying can be a significant challenge for autistic young people and their families¹¹. The extent and the impact of bullying can last well into adulthood.

There is a large amount of research on bullying prevalence rates of pupils with autism and, although the rates vary between studies, bullying rates are always extremely high with some research finding it as high as 94%¹².

Even so, the data may understate the issue as not all autistic young people will understand they are in a bullying situation and may not be adequately supported to communicate their experiences. For example, a study of male autistic pupils found that reporting the bullying they had experienced to adults had made it worse and many had not disclosed it at school and instead waited until they got home, more than 50% also avoided school as a coping strategy for dealing with the bullying they were experiencing¹³.

5.2 TYPES OF BULLYING REPORTED BY AUTISTIC YOUNG PEOPLE

Autistic young people are significantly at risk of bullying behaviour and peers can sometimes deliberately provoke autistic young people if they have picked up on their sensory differences, for example making loud noises, or manipulating autistic young people. For example, the types of bullying behaviour that was reported by the autistic young people we spoke to included:

Physical bullying:

- Flicking rulers or rubber bands at them
- Stealing comfort items
- Physical violence

Emotional bullying:

- People being overly nice to them to their face but rude behind their back/being nice to them so other people will laugh
- Exclusion from social activities, purposely talking about plans then not inviting them.
- People complaining when having to sit next to them in seating plans
- Doing things to cause meltdowns such as deliberately being too loud
- Lies told to get them into trouble

Verbal bullying:

- Derogatory name calling
- Insulting them to their friends around them loudly
- Laughing at them
- Threats to hurt them and family members

Online/cyber bullying:

- Making videos impersonating and making fun of them e.g. of the way they talk
- Fake accounts and 'catfishing' them
- Sharing screenshots of things they said, being taken out of context and spread online
- People creating horrible memes
- Having a social media page dedicated to hate comments about them
- Posting anonymous comments under social media posts including hateful language
- Sharing private images around to peers or others without consent
- Not being included in group chats that are for multiple people (e.g. class group chats).

11 - Weiss J.A. et al (2015)

12 - Humphrey, N. et al (2015)

13 - Bitsika, V. and Sharpley, CF. (2014)

The young people in our focus group also reported that bullying made them feel lonely and isolated, have low self-esteem and poor mental health, and made them lose their sense of self. They also reported not feeling safe, not wanting to go to school, and not trusting teachers and adults. One young person told us: "After leaving school due to bullying I've only recently found myself again and what I enjoy!"

"I actually tried to reach out to teachers and was told I was 'too smart' to have ADHD or autism, when I'm now diagnosed with both (no thanks to them), but for me, it really sent me into a state of depression thinking I just wasn't like everyone else and it was a bad thing"

- Autistic Young Person

5.3 WHY AUTISTIC YOUNG PEOPLE MAY BE TARGETED

There are many reasons why young people might be targeted and, while real or perceived 'differences' and pupil characteristics can be a reason, other factors include relationships, for example amongst the peer groups, staff and families, and it also intersects with the way the community or school environment is set up. These are all factors that may put young people more at risk of bullying.

The autistic young people we spoke to also highlighted some of the reasons they felt that autistic pupils were more likely to be bullied, which are:

1. For being different or perceived as different

The young people felt that this made them stand out and that it also linked with a lack of understanding about their condition.

"Yes because of miscommunication and lack of social skills lots of people may find them weird or get annoyed with them"

- Autistic Young Person

It is estimated that around one in seven people (more than 15 per cent of people in the UK) are neurodivergent, meaning that the brain functions, learns and processes information differently.

'Neurodiversity' is the umbrella term to describe neurological differences and alternative ways of thinking such as Autism, Dyslexia, DCD (Dyspraxia), Dyscalculia, and ADHD, and refers to a world where these differences are recognised and respected¹⁴.

"Societal exclusion of neurodivergent individuals encourages bullying, as it determines anyone different as an outcast"

- Autistic Young Person

According to a recent survey carried out by Ambitious about Autism¹⁵, 75% of autistic young people have experienced bullying behaviour and only half of young people said they felt safe at school. The charity found that young people with autism can 'often be vulnerable to bullying because they find it harder to 'read' social situations or demonstrate different behaviours'.

