Teaching about bullying: considerations for students with disability

18.8% of school students in Australia received an adjustment to participate in education because of a disability in 2017 (Nationally Consistent Collection of Data School Students with Disability, 2017).

Students with a behavioural, emotