

# Battling Bullying

## A Toolkit for Children with Disabilities

Lisa Richardson

**“We have learned that bullying behaviour is often founded in discrimination based on perceived ‘differences’ such as race, disability, gender or sexual orientation; that discrimination can have a negative impact upon student psychological and emotional health; and that bullying can contribute to decreased student participation in school and failure to graduate.”**

**-- “Facing Our Fears: Accepting Responsibility,” Report of the Safe Schools Task Force on Bullying, Harassment and Intimidation in BC Schools, June 2003**

**Not all children with disabilities are bullied. Young children have a remarkable capacity to accept disability issues, often more readily than adults. However, sometimes bullies can be a source of heartache for kids with differences, particularly when they’re integrated in the traditional education system.**

**A study undertaken at the University of Leeds, working alongside children with disabilities aged 11 to 16, found bullying to be a central theme when these children talked about their lives – and was often cited as a reason for moving from inclusive to segregated school environments.**

**Bullying is, according to leading Norwegian researcher Dr. Dan Olweus, “a pattern of repeated aggressive behaviour, with negative intent, directed from one child to another where there is a power imbalance.” Children with disabilities are potential victims of bullying because of just such a power imbalance – if they’re visually different, physically or emotionally vulnerable, or are perceived to be getting special treatment, ringleaders may target them.**

**Children with disabilities can also be bullies – the Leeds research revealed that segregated school environments are not immune from bullying.**

**Bullying is an issue that requires the engagement of everyone in a community. Children, parents and teachers alike can benefit from a list of strategies to successfully combat bullying.**

### **Tools for Kids**

**- If a bullying situation develops, move away. Don't stay in a situation that has the potential to escalate. Learn to avoid certain situations. Stay in places where there is adult supervision.**

**- If you're being bullied, tell an adult. The code of silence protects bullies. Speak up.**

**- Tell a friend. Don't suffer in silence.**

**- If you witness bullying, say something. The cycle of bullying depends largely on the silence of bystanders.**

**- Build a support network, of parents, friends, caregivers, therapists and teachers.**

**Often, adults view bullying as a normal type of natural selection – the wolf pack circles around the weakest in the group. Parents and teachers who exhibit this attitude are implicitly supporting bullying behaviour.**

**Suggesting that “kids will be kids” and that we should let them express themselves naturally is tantamount to neglecting to provide the proper guidelines and parameters. The hurt and detriment suffered by those who are bullied prove it is a behaviour we shouldn't condone.**

**Adults in the community need to set the stage as to whether bullying is accepted or not. Let the adults around you know that their leadership is needed.**

### **Tools for Parents**

**- Ask for help. Let other parents, teachers, staff and students know what you need.**

**- Be engaged. If your child comes home with a ripped shirt or sudden mood swings, then talk to the teacher. If a child tells you he is being bullied, pay attention.**

**- Create networks of positive relationships for your child. The more engaged a child is in her community, the stronger she becomes.**

**- Empower your child – to speak for himself, assert himself and not think of himself as a victim, to have a network of allies who will come to his defence. Bullies tend to pick on children whom they perceive to be vulnerable and unable to defend themselves.**

**- Help your child find something she has a unique ability or passion for, be it adaptive skiing, swimming or taking care of a worm farm. Kids with a sense of self-confidence are less vulnerable.**

**- Find an environment for your child where his disability disappears. For example, in wheelchair basketball, being in a wheelchair doesn't stand out – it is the norm. If a child with a disability can spend some time on a level playing field, he will feel more empowered.**

**- Encourage the school to establish a buddy program with more senior students who can mentor younger kids and provide them with positive social interactions outside their grade's cliques.**

**- In conjunction with your child and her teacher, establish what success will be for each school year, and develop an action plan as to how that can be attained. Reward the child for successes in meeting her own milestones, so she can enjoy a sense of academic capability.**

**- If your child is repeatedly being targeted by bullies, consider relocating him to another environment.**

**Pius Ryan is the district principal in charge of student services for the Howe Sound School District, B.C. His master's thesis focused on the relationship between bullying and empathy. Ryan explained that the way a child handles adverse peer encounters at school is often a question of her own resilience. To have a successful school experience, children need supportive parents, positive social networks, and to find themselves academically capable. A child who has two of those three things can overcome deficits in the third – for example, when peer networks sour. The difficulty for children with certain disabilities, such as intellectual or learning disabilities, is that their academic capability might already be the stool's wobbly leg. If their peers start victimizing them, the children might be vulnerable.**

**Part of integrating children with disabilities into the mainstream school system involves redefining success for those kids. "Sometimes it's hard for parents to let go of their vision of success to realize the vision for their child," says Ryan. "The educational plan can support this new vision of success."**

Successes need to be recognized, and need to be tailored to a child's potential and abilities. Many of the children interviewed in the Leeds study, though, noted that some adults who worked with them started with preconceived ideas about what it means to have a disability and failed to treat them as individuals. They labelled and separated out children with disabilities and were often not aware of many of the oppressive outcomes of this approach. As far as possible, children with disabilities should be part of the goal-setting for themselves.