¹⁴ - For more information see: <https://www.neurodiversityweek.com>
¹⁵ - Ambitious about Autism: <https://www.ambitiousaboutautism.org.uk/information-about-autism/in-education/bullying>

2. Lack of understanding/empathy about autism

The young people felt that there was a general lack of understanding of autism in schools and this contributed to negative attitudes towards them and lead to bullying. For example:

"People may find their self-soothing activities such as rocking or clapping as strange, because they don't fully understand the condition"

- Autistic Young Person

"Often information about autism or being neurodivergent is not taught in schools"

- Autistic Young Person

3. Inappropriate or misunderstood reasonable adjustments

The way that reasonable adjustments were provided sometimes made the young people stand out or other pupils would be jealous of what seemed to be favourable or different treatment.

"Because they may have additional help like a TA in a lesson."

"because they might not have to follow all of the rules - e.g. maybe allowed to wear different uniform or have fidget items which others might not be allowed"

"See their seemingly bad behaviour as rewarded (e.g. reasonable adjustments in education or support following meltdown)"

- Autistic Young People

It's vital that schools think carefully about how reasonable adjustments are implemented and avoid singling out autistic young people. This may for example mean thinking about ways to make the same adjustments for all pupils where possible.

4. Societal and environmental factors

The autistic young people we spoke to also raised issues around the school environment and lack of resources and support, as well a lack of understanding about autism.

"Schools not having the right resources to support them, therefore making school even harder than it 'should' be, therefore meaning they may have more meltdowns"

"to prevent that we need to reverse the stigma and educate way more in schools"

- Autistic Young People

They also raised issues about the school environment and culture and how this enables different control and power dynamics to play out. We know that a power imbalance is one of the core elements that define bullying so it's important to think about whether the wider school environment and culture could actually be putting young people more at risk of bullying.

"Educational systems are such a toxic environment, and very outdated, archaic and controlling one at that. So therefore children in schools feel a need to control their identity, friendships groups and the perceptions others gain from them. A way they do this is by putting others down to lift themselves up in the hierarchy. Teachers and power play is a major stressor in this as well. Therefore we need to find an alternative way for children to feel seen, in control and safe at school"

- Autistic Young Person

"people jump to their own conclusions about every little thing that they don't understand about autistic young people"

- Autistic Young Person

5.4 YOUNG PEOPLE WITH AUTISM WHO DISPLAY BULLYING BEHAVIOUR

Any person is capable of displaying bullying behaviour. It is important to ensure we don't make assumptions about young people bullying others. Autistic young people are overrepresented in exclusions data and it's important not to jump to conclusions or make assumptions about what might have happened.

It is important for school staff to approach the person who has been bullying in a skillful manner as depicted below:

- Understand the young person's thinking and perceptions, try to encourage empathy/understanding.
- Consider approaches for working with the wider group such as restorative approaches.
- Consider different ways to help a young person feel less anxious.

Autistic young people (like all young people) can display bullying behaviour. However, when autistic young people are thought to be bullying it may be because staff are focussing on the young person's aggressive or externalising behaviours, but not on the young person's intent which is a key element in the definition of bullying. As many studies have shown, autistic young people are not always able to understand the same social rules and cues and may not be aware of the consequences of their behaviours and how it impacts on others:

"They are not usually the perpetrators of bullying with clear intent. In fact, our research findings indicate that children with ASD are more likely to be the victims of bullying and less likely to bully others when compared with typically developing children."¹⁶

Reminder of the definition of bullying:

The **repetitive, intentional hurting** of one person or group by another person or group, where the relationship involves an **imbalance of power**. Bullying can be physical, verbal or psychological. It can happen face-to-face or online.

The power imbalance element of the definition can also be misunderstood in relation to autistic young people in bullying situations. On the one hand, some autistic young people might seek control in unpredictable situations, and it may make it more likely that they seek the power such as reacting or retaliating to provocation - and therefore inadvertently bully others. For example, seeking control in unpredictable situations. However, some actions often perceived, by others, as bullying may also result from social misunderstandings, such as:

- wanting to join in activities or fun, but not being sure how to;
- anxiety caused by changes in routines or social rules having been broken, such as walking on the grass or leaving the toilet cubicle door open; and
- not being able to understand another person's perspective or point of view.

