



National
Autism Safety
Council™

Autism & Bullying

Tips for Prevention & Response

A Comprehensive Guide for Caregivers



About This Guide

This guide was created in collaboration with families clinicians educators for responders and service professionals.

It integrates knowledge from:

- **Current research**
- **Field expertise**
- **Lived experience**
- **Collaboration** with families, caregivers, clinicians, educators, first responders, & service professionals

The content reflects proven practices and the most up-to-date knowledge available at the time of publication.

This guide is for informational and educational purposes only. It is not intended to serve as medical or legal advice and should not replace consultation with qualified healthcare providers, behavioral specialists, or legal professionals. **Every child and family situation is unique, and decisions about safety planning and intervention should be made in collaboration with trusted professionals familiar with your individual needs.**



National
Autism Safety
Council™

*Advancing Autism Safety Through
Science, Expertise & Collaboration*



Understanding Bullying in ASD



HOW COMMON IS IT?

- According to research by the Kennedy Krieger Institute, **63% of 1,167 children with ASD, ages 6 to 15, had been bullied at some point in their lives.**
- The same study showed that nearly **30% of children who had been bullied had been pushed, shoved, hit, slapped, or kicked.**

Bullying is an all-too-common experience for children and adolescents with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), often fueled by social misunderstandings, communication differences, or stigma. **Many autistic students report being excluded, teased, or physically harmed by their peers.**

These experiences can lead to anxiety, depression, and lasting emotional distress, **making bullying prevention an essential part of autism safety.**

Types of Bullying Include:

- Verbal Bullying
- Social/Relational Bullying
- Physical Bullying
- Damage to Personal Property
- Cyberbullying
- Triggering of Outbursts

1. Zablotsky, B., Bradshaw, C. P., Anderson, C. M., & Law, P. (2014). Risk factors for bullying among children with autism spectrum disorders. *Autism: the international journal of research and practice*, 18(4), 419–427. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361313477920>





About the Different Types of Bullying in ASD

Bullying can take many forms, and **understanding these different types is the first step** toward recognizing and stopping harmful behavior.

Verbal Bullying:

- **Examples:** Teasing, name-calling, threats, inappropriate or sexual comments, taunts
- **Its Impact:** Because many autistic children can be more sensitive to language tone, literal versus implied meaning, this can be distressing; teasing or mocking around traits (stimming, speech differences) is common.

Social/Relational Bullying

- **Examples:** Hurting someone's relationships or reputation; exclusion; spreading rumors; intentionally leaving someone out; telling others not to be friends
- **Its Impact:** Autistic youth often already experience social communication challenges; being left out, misunderstood, or having relationships undermined can increase isolation, anxiety.

Physical Bullying

- **Examples:** Hitting, kicking, tripping, pushing, pinching; spitting; taking or breaking things; rude gestures
- **Its Impact:** These are often more obvious and potentially dangerous; also, autistic children may have sensory sensitivities (e.g., to pain, touch) that amplify the harm.

Damage to Personal Property

- **Examples:** Stealing, breaking possessions, tampering with tools or items important to the child
- **Its Impact:** Autistic children sometimes have special items of comfort or interest, loss/damage can be especially distressing.

Cyberbullying

- **Examples:** Harassment, name-calling, spreading rumors, threats online or via social media, messing with digital identities
- **Its Impact:** Though some studies show less cyberbullying compared to other types, the effects can linger, and autistic youth may have more difficulty managing how to respond, or shutting off from the hurt.

Triggering of Outbursts

- **Examples:** Intentionally provoking an autistic child (e.g., using what they know upsets the child; overloading sensory)
- **Its Impact:** This is especially pernicious: the child is both victim and sometimes then blamed for the reaction, worsening stigma.



Risk Factors for Bullying

Understanding Increased Vulnerabilities

Autistic children often face a higher risk of being bullied, not because of who they are, but because the environments around them frequently misunderstand or overlook their needs. Differences in communication, sensory processing, and behavior can make social situations confusing, and can make autistic students stand out in ways that peers may target. Factors such as difficulty interpreting social cues, visible stimming, strong interests, or rigid routines can unfortunately become reasons for exclusion in school settings, especially during the vulnerable middle school years. When combined with lower social self-esteem, co-occurring conditions like anxiety or ADHD, or placement in general education settings without adequate support, the risk increases even more. **Recognizing these vulnerabilities is essential to preventing harm and creating school environments where autistic students feel protected, understood, and valued.**

Disability Harassment

- ▶ *Bullying crosses the line into **disability harassment** when the behavior targets a student because of their disability or when it interferes with their ability to participate in or benefit from school.*
- ▶ *Under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, **the school must address the harassment.***



