

# B is for bullied:

the experiences of children with autism and their families



"I've seen for myself the devastating impact that bullying has on children with autism. Every child with autism has the right to feel safe and secure at school. We need to act now to make this a reality."

**Professor Sir Al Aynsley-Green, Children's Commissioner for England**

"I was bullied in my old school. It was hard. I was left out. They would not play with me. They chatted with each other but not to me. That made me feel sad because I wanted to be friends with them."

**Anna, 14**

"My child is bullied – the school says it is his fault for being 'annoying'."

"He made a serious suicide attempt. Climbed over the safety barrier of a bridge and was found wanting to jump onto a busy dual carriageway."

"People see that people with autism are different and just because they are different, they start teasing them. This man in a wheelchair came in, he gave us this little phrase to remember: 'It's OK to be different'...I think all the people I know with Asperger's are really interesting people to talk to."

**Ben, 11**

Over 40 per cent of children on the autistic spectrum<sup>1</sup> have been bullied at school. The impact on children and families can be devastating. Many of the children and families we surveyed report damage to self-esteem, mental health and progress at school. Some withdraw from school altogether, others never fully recover from their experiences. In this report we investigate how bullying affects children with autism and their families and set out what schools, local authorities and the Government should do to stop bullying and *make school make sense* for children with autism.

make school  
make sense



The National  
Autistic Society

Autism, including Asperger syndrome, is a lifelong developmental disability that affects the way a person communicates and relates to people around them. People with autism experience difficulties with social interaction, social communication and imagination – known as the ‘triad of impairments’.<sup>2</sup> Research suggests that the prevalence of autistic spectrum disorders in the total population is 1 in 100.<sup>3</sup> As such, everybody working with children should expect to work with children on the autistic spectrum.

In 2006 The National Autistic Society (NAS) carried out the largest ever survey on autism and education as part of the *make school make sense* campaign<sup>4</sup>. We received 1,400 responses from families, and we also interviewed 28 children with autism about their experiences. The statistics and quotes in this report are from that research.<sup>5</sup>

### Who gets bullied?

Bullying can take on many forms, including name-calling, physical violence or social isolation. According to our survey, two in five children with autism have been bullied. For children with Asperger syndrome or high-functioning autism, this is even higher with nearly three in five parents reporting that their children have been bullied at school. This may be an underestimate: another recent study found that over 90 per cent of parents of children with Asperger syndrome reported that their child has been the target of bullying in the past year.<sup>6</sup>

It’s the same group of people just annoy me all the time. They do a range of different stuff – chucking stuff at me, paper and stuff in class... not usually in break time... Happy slapping me once, that got seriously dealt with... They got detention and badly shouted at.

Hugh, 14

Girls are slightly less likely to have been bullied than boys, with 36 per cent of parents of girls reporting bullying, compared with 42 per cent of parents of boys. Children in mainstream schools are most likely to have experienced bullying (54 per cent), although figures across the board are still unacceptably high.



There was one or two people but they have stopped now. They were teasing, physical contact sometimes. They were just teasing me, trying to get me into trouble. I tend to know what bullies try to do. They attack and tease you and try to make you to lash out and then go and tell the teacher and try and get me in trouble. My main tactic is just to run. I’m a very fast runner when I feel like it. They mainly pick on me in the playground and I’d run round the quiet area.

Ben, 11

### Why children with autism can be vulnerable

Some children with autism can appear to be locked in their own world, while others may be eager to make friends but lack the social skills to fit in with their peer group. Children with autism have difficulties with non-verbal behaviour, such as making eye contact, using and interpreting facial expressions and body language. They may act in ways which seem unconventional or strange, as a result of not understanding social rules and norms. Some children with autism also have difficulties with physical co-ordination, or have sensory difficulties, such as an under- or oversensitivity to certain smells or noises. Others have special or very narrow interests in certain topics.

As a result, children with autism may not fit in easily with their peers and can be more susceptible to bullying than others. Because of the nature of their disability, children with autism may not always be able to identify when they have been bullied, particularly with more subtle forms of bullying. If another child appears to be friendly, then a child with autism may trust them even when that child later acts in malicious ways.



**Have you been bullied at school?**  
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 but I don’t particularly care about them.