It's important for school staff to have a good understanding of how autism affects individual young people in their care, not jump to conclusions about what has happened, and really try to understand what lies behind the behaviour.

We have developed a guide to support with young people who are displaying bullying behaviour, [here](#).

16 - Hwang S. et al (2018)

5.5 THE IMPACT OF BULLYING ON AUTISTIC YOUNG PEOPLE

The impact of bullying is severe. It should be seen as a barrier to learning and potentially a safeguarding issue. There is very clear evidence from longitudinal studies over the years of the negative impact of bullying continuing to be felt into adulthood. With persistent bullying research shows that levels of poor outcomes and harm increase significantly.¹⁷

Mental health and wellbeing

Research has also shown the links between bullying and mental health and wellbeing, including anxiety, depression, self-harm for example in the short term and wider health, wealth and social issues in the long term, such as less income and poor relationships¹⁸. Some research has also argued that pupils with autism are more likely to report lower levels of self-esteem which in turn can be seen as a risk factor¹⁹.

The autistic young people in our focus group, described the impact of bullying to include:

- Social exclusion and isolation
- Mental health issues
- Losing their sense of self and low self-esteem
- Not trusting the school to help
- Impact on their relationships and interaction with other people

"Personally, in this situation I actually tried to teach out to teachers and was told I was "too smart" to have ADHD or autism, when I'm now diagnosed with both (no thanks to them), but for me, it really sent me into a state of depression thinking I just wasn't like everyone else and it was a bad thing."



We produced a range of resources as part of our Anti-Bullying Week campaign 'All different, All equal' which includes primary and secondary school backs and tips on celebrating difference, [here](#).

They also worried that it would impact on their future prospects and opportunities, and they feared that they may be bullied again (e.g. at college, in the workplace):

"This is something I'm worried about personally since I'm starting again in September, well, it's new people. And [an autistic young person] may not be able to figure out new people, so they may not like [them]. And it might be the whole lifecycle of high school again, just for two years."

Missing school/absenteeism

There is also a strong link between bullying and school absenteeism. 16,000 11-15 year olds are absent from school at any one time due to bullying. If you look at where bullying was a contributory reason but not the main reason, the number increases to over 70k²⁰. There is also a strong link between bullying and truancy - the greater the incidence of bullying, the more likely the young person is to truant. Young people who were bullied frequently (daily) are 3 times more likely to truant than those who have not been bullied²¹.

One study found that young people with autism refused to go to school significantly earlier than in those without autism, and that bullying was significantly associated with autistic young people refusing to go to school. The study stresses the importance of recognising bullying among children with autism as an opportunity for early intervention²².

17 - See here for further information: <https://anti-bullyingalliance.org.uk/tools-information/all-about-bullying/prevalence-and-impact-bullying/impact-bullying>
18 - Wolke D, Lereya ST. (2015)

19 - Van der Cruysen, R., & Boyer, B. E. (2021)

20 - NATCEN (2011)

21 - Department for Education (2014)

22 - Ochi, M & Kawabe, K (2020)

6. PREVENTING AND RESPONDING TO BULLYING OF AUTISTIC YOUNG PEOPLE

There are some key factors to consider when preventing and responding to bullying of autistic young people in school.

6.1 A WHOLE-SCHOOL UNDERSTANDING AND APPROACH

It's important that all school staff have a good understanding of autism, understand that autistic young people are all different and have different needs, and there is not a 'one size fits all' approach. It's vital that they understand that autistic pupils are significantly more at risk of being bullied. Tackling bullying of pupils with autism should be embedded in a whole-school approach to anti-bullying work to ensure that the focus is on wider positive changes in the school that benefit all pupils. You can find out more about whole school approaches to anti-bullying [here](#).

Promoting a greater understanding of autism and celebrating difference amongst all members of the school community including staff parents and pupils is a vital bullying prevention strategy in schools. It is also important to remember that there will be autistic staff, parents and carers, and those with autistic family members, who can bring a wealth of empathy and experience.