Risk Factors

- **Social communication challenges:** difficulty interpreting social cues, nonverbal signals, figuring out social norms make autistic kids more likely to be misunderstood
- **Behavioral traits/difference in routines:** stimming, rigid rules, special interests, being more literal or concrete, sensory sensitivities -- peers may see these as “weird” or “different” and target them
- **Settings:** Attending mainstream or public schools seems to carry higher risk compared to special education or private settings ¹
- **Grades/developmental periods:** Middle school and early adolescence are high risk periods ¹
- **Self-concept, awareness, and other disabilities:** Lower social self-esteem, co-occurring anxiety or ADHD, or other unique needs increase both the rate and the harm from bullying ²

1. Zablotzky, B., Bradshaw, C. P., Anderson, C. M., & Law, P. (2014). Risk factors for bullying among children with autism spectrum disorders. *Autism: the international journal of research and practice*, 18(4), 419–427. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361313477920>

2. Matthias, C., LaVelle, J. M., Johnson, D. R., Wu, Y. C., & Thurlow, M. L. (2021). Exploring Predictors of Bullying and Victimization of Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD): Findings from NLTS 2012. *Journal of autism and developmental disorders*, 51(12), 4632–4643. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-021-04907-y>



Signs of Bullying in ASD

Recognizing the signs of bullying in a child or teen with autism starts with knowing the subtle changes in behavior, emotions, and social patterns that often signal something is wrong. Below are signs and common indicators.

Behavior or Mood Changes

- Increased anxiety, clinginess, or fearfulness
- Sudden withdrawal or desire to avoid school, activities, or certain people
- Unexplained anger, irritability, or emotional outbursts
- Acting “different” after school, or shut down, unusually quiet, or distressed

Regressions

- Decline in communication or social skills
- Increased meltdowns or shutdowns
- Reappearance of behaviors that had improved (e.g., toileting, sleeping alone)

School Avoidance

- Refusing to get on the bus or go to school
- Frequent requests to stay home
- Complaints about specific classmates, hallways, or settings

Physical or Material Clues

- Unexplained bruises, scratches, or torn clothing
- Damaged or missing personal items (glasses, sensory tools, school supplies)
- Changes in sleep patterns, headaches, stomach-aches

Academic

- Difficulty concentrating or completing work
- Sudden drop in grades
- Loss of interest in subjects they previously enjoyed

Social Changes

- Avoiding peers or isolating themselves
- Sudden shift in friend groups
- Increased fear of group activities, recess, or lunch-time

Communication Red Flags

- Statements like “I don’t want to go,” “They’re mean,” or “I’m scared”
- Drawings, scripts, or play themes involving fear, harm, or being chased
- For non-speaking children: increased pacing, agitation, or behavioral distress after social situations

Stress or Trauma Signs

- Nightmares or trouble falling asleep
- Heightened startle response
- Increase in self-injurious behaviors (head-banging, hand-biting, etc.)
- New or intensified sensory sensitivities

Online Behavior Changes

- Hesitation to check messages or devices
- Closing screens quickly
- Sudden fear or avoidance of social platforms or group chats





The Effects of Bullying

The Effects of Bullying

Bullying can disrupt nearly every part of an autistic child's life. Its effects often run deeper and last longer, impacting mental health, physical well-being, school engagement, and long-term safety.

- **Mental health:** higher rates of anxiety, depression, low self-esteem. Bullying is strongly associated with increased internalizing symptoms ¹
- **Physical health:** stress-related effects, like sleep problems, headaches, stomach issues, etc ²
- **School outcomes:** absenteeism, lower academic achievement, dropping out of activities, trouble concentrating
- **Social isolation:** being excluded or feeling unsafe undermines opportunities for friendship and social development
- **Risk of suicidal thoughts:** adolescents on the spectrum who are bullied have higher risk of suicidal ideation compared to their neurotypical peers ³

Additional Insights

- **Newer studies confirm that social/relational bullying is among the most common** for autistic youth, sometimes more so than physical bullying ⁴
- **Cyberbullying** is less frequent in some studies, but still significant and increasing as kids spend more time online ⁴
- **Many incidents go unreported or unrecognized by adults**, especially when bullying is social or relational rather than overtly physical
- **More research is needed on interventions** tailored specifically to autistic individuals, particularly around emotional regulation, peer acceptance, and teaching neurotypical students how to be allies

1. Accardo, A.L., Neely, L.C., Pontes, N.M.H. et al. Bullying Victimization is Associated with Heightened Rates of Anxiety and Depression Among Autistic and ADHD Youth: National Survey of Children's Health 2016–2020. *J Autism Dev Disord* 55, 3605–3621 (2025). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-024-06479-z>