### **Tools for Teachers**

- Schools, parents and communities need to encourage cultural shifts, where violence and force are not rewarded, but empathy, impulse control and positive problem solving are. Several programs to combat bullying have been designed, including Olweus's Intervention program, and the Second Step program (See Resources, below).

- Fear of the unfamiliar is often what makes kids and adults uncomfortable around children with disabilities. Teachers can host information sessions during which a person's disability is explained, questions are asked and other students are invited to talk about their different abilities. Empathy can grow from understanding.

- Create opportunities to integrate. Avoid labelling and singling out a child. Let parents and citizen groups know who they need to lobby to help you get the resources you need.

- Encourage students to develop rules against bullying and hold regular meetings to monitor and discuss it. Dr. Olweus recommends developing programs that help students exert leadership – in recognizing bullying and refusing to participate in it, and in coming to the aid of victims skillfully and non-violently.

Special education lecturer at Australia's Macquarie University, Coral Kemp, notes that teachers integrating students with disabilities into their classrooms often are concerned that they lack the skills to help those students reach their full potential.

“Teachers need to accept that it is not their job to overcome the disability,” says Kemp. “The measure of a successful integration is not how closely the child's skills match those of the other children in the class. It is that the child continues to make progress in all areas and that the programs designed to achieve this can be accommodated within the regular classroom and playground.”

Teachers are often also concerned that the extra time they need to spend with a child with disabilities will hurt the other children in the class. On the contrary, says Kemp: "Providing for a child with disabilities in a class will often tune the teacher into the learning needs of other children."

Just as there is no one-size-fits-all box for children with different abilities, there is a wide range of learning abilities in every class. Several of the children who participated in the Leeds research commented that everyone is different in some way. For some children, particularly those prone to bullying, their deficiency is a lack of empathy. With some special assistance and development, everyone can work on that.

(Lisa Richardson is a freelance writer living in Pemberton, B.C.)

## **RESOURCES:**

### **WEBSITES**

**Assessment Toolkit for Bullying Harassment and Peer Relations at School**

**Produced by the Canadian Public Health Association (CPHA)**

**[www.cpha.ca/antibullying](http://www.cpha.ca/antibullying)**

**Bullying Fact Sheet**

**Produced by Child & Family Canada**

**[www.cfc-efc.ca/docs/vocfc/00000805.htm](http://www.cfc-efc.ca/docs/vocfc/00000805.htm)**

**Bullying.org**

**A Canadian site dedicated to increasing the awareness of and problems associated with bullying, and to preventing, resolving and eliminating bullying in society.**

**[www.bullying.org](http://www.bullying.org)**

**Bully B'ware**

**A British Columbia website devoted to bully prevention, providing tips and strategies on how to deal with bullies.**

**[www.bullybeware.com](http://www.bullybeware.com)**

**Second Step**

**A violence prevention curriculum produced by Committee for Children in the U.S.**

**www.secondstep.org**

## **ARTICLES**

**“Learning Disabilities and Bullying: Double Jeopardy”**

**By Faye Mishna**

**Journal of Learning Disabilities, July/August 2003**

**“Peer Harassment in Individuals with Developmental Disabilities: Towards the Development of a Multidimensional Bullying Identification Model”**

**By Zopito Marini, Louise Fairbairn and Robin Zuber**

**Developmental Disabilities Bulletin, Vol. 29, No. 2, 2001**

**“Bullying and Teasing of Youth with Disabilities: Creating Positive School Environments for Effective Inclusion”**

**By John Hoover and Pam Stenhjem**

**NCSET (National Center on Secondary Education and Transition) Issue Brief, Volume 2, Issue 3, December 2003**

**“Lives of Disabled Children”**

**Produced by the University of Stirling Department of Applied Social Sciences**

**Children 5-16 Research Briefing**

**March 2000, Number 8**

## **BOOKS**

**“Perfect Targets: Asperger Syndrome and Bullying – Practical Solutions for Surviving the Social World”**

**By Rebekah Heinrichs and Brenda Smith Myles**

**Autism Asperger Pub. Co., 2003**

**ISBN: 1931282188**

**“Bullies, Targets, and Witnesses: Helping Children Break the Pain Chain”**

**By Suellen Fried**

**National Book Network, 2004**

**ISBN: 1590770560**