Mícheál, 15

Carl doesn't tell when he is being bullied. I have to figure it out, sometimes from bruises. His teachers don't seem to notice – perhaps because of inadequate playtime supervision.

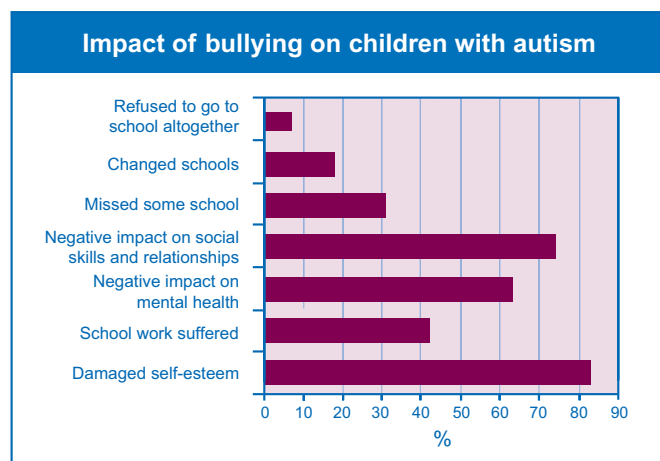


*In the past everyone used to bully me, especially year 6s when I was in years 4 and 3. Called me names...worst thing, in my class, one or two people who were hitting me. I felt really annoyed. No one helped... One person in particular calls me a very large amount of names. Let's just say that I learnt some of my rudest swear words from what that person used to, or still, calls me.*

**Alexander, 11**

## How does bullying affect children with autism?

The negative effects of bullying on children with autism are distressingly clear. It has damaging effects on children's self-esteem, mental health, social skills, and progress at school. 83 per cent of parents tell us that their child's self-esteem was damaged, and three-quarters reported that it affected their child's development of social skills and relationships. Because children with autism often find it difficult to understand social rules, when other pupils take advantage of this, it can make it even more difficult for children with autism to develop their social understanding. Bullying can also seriously disrupt children's education. 56 per cent of parents said that it has caused their child to miss school or even change schools.



It is also extremely worrying that of those children who have been bullied, 63 per cent of parents also felt the experience has negatively

affected their child's mental health. Many parents said that bullying has led their child to self-harm or even become suicidal. Nevertheless, many children with autism struggle to access Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services.



*My son was bullied to the point of wanting to end his life and has self-harmed. He attends therapy to help him deal with this. We feel he will never recover from these feelings.*

*The school denied all. He became suicidal at seven years old, and his anxiety levels were so high he became very hypersensitive and cannot wear normal clothing. Bullying was one of the causes of his anxiety.*

*My daughter changed from being trusting, happy, un-self aware to being paranoid, depressed and suicidal. She wanted to change gender to being a boy as she felt she could survive better if she was 'tough'.*

*A lot of teasing and children copying the way she walks, etc. She is aware of it and confidence is affected. She would self mutilate, scratching herself etc.*

*She wouldn't eat for a week, she also picks at her skin causing it to become infectious, and had to have antibiotics. She wanted to die, head banged on wall before being taken to school.*

*The bullying was so bad that at 13 she tried to commit suicide. She has been mentally ill/paranoid/depressed/phobic ever since.*

Bullying can have a devastating impact at any age, but more parents in our survey reported negative impacts among the oldest children in our survey (aged 16-19), with typically ten per cent more parents reporting negative effects than parents of younger children.



*Secondary school (mainstream) destroyed him and nearly caused him to commit suicide. Bullying was by staff as well as students. Five years on, it caused Simon huge courage, even to try at a mainstream college.*

## How bullied children can face exclusion

A child with autism may lack the social skills to handle difficult situations, and can be easily led or provoked by bullies. A classic pattern for children with autism who exhibit challenging behaviour is that prolonged, low-level bullying and teasing from other children triggers a sudden and seemingly disproportionate response. Five families in our survey specifically mentioned their child has been excluded from school as a result of their reaction to bullying. Overall, one in five children with autism has been excluded from school, and one in four children with Asperger syndrome. Of these, 67 per cent had been excluded more than once.

We moved him at the end of year five because of bullying, which had resulted in physical injury. The bullying in secondary was classified by the staff as 'regular teasing' and was therefore ignored. When he reacted to it, first by school refusal, then by minor acts of violence, then by significant self harm issues, he was classed as having emotional and behavioural difficulties and excluded.