It's also really important to involve autistic young people in any consultation about bullying and provide opportunities to contribute to any plans for change. Parents and carers can also be involved and invited to input into the development of strategies and included in helping to solve bullying problems in schools. Parents of autistic young people need to

be included in schemes and approaches being implemented to support their child. This will help to ensure parents and carers feel valued as well as ensuring the school is sensitive to the individual needs of young people. Some research has also shown that higher levels of parental confidence and engagement is a protective factor and has been associated with reductions in bullying of autistic young people²³.



We have free CPD online training including courses on Bullying and Special Educational Needs and Reducing Disablist Bullying: Disabilities, the Equality Act and Schools Duties, [here](#).

6.2 TRAINING AND SCHOOL STAFF

There is a need for more staff training regarding identifying different types of bullying early and dealing with it effectively and appropriately. Self-reflection and critical self-awareness is an important aspect of this. Staff should reflect on their own attitudes and behaviours towards autistic young people.

Teachers may also benefit from additional training focused on developing further acceptance and understanding of the unique viewpoint and skills that autistic young people bring to the classroom.

23 - Hebron, J and Humphrey, N (2014)

All staff should be provided with autism awareness training and work hard to meet the needs of individual young people. It's vital that staff understand that, for some autistic young people, their behaviour may be misunderstood by others and could be perceived as bullying. For example, seeking control in unpredictable situations, or reacting or retaliating to provocation.

6.3 SCHOOLS' RESPONSIBILITIES TO DISABLED PUPILS

Training for teachers must include awareness of the disability duties in the Equality Act 2010, including the breadth of the definition; the need to make reasonable adjustments; and wider school responsibilities to plan for improved equality of opportunity in the longer-term.

*"the more we can incorporate those adjustments into our day-to-day school practices, our policies and how we organise ourselves, the less we need to intervene individually and risk singling out individual children"*²⁴

Throughout this guide there have been references to the disability duties in the Equality Act 2010, but the main focus has been on practice and practical solutions to reduce the bullying of young people with autism. You can find more comprehensive guidance about the disability duties [here](#). There are a few key considerations for schools' duties to disabled pupils summarised here:

Understanding the breadth of the definition of disability: autistic pupils are likely to be covered by the definition of disability in the Equality Act 2010. It is important that all staff know that behaviour arising from a disability

is different from 'naughtiness' and 'misbehaviour'; it requires a different response; and should be anticipated and prevented by making reasonable adjustments.

Making reasonable adjustments: schools must make reasonable adjustments to prevent disabled pupils being placed at a 'substantial disadvantage'. The way that adjustments are made can be key; they should be informed by pupils themselves and kept under review to see if they are working as intended.

Harassment: humiliating, mocking or belittling a disabled pupil may amount to harassment.

Strategic duties: schools have duties to individual pupils but also have wider, strategic duties to plan to improve access to education and to the wider life of the school for disabled pupils.

Inclusive culture: it is easier to meet duties to disabled pupils where schools adopt a whole school approach, embed equality considerations in the culture of the school, and accept and celebrate difference as a positive human asset.

*"If we engage with children and young people themselves in considering how best to support their learning, their access to all the education and benefits, facilities or services at the school, we often provide better solutions and better access than we can by devising our own solutions."*²⁵

24 - Stobbs, P. (2022)
25 - Stobbs, P. (2022)

6.4 SUPPORTING ALL PUPILS TO UNDERSTAND AUTISM AND NEURODIVERSITY

Pupils need to learn about autism and other differences, from very early on. Arguably secondary school is too late as patterns of behaviours, ideas and hierarchies are already entrenched. Learning about autism could be included in assemblies or RSE lessons for primary school young people, with regular additional learning opportunities about difference for older children and young people. Some schools have developed workbooks where pupils understand their own strengths and differences as a way of understanding that everyone is different, for example. It might be possible to use assemblies to talk about differences, for teachers to offer incentives like award credits or points for kind behaviours as ways to empower peers to help prevent bullying or to understand how to report it. However, it's important not to single individual pupils out and focus on and celebrate all differences.