2. Kæld E, Beckman L, Eapen V, Lin P. Exploring Potential Modifiers of the Association Between Neurodevelopmental Disorders and Risk of Bullying Exposure. *JAMA Pediatr.* 2022;176(9):940–941. doi:10.1001/jamapediatrics.2022.1755

3. Holden, R, Mueller, J, McGowan, J, Sanyal, J, Kikoler, M, Simonoff, E., Velupillai, S. and Downs, J. (2020), Investigating Bullying as a Predictor of Suicidality in a Clinical Sample of Adolescents with Autism Spectrum Disorder. *Autism Research*, 13: 988-997. <https://doi.org/10.1002/aur.2292>

4. Bardou, K., Papantonopoulou, K., & Georgiadi, M. (2025). School Bullying Among Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD): The Role of the Educational Setting. *Education Sciences*, 15(8), 1055. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci15081055>





Bullying Prevention & Intervention Strategies

Keeping autistic individuals safe from bullying starts with **working together**, including families, educators, peers, and communities, to foster understanding and respond with compassion. Below are ways to help prevent or reduce bullying.

Ways to Prevent or Reduce Bullying

Awareness, Empathy Building & Peer Allies

- Educate students, staff, and parents about autism: traits, communication differences, sensory issues
- Use stories, peer panels, social narratives to help neurotypical peers understand what it means to be autistic
- Empower peers to become allies and step in if bullying occurs

School Policy & Environment

- Clear anti-bullying policies that explicitly cover disability-based bullying
- Training for teachers and staff to recognize subtle bullying (social exclusion, triggering behavior)
- Promote inclusion: structured peer interactions, buddy systems, supported social skills groups

Empowering the Child

- Teach children with autism about each type of bullying and how to report bullying, and how to avoid or remove one's self safely from a situation; research shows behavior skills training can help
- Role-play or rehearsals of possible bullying situations: what to do and say to stay safe

Support Systems & Mental Health Resources

- Counseling, therapy that addresses both coping skills and emotional regulation
- Safe spaces at school: trusted adults, peer mentors

Parental Involvement

- Open communication with child: ask about experiences, listen without judgment
- Work with the school: report incidences, request accommodations if needed (sensory breaks, safe spaces)

Legislation / Policy Advocacy

- Ensuring school laws cover disability harassment
- Programs in curricula about neurodiversity

Online/Cyberbullying Prevention

- Teach safe internet practices
- Monitor online interactions where possible; set boundaries
- Help kids know what to do when cyberbullying occurs (block/report/seek help)





What Parents Can Do to Prevent Bullying

Parents play a critical role in protecting autistic children from bullying, both by partnering with schools and by supporting their child at home. **Being proactive, communicating clearly, strengthening supports through the IEP, staying involved, and knowing your rights, can significantly reduce risks.**

Communicate with the School

- Maintain open, ongoing conversations with your child's teachers, counselors, and administrators. Share information about your child's strengths, autism-related needs, and any concerns about bullying. Ask what anti-bullying practices, disability-awareness efforts, and classroom inclusion programs are in place, and how you can stay informed.

Use the IEP to Build Support

- Leverage the IEP process to include goals that strengthen social skills, self-advocacy, emotional regulation, and peer connections. Request accommodations or supports that help your child navigate social settings safely, as well as a plan for how the school will respond to bullying incidents.

Prepare and Empower Your Child

- Talk regularly about friendship, boundaries, and respect. Describe what healthy relationships look like, and reassure your child that bullying is never their fault. Emphasize personal strengths, practice responses to uncomfortable situations, and make sure they know exactly who to tell if something feels wrong.

Stay Involved and Monitor

- Stay connected with your child's school life: visit when appropriate, volunteer, and observe classroom or playground dynamics. At home, check in daily about your child's experiences, quiet changes in mood, sleep, or behavior can be early signs that something is off.

Document Everything

- Keep a detailed record of all bullying-related concerns and communication. Note dates, times, locations, who was involved, what happened, and how your child was affected. Save emails, meeting notes, IEP updates, photos of damaged property or injuries (if applicable), and any written statements from staff or witnesses. Consistent documentation strengthens your advocacy, supports IEP revisions, and provides critical evidence if the issue escalates or requires formal intervention.

Know Your Rights

- Every state has laws addressing school bullying and disability-based harassment. Explore the requirements for your state, such as reporting procedures or school obligations, so you can advocate effectively. **StopBullying.gov** provides a clear, state-by-state overview of relevant policies and protections.



Prevention Resources:
Stop Bullying
stopbullying.gov

Bullying Prevention Center
pacer.org/bullying

CyberBullying
cyberbullying.org

Workplace Bullying
workplacebullying.org



**National
Autism Safety
Council™**