*Jenny (who has autism) suffered extreme mental bullying about her severely autistic sister, and because of her poor social and language skills she lashed out. The school refused to address the issue and just excluded her for her retaliation.*

My son is at a mainstream school where he is being bullied. He can react very aggressively, and last week he knocked a child unconscious. Now he's refusing to go back to school.

Children with autism can sometimes be the perpetrators of bullying too. There may be a wide range of reasons for this, including reasons related to their disability, such as not being able to understand other people's point of view. It is important that schools and families work together with children who are bullying others to prevent it and address the underlying reasons. One mother called our Autism Helpline concerned that her eight-year-old son was bullying another child in his class. Although the parents had reported these incidents to the head, she was worried because she felt the school was not supporting her efforts to stop her son doing this.



When I was little I used to hate people because they had ginger curly hair because I didn't like that sort of style of person and I was scared of them so I started to tackle them. And there's this other boy who I used to insult and throw rocks at because I didn't know better.

**Rob, 12**

Social skills training is a simple and effective intervention which can help children with autism deal more effectively with social situations and can 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. However, parents in our survey identified the lack of social skills training as the biggest gap in provision for their children.

## Effects on the family

Bullying does not just impact on children with autism. Their brothers and sisters may also experience bullying about their sibling's disability.



Tom, Jamie's younger brother, was also bullied and became very distressed and withdrawn, requiring play therapy and lots of support.

*His younger brother (at the same school) is bullied because of his older brother and therefore he even joins in and he bullies his younger brother at home.*

Constant fighting with school to get understanding has affected the whole family. Younger siblings are frightened that school would be similarly 'cruel' to them.

Some children with autism also feel unable to return to school as a result of bullying, or their parents have to care for their child at home because of the mental and physical impacts on their child. In addition to the child missing school this has a broader impact on the whole family and can mean that parents are unable to work.

My child developed severe depression and the school was unable to manage bullying. Lack of appropriate support meant my employment was badly disrupted.



*Our son was a quivering, nervous wreck by the time his first school finished with him. We were forced to pull him out as we had grave concerns about his mental health.*

She is extremely distressed about going to school following episodes of extreme bullying. Constantly crying all day at school and being sent home. I've got her at home today and she's still crying and in a distressed state.

*He has always been bullied and he has changed schools before because of this. He has come home with bruises and scratches all the time. I removed him from school today because I'm concerned what will happen to him.*

## **Bullying policies**

Bullying on the grounds of disability needs to be dealt with in the same way as other forms of bullying. However, in the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) guidance for schools, *Bullying: don't suffer in silence: an anti-bullying pack for schools*<sup>7</sup>, different types of strategies are suggested for different forms of bullying. Strategies to deal with incidents of bullying on the grounds of race, gender or sexual orientation are directed at changing the bully's attitudes and behaviour, or initiating a whole-school approach. Strategies include putting in place effective recording systems; multi-agency working with police, youth services and others; and being aware that even young children can understand the consequences of their actions. Strategies for bullying on the grounds of disability focus more on helping the bullied pupil to deal with the bullying. Strategies include teaching assertiveness and other social skills; role-playing in dealing with taunts; and providing special resource rooms at playtimes and lunchtime.

The anti-bullying pack makes clear that bullying is unacceptable and is undoubtedly a useful

resource for schools. However, there is a danger that the contradiction in the advice on tackling bullying sends out the message that bullying on the basis of race, gender and sexual orientation is unacceptable, but that bullying on the basis of disability is a problem that needs to be dealt with by the bullied child.

All schools must have an accessible and effective anti-bullying policy. However, when asked about this, almost one in four parents (23 per cent) tell us they don't know if such a policy is in place in their child's school (whether their child had been bullied or not). This is despite the requirement on schools to publish their policy. The situation was slightly better overall in mainstream provision (rather than resource bases or special schools), where 83 per cent of parents were aware of the school's anti-bullying policy. Parents of the youngest children (aged two to five) were least likely to know whether there was an anti-bullying policy in place.