6.5 AWARENESS OF THE SPECIFIC CHALLENGES AUTISTIC PUPILS EXPERIENCE IN RELATION TO BULLYING

Training will support school staff to have a greater understanding and awareness of the specific challenges autistic pupils face.

For example, it's important that staff are aware that some young people may deliberately provoke autistic young people - for example if they become aware of their sensory differences. This could be in subtle ways in response to their known sensitivities and triggers (e.g. making noises around them, touching their clothes, putting food on their plates). It is important that staff keep an eye on peer interactions with autistic young people as they may not always be aware that they are being bullied, or due

to cognitive differences may assume that the teacher will automatically be aware of when they are being victimised.

It's also important that staff are aware that unstructured group work can be challenging for some autistic young people and it can lead to exhaustion and anxiety.

Staff should also be aware that eye contact may be challenging for some autistic young people and it shouldn't be forced. However, it's important to understand that not making eye contact may make it hard for some autistic young people to identify who is bullying them. Help them consider other markers such as people's voices, shoes, or bags.

It is important to be aware that experiences of bullying are extremely stressful, and this stress will be felt and expressed in different ways. For some young people, this will be expressed in anger and lashing-out, others will be too anxious to attend school or become more and more isolated. This stress can also impact physical and mental health including depression, anxiety and eating disorders, so it's important to look out for signs of bullying and not rely on pupils to come forward to report it.

6.6 LISTENING AND COMMUNICATION

It's important to be mindful that autistic young people may find it challenging to communicate experiences of bullying especially as bullying can exacerbate feelings of stress and anxiety that make this more difficult. Work sensitively with autistic young people to understand how and where they are experiencing bullying.

Remember that every young person is different and it's important to seek to listen, observe and understand the needs of individual young people. When listening to an autistic young person, the adult should make themselves aware of the specific communication needs that the

young person with autism has and adapt as necessary.

Think of the different ways you can support autistic young people to share their experiences. For example, making sure they understand the question, giving them time to answer, using time order such as 'first', 'then' and 'last, using visuals and providing items they can play or fiddle with while you work.

Provide different communication tools to support autistic young people to share their experiences of bullying. For example, The National Autistic Society have produced some communication tips on their website. Kidscape and Reachout ASC have also created tools to help with supportive communication, you can find the free downloadable resources on their website²⁶.

6.7 RESPOND TO BULLYING APPROPRIATELY

One of the main barriers to young people coming forward and telling someone about bullying is they are worried about how you might react. The autistic young people in our focus groups felt that often schools didn't take bullying and other issues raised seriously and this then led to further problems or even exacerbated them.

It's important to make sure that there are a whole range of different ways young people can report bullying and ensure they are accessible – the young people we spoke to said they often found reporting daunting or scary, for example:

"I was just thinking that sometimes it's really hard to explain bullying when it's small, little things and sometimes when you verbalize it, especially to potentially like an authority figure, it sounds like meaningless and kind of very insignificant when actually it's more about the impact it's having on the person. But to collate a list of evidence isn't really that easy, unless you make a note of it from quite early on, which isn't always what you're prioritizing."

Asking young people to come up with the ideas and let you know what would help them to feel safe and secure to come forward is key to getting this right. When young people do come forward, ensure that responses to reported bullying are sensitive and appropriate and that the young person is involved in the response. The young people we spoke to said that schools sometimes focus on getting the young person or pupils displaying bullying behaviour to apologise rather than helping them to really understand the impact of their behaviour or challenge the underlying attitudes:

"Being made to "make up" can often be making the wound made by the bullying worse, as the bully would most likely not mean it, they'd only say sorry so the teachers will let them off"

"People are simply not taught the importance of simple empathy"

"Staff asking bullies to apologise, the apologies are often not authentic and often bullies are not told why their behaviours are wrong"

Restorative approaches²⁷ are one strategy that schools find useful in helping young people resolve bullying situations and conflict but it's important that it's done sensitively and in consultation with the target/s of the bullying to ensure they are not being placed at risk.

