BULLYING AND YOUTH WITH DISABILITIES

Background

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

- Youth with disabilities are at increased risk for bullying victimization and its effects compared to their peers:
  - Youth with disabilities are 2 to 4 times more likely to be bullied compared to their peers.
  - Youth with disabilities report higher rates of physical harm, emotional problems, and psychological distress resulting from bullying, relative to their peers.
  - 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:
  - Physical vulnerability
  - Social skills challenges
  - Low frustration tolerance
  - Communication difficulties
  - Intolerant environments
• 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)
  o 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