Anti-bullying policies need to be explicit in terms of the steps that will be taken by the school when incidents of bullying are reported or identified by staff, parents or children. They should set out what the options are for parents if they feel that an incident is not being dealt with effectively. The Government has published *Good practice guidance* in England which recommends that as part of the school's anti-bullying policy, staff should be aware of the vulnerability of children with autism to bullying<sup>8</sup>. Children with autism should also be consulted with and involved in the drawing up or revision of policies on anti-bullying as standard good practice.

## **Preventing bullying**

Of those parents whose children had been bullied, 44 per cent say no action has been taken by the school. In Wales this is even higher, with 63 per cent of parents reporting that no action had been taken. For young people over the age of 16, nearly two-thirds of parents said that action was not taken to stop bullying. Some parents feel that schools ignore the bullying, even blaming it on the children themselves. In some cases children report that the teachers are actually conducting some of the bullying.

He has tried strangling himself because he is being bullied so much at school. Most of the bullying is because he takes everything so literally. The teachers are not helping the situation and feel that as he is not being bullied all the time there is not really a problem.



*My son faced daily discrimination and bullying by both other pupils and staff.*

I am happier to have her at home, educating her whilst we wait for an appropriate school. At school she regressed, wasn't given support adequately, she was sexually taken advantage of, bullied, blamed and generally unhappy and ultimately they were not protecting her. The local education authority was kept informed throughout but did nothing; they did attend an annual review but that was all.

*After our daughter was bullied and injured we had to get our GP and paediatrician to demand that she could be kept inside if she wanted to stay inside. We also had to fight to get her one-to-one support in the school yard and at lunchtime (to feed her because she only weighed 18kg at ten years old).*

No allowances are made (by the school) for a different learning style, her need to withdraw, her terror from bullying peers. They said she was a natural 'victim' and brought it all on herself. The bullying was simply 'the rough and tumble of everyday life in school'.

*At the beginning they were quite nice. Once I started settling in it turned out to be a terror school...well there were several times they hurt me and were unfair. I had an OCD [Obsessive Compulsive Disorder] incident and they were violent to me and pushed me around. I was scared about the work that had been put on the table, and I got scared.*

**Donald, 13**



I sometimes get into trouble and get shouted at and get told off for saying stuff I wasn't saying... they (the older children) don't like me. The teacher doesn't do a lot to stop it and she shouts at me. But it doesn't happen when my helper is there. I feel safe then.

**Ruaraidh, 9**

On the other hand, 47 per cent of parents feel their child's school had taken effective action to stop the bullying. Mainstream schools seem to be slightly better at dealing with bullying where it does occur.



Because of bullying he has a lunchtime library pass which means he can be safe. He goes to keyboard lessons.

*Our son comes out of school ten minutes early now (only after requesting it for four years!) because of bullying in front of me.*

My son likes to be near a member of staff at break times, so he often spends them in his class tutor's 'den' and this keeps him out of the way of the bullies.

A whole-school approach to bullying is the most effective way to stop bullying.<sup>9</sup> All staff, including teachers, learning support assistants and lunchtime supervisors should understand the school's anti-bullying policy and understand that it is a priority to address the behaviour of bullies. All staff should receive training in tackling bullying.



The school handles bullying sensitively and as far as we know bullying has significantly reduced. They have whole school meetings when any incident takes place.

*They laugh at me sometimes, I don't know why, and they tease me. I hide under the desk, because there are lots of boxes and that is a good place to hide. I talk to a teacher, I talk to Mrs Waddington (the SENCO). She is not my form teacher, but I always talk to her because she is nice. I once took my little cat out to play and 'they'*

*took it off me and threw it to each other and then they threw him in the mud and then they were making me chase them. But then they got big told off, so big that they got put into another room all by themselves and the head teacher came down and I heard them shouting really loud. They have never done it since.*

**Jamie, 11**

Approaches such as peer mentoring, befriending and buddying schemes, structured play activities during breaks and circles of friends can be an effective way of supporting children with autism and preventing bullying. Raising awareness of autism among other children can help them understand why someone may act differently to them. It can encourage them to support children with autism and discourage bullying among their peers.<sup>10</sup>

We have used Circle 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. One child with autism was obsessed with his book. It was almost impossible to get him away from it so his teacher had to constantly tell him to put it away. Now the kids remind him and usually that works. Also, they give him thumbs up when things go well, look out for him in the playground, talk to him and take him to a teacher if there is a problem.