26 - See the useful resources section below or visit: <https://anti-bullyingalliance.org.uk/tools-information/all-about-bullying/at-risk-groups/sen-disability/autism-and-bullying>

27 - See here for further information: <https://anti-bullyingalliance.org.uk/tools-information/all-about-bullying/responding-bullying/restorative-practice>

6.8 SUPPORT FOR AUTISTIC YOUNG PEOPLE

It's vital that support for autistic young people is person-centered. It is easy to fall back on stereotypes when we see or hear a label. Understanding a young person's needs helps us to think about them as an individual, rather than a 'type' and avoids us making assumptions about what the young person needs. Needs tell us how a young person is affected by their condition/s in their day-to-day life. These will differ from young person to young person.

Work with individual autistic young people to understand their challenges and needs and what support they would find most helpful. Support autistic young people to be themselves rather than feeling they must change or fit in to be like others. Give them time to process ideas and questions and to learn social skills together.

Making reasonable adjustments for young people with autism

The disability duties in the Equality Act require schools to make reasonable adjustments for young people with autism. Yet, where reasonable adjustments have been made without careful thought and planning, they can single out young people in a way that emphasises difference and may increase the risk of bullying. It's important that autistic young people don't feel that they are being bullied because of who they are, and understand that it is schools' responsibility to ensure the safety of all young people in their care.

To avoid such difficulties, **it is vital to think through how reasonable adjustments are made. They should be discussed and planned with young people themselves, involve parents, and be kept under review. Something that works well in one lesson or activity, or at one point in time, may not work in another.**

Adjustments work better in an environment where all young people are welcome, difference is accepted, and equality considerations are embedded in the culture and ethos of the school. Make sure the support is accessible and available to all.



Prevention strategies and approaches to support autistic young people

Strategies and approaches you can try should be embedded in a whole school approach and generally fall into one of the three types of strategies below:

Classroom strategies: These are strategies that are delivered through the curriculum to educate students about bullying and discuss anti-bullying work.

Autistic young people may need support to learn what is socially acceptable and what the rules are in different social situations. There are lots of different resources to support with this²⁸.

Playground/break time strategies: These are strategies to prevent bullying in the playground or in areas used by young people in break times and require specific measures as part of the implementation of a whole-school approach to bullying. Most direct forms of bullying happen in the playground and school grounds, so effective playground strategies are important for prevention.

Autistic young people often experience bullying during break times and at times of un-structured play. Playtimes can be made more structured as a way of supporting autistic young people. Offering a quiet safe place to go would be positive and not disruptive to the school routine. Schools might also want to consider, for example:

- Creating lunch time clubs
- Staggering lunch times
- Providing more structured playtimes
- Having more trained adult supervisors during break times

²⁸ - See the Useful Resources section at the end for further information.
²⁹ - You can find out more about peer support strategies on our website:
<https://anti-bullyingalliance.org.uk/tools-information/all-about-bullying/whole-school-and-setting-approach/peer-support-strategies>

Peer support strategies: Peer support strategies work with the student peer group both to prevent and respond to bullying. It's important that they are implemented as part of a whole school approach to bullying. There are many forms peer support can take, for example:

- Circle of friends
- Buddy schemes
- Peer mediation
- Peer mentoring

Look at opportunities for peer support, but be mindful of different communication needs, and ensure that autistic young people are involved in coming up with ideas so that it works for their individual needs. Also, keep them in review and ensure young people have an opportunity to feed back about how it's going²⁹.



Inclusion and celebrating difference

Becoming and being inclusive is an ongoing journey which everyone in the school community must take responsibility for. It is not a set list of tasks but is an ethos which underpins how we interact with people in all contexts.

Autistic young people need to be included in all aspects of school life and see positive representations of autistic people in the school community and the school environment.

Teaching about neurodiversity in RSE lessons for example is one way of helping pupils to understand and celebrate the many positives of neurodiversity and different ways of thinking. However, it's important to think about all the places young people are present in across the school and within the community and ensure that approaches are embedded and accessible for autistic pupils throughout. For example, you could:

- Develop and design school rules about bullying in accessible formats and take time to consider how best to communicate these to meet the communication needs of individual young people. Be mindful that some young people may need support to understand context of rules, rather than necessarily applying them to all situations.

