

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 peers¹
 - o Youth with disabilities are 2 to 4 times more likely to be bullied compared to their peers^{2, 4}
 - o Youth with disabilities report higher rates of physical harm, emotional problems, and psychological distress resulting from bullying, relative to their peers³
 - o Increased rates of bullying victimization among youth with disabilities appear to be stable over time³
- Some examples of common disabilities among youth are ADHD, Autism Spectrum Disorders, epilepsy, diabetes, language impairments, food allergies, learning disabilities, blindness, and/or deafness¹

Factors Related to Being Bullied for Children with Disabilities

- There are a number of factors related to disabilities which may increase risk for bullying victimization¹, 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^{1, 5}

- 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.⁵

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

[1] Bullying and Youth with Disabilities and Special Health Needs (2018, July). <https://www.stopbullying.gov/bullying/special-needs>

[2] Bullying and Harassment of Students with Disabilities (2016). <https://www.pacer.org/bullying/resources/students-with-disabilities/>

[3] Rose, C. A., & Gage, N. A. (2017). Exploring the involvement of bullying among students with disabilities over time. *Exceptional Children*, 83(3), 298-314.

[4] Houchins, D., Oakes, W., Johnson, Z., Houchins, D., & Oakes, W. (2016). Bullying and Students With Disabilities: A Systematic Literature Review of Intervention Studies. *Remedial and Special Education*, 37(5), 259-273. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0741932516648678>

[5] Yell, M., Katsiyannis, A., Rose, C., Houchins, D., Houchins, D., & Oakes, W. (2016). Bullying and Harassment of Students With Disabilities in Schools: Legal Considerations and Policy Formation. *Remedial and Special Education*, 37(5), 274-284. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0741932516648678>

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



- **Educate** your students about social-emotional skills⁴
- **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**