**Primary school special educational needs co-ordinator**

Many of these approaches are simple to implement and will be of benefit to other children too. A top-down approach is also crucial: strong leadership is essential to ensuring a whole-school approach to eliminate bullying. Bullying on the basis of disability is indefensible, and this message must be at the heart of every school's ethos.

School can be a scary place for children with autism. It's time for change. *make school make sense.*

## Recommendations

National governments should:

- Work with the Training and Development Agency for Schools (and Higher Education Funding Council in Wales) to incorporate autism into initial teacher training.
- Work with the National College for School Leadership to ensure that the Head teacher Induction Programme and the National Standards for Head Teachers promote inclusive practice with explicit reference to autism.
- Ensure all Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators (SENCOs) are qualified teachers and receive training in autism. This training needs to be sufficiently in depth that they are able to support the needs of children with autism, and can disseminate best practice to other staff in their school
- Revise the Department for Education and Skills guidance on bullying in England to give bullying of disabled children the same rights-based emphasis as homophobic and racist bullying, particularly in light of the new Disability Equality Duty to promote equality for disabled people and eliminate disability-related discrimination.

Local authorities should:

- Secure the provision of autism support and advisory services to mainstream schools. This should include ring-fencing resources for outreach services so that the delegation of special educational needs (SEN) funding to schools does not erode such services.
- Ensure that all school governors with responsibility for SEN receive appropriate training in autism.
- Invest in social skills training programmes for people with autism.

Schools should:

- Embrace the new Disability Equality Duty as an opportunity to provide a positive, supportive environment for children with autism and eliminate disability-related harassment and discrimination and promote positive attitudes towards disabled people.

- Be guided to review child's support needs before taking disciplinary action, and where appropriate initiate statutory assessment.
- Ensure that anti-bullying policies are explicit in terms of: the steps that will be taken by the school when incidents of bullying are reported or identified by staff, parents or children; the need for staff to be aware that children with autism are particularly vulnerable to bullying; a clear statement of what the options are for parents if they feel that an incident is not being dealt with effectively.
- Adopt approaches to support children with autism (and other children) and to prevent bullying, such as peer mentoring, befriending and buddying schemes and circle of friends.
- Ensure the school leadership adopts a whole-school approach to tackling and eliminating bullying.

### Further information

- The NAS *Bullying* information sheet, available from the NAS website: [www.autism.org.uk/a-z](http://www.autism.org.uk/a-z)
- Thorpe, P. (2005). *Bullying and how to deal with it: a guide for pupils with autistic spectrum disorders*. London: The National Autistic Society.

### References

- <sup>1</sup> Here we use the terms autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) and autism to refer to a group of disorders including classic autism, Asperger syndrome and high-functioning autism.
- <sup>2</sup> Wing, L. and Gould, J. (1979). Severe impairments of social interaction and associated abnormalities in children: epidemiology and classification. *Journal of autism and developmental disorders*, **9**(1), pp11-29.
- <sup>3</sup> Baird, G. et al (2006). Prevalence of disorders of the autism spectrum in a population cohort of children in South Thames: the Special Needs and Autism Project (SNAP). *The Lancet*, **368**, pp210-215.
- <sup>4</sup> Batten, A. et al (2006). *make school make sense: autism and education, the reality for families today*. London: The National Autistic Society.
- <sup>5</sup> All quotes are from parents unless otherwise stated. This report covers England and Wales.
- <sup>6</sup> Little, L. (2002). Middle-class mothers' perceptions of peer and sibling victimization among children with Asperger's syndrome and non-verbal learning disorders. *Issues in comprehensive pediatric nursing*, **25**(1), pp43-57.
- <sup>7</sup> Department for Education and Skills (2002). *Bullying: don't suffer in silence: an anti-bullying pack for schools*.
- <sup>8</sup> Department of Health and Department for Education and Skills (2002). *Autistic spectrum disorders: good practice guidance*.
- <sup>9</sup> Fiddy, A. and Hamilton, C. (2004). *Bullying: a guide to the law*. London: Children's Legal Centre.
- <sup>10</sup> For more information visit [www.autism.org.uk/teachers](http://www.autism.org.uk/teachers)

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[www.info.autism.org.uk](http://www.info.autism.org.uk)

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