- Act as positive role models and model inclusive behaviour.
- Celebrate all differences in the school and don't focus on individual pupils' differences as this can single pupils out.
- Ensure there are positive representations of autistic people in the school community, such as visual representations of famous autistic people around the school, for example Greta Thunberg or Tim Burton. You could ask young people to come up with the ideas and find out who they find inspiring.

6.9 EVIDENCE-BASED APPROACHES AND INTERVENTIONS

Bullying interventions need to acknowledge the different communication needs of autistic young people and a multifaceted approach does appear to be the way forward, and will help autistic young people to enjoy school, feeling accepted for who they are.

It's also important that approaches are informed by research. We have worked with Professor Peter Smith of Goldsmiths, University of London to do a literature review that includes interventions from around the world which have shown to have some positive findings. These include theory of mind training (Liu et al.), improving communication skills and coping strategies (Hong et al.), video modeling to encourage assertiveness (Rex et al.), peer mentoring (Bradley) and peer network support (Sreckovic et al.), and group music-making (Cook et al.)³⁰.

³⁰ - See Appendix 1 for further information.

7. USEFUL CONTACTS

Ambitious about Autism <https://www.ambitiousaboutautism.org.uk>

Ambitious about Autism is a national charity for autistic children and young people, who run specialist education services, employment programmes, training and consultancy.

Autism Education Trust <https://www.autismeducationtrust.org.uk>

A not-for-profit organisation supported by the Department for Education, including a support programme offering education professionals training, practical tools and free resources to better support autistic children and young people aged 0 to 25.

Beyond Autism <https://www.beyondautism.org.uk/professionals/resources>

Free classroom resources and training on autism.

Bullying UK www.bullying.co.uk/advice/anti-bullying-advice

Offer information on various types of bullying including school, text and email

ChildLine <http://www.childline.org.uk>

ChildLine is for anyone up to the age of 18 who is in need of support or counselling due to anything of concern. Helpline: 0800 11 11 (lines open 24 hours).

Contact <https://contact.org.uk>

Information and advice for families of disabled children.

Gov.uk <https://www.gov.uk/bullying-at-school>

Provides legal information from the Government regarding bullying. It includes information about how to report it and what schools and the police are obligated to do.

Information, Advice and Support Services Network (IASSN) <https://councilfordisabledchildren.org.uk/about-us-0/networks/information-advice-and-support-services-network>

It is a legal requirement that all local authorities ensure children and young people with SEND and their parents have access to an impartial Information, Advice and Support (IAS) service. The IASSN are funded by the Department for Education (DfE) to support this. You can find your local service details at the link above.

Kidscape and Reachout ASC <https://www.kidscape.org.uk/advice/advice-for-parents-and-carers/what-is-bullying/autistic-children-and-bullying>

Kidscape is working with Reachout ASC to improve the support they give to autistic children and their families and have developed a series of resources together.

The National Autistic Society (NAS) <http://www.autism.org.uk>

A specialist autism voluntary sector organisation providing information, advice and support including on autism and bullying. They also have an Autism Services Directory.

Samaritans <http://www.samaritans.org>

Samaritans are available 24 hours a day to listen to anyone in distress.

Helpline: 08457 90 90 90 (lines open 24 hours) Email: jo@samaritans.org

8. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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APPENDIX 1: EVIDENCE-BASED INTERVENTIONS

It is important that research informs intervention efforts, and the six studies highlighted below report on a range of approaches that all had some positive findings. These were obtained from a literature review of selected articles from around the world between 2013-2022 by Professor Peter K Smith of Goldsmiths, University of London.

