BULLYING AND YOUTH WITH DISABILITIES

Background

• Bullying abuse is a form of aggressive behavior that:
  o Is intended to harm others
  o Involves an imbalance of power between the peer (or group of peers) engaging in aggressive behavior and the target
  o Usually happens over and over

• Youth with disabilities are at increased risk for bullying victimization and its effects compared to their peers:
  o Youth with disabilities are 2 to 4 times more likely to be bullied compared to their peers
  o Youth with disabilities report higher rates of physical harm, emotional problems, and psychological distress resulting from bullying, relative to their peers
  o Increased rates of bullying victimization among youth with disabilities appear to be stable over time

• Some examples of common disabilities among youth are ADHD, Autism Spectrum Disorders, epilepsy, diabetes, language impairments, food allergies, learning disabilities, blindness, and/or deafness

Factors Related to Being Bullied for Children with Disabilities

• There are a number of factors related to disabilities which may increase risk for bullying victimization, such as:
  o Physical vulnerability
  o Social skills challenges
  o Low frustration tolerance
  o Communication difficulties
  o Intolerant environments
**Laws Protecting Youth with Disabilities from Bullying**

- The *Education for all Handicapped Children Act* (1975) states that school districts have a responsibility to take reasonable steps to ensure a safe environment and provide a “free and appropriate education” in the “least restrictive environment.”
- The *Dignity for All Students Act* (2012) outlines procedures for creating school climates free of discrimination and harassment.
- Acts of bullying can become “disability harassment,” which is prohibited under section 504 of the *Rehabilitation Act* (1973) and the *Americans with Disabilities Act* (1990)
  - Disability harassment is defined as “intimidation or abusive behavior toward a student based on a disability that creates a hostile environment by interfering with or denying a student’s participation in or receipt of benefits, services, or opportunities and the institution’s program”
- In addition to federal laws, each state has laws to prevent bullying and discrimination of youth with disabilities.
- When bullying occurs, schools have a legal obligation to investigate and take effective steps to address it.

**Recommendations for Parents**

- Be your child’s advocate by being aware and seeking help when necessary
- Encourage communication about bullying instances
- Assess your child’s educational functioning, safety, and emotional health
- Communicate with your child’s school to understand the school’s plan for preventing and addressing bullying
- If you feel your child is the victim of bullying or harassment, do not delay in reporting this to your school

**REFERENCES**


**What can EDUCATORS do to prevent bullying of youth with disabilities?**

- **Educate** your students about social-emotional skills
- **Be aware** of your school’s bullying policies and modify anti-bullying prevention programs to include youth with disabilities
- **Educate students** about disabilities and increase students’ awareness of bullying
- **Be a role model**; create a welcoming and safe school environment for all students
- **Address bullying with the child’s Individualized Education Plan**