AUTHORS, YEAR & TITLE	EVIDENCE
<u>Liu et al. (2018)</u> Effects of theory of mind performance training on reducing bullying involvement in children and adolescents with high functioning autism spectrum disorder	<p>This study from Taiwan examined the effects of theory of mind performance training (ToMPT) on reducing bullying involvement in children and adolescents with high-functioning Autism. Children and adolescents with high-functioning Autism completed ToMPT (n = 26) and social skills training (SST; n = 23) programs. Participants in both groups and their mothers rated the pretraining and post training bullying involvement of participants on the Chinese version of the School Bullying Experience Questionnaire. In the ToMPT group, the severities of both self-reported and mother reported bullying victimization significantly decreased from the pretraining to post training assessments, whereas in the SST group, only self-reported bullying victimization significantly decreased. Compared with the SST program, the ToMPT program significantly reduced the severity of mother reported bullying victimization. The study supports the effects of ToMPT on reducing mother-reported bullying victimization in children and adolescents with high functioning autism.</p>
<u>Hong et al. (2015)</u> Addressing Bullying of Students with Autism: Suggestions for Families and Educators	<p>This is a study from the USA. The social and communication characteristics of students with autism provide significant challenges in teaching and preparing these students for bullying situations. Cooperative work between teachers and parents, analysing an individual student's needs, educating the student about bullying, teaching how to cope with and reporting it in both controlled settings and natural environments, and developing a monitoring system are key components of preventing the students with autism from being bullied. An illustrative example and practical suggestions and approaches are provided.</p>

<p><u>Rex et al. (2018)</u></p> <p>Using Video Modeling as an Anti-bullying Intervention for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder</p>	<p>This study from the USA used a multiple baseline design across participants to assess the efficacy of a video modeling intervention to teach six children with Autism to assertively respond to bullying. During baseline, the children made few appropriate responses upon viewing video clips of bullying scenarios. During the video modeling intervention, participants viewed videos of models assertively responding to three types of bullying: physical, verbal bullying, and social exclusion. All six children learned through video modeling to make appropriate assertive responses to bullying scenarios. Four of the six children demonstrated learning in the in situ bullying probes. The results are discussed in terms of an intervention for victims of bullying with Autism.</p>
<p><u>Bradley (2016)</u></p> <p>Why single me out?' Peer mentoring, autism and inclusion in mainstream secondary schools</p>	<p>The past decade has seen an increase in the number of students with autism attending mainstream educational provision. Improving outcomes for this group is a complex issue given the lack of evidence-based practice. A new peer mentoring programme developed for students with autism in mainstream secondary schools was evaluated using a combination of quantitative and qualitative measures. Twelve students with autism and 36 students without autism participated in the programme across five schools in the south-east of England. Students with autism were assessed using the Harter Self-Esteem Questionnaire, Loneliness and Social Dissatisfaction Scale and the Anti-Bullying Alliance survey. Semi-structured interviews recorded their views and experiences of the programme. Significant gains in self-esteem, social satisfaction and a reduction in bullying were seen over the course of the programme.</p>
<p><u>Sreckovic et al. (2017)</u></p> <p>Examining the Efficacy of Peer Network Interventions on the Social Interactions of High School Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder</p>	<p>Due to challenges in social communication and increased complexity of peer groups during adolescence, many secondary students with autism engage in limited positive social interactions with peers. This study from the USA examined the effects of a peer network intervention implemented with three high school students with Autism. Fourteen students at the same high school as the students with Autism participated as peer partners. The results indicated that peer networks are effective at increasing social interactions of secondary students with Autism and provided preliminary support for the use of peer networks to reduce rates of bullying victimization.</p>



<p><u>Cook et al. (2019)</u></p> <p>The impact of a school-based musical contact intervention on prosocial attitudes, emotions and behaviours: A pilot trial with autistic and neurotypical children</p>	<p>This study from England showed that children with autism are more likely to be socially excluded than their neurotypical peers. Since the majority of children with autism attend mainstream schools, interventions are needed to improve the attitudes and behaviours of their peers. Many studies highlight the influence of contact on positive attitudes and reduced discrimination. Group music-making provides an ideal opportunity for positive contact to occur in the classroom. This study evaluated the impact of music-based contact with autistic peers on the attitudes, emotions and behaviours of neurotypical children. Changes in those with autism were also assessed. Neurotypical participants (n = 55) aged 10-11 years took part in an 11-week music programme designed to increase social interaction, which either did or did not include contact with autistic children (n = 10). Measures of attitudes, emotions and behaviours were assessed at baseline and follow-up. In response to a hypothetical scenario depicting social exclusion of a child with autism, neurotypical participants in the contact group showed a greater increase in prosocial emotions and a greater decrease in tendency to be a victim than those in the no-contact group. Participants with autism also showed a 19.7% decrease in victimisation. Implications of group music-making for tackling social exclusion of children with autism are discussed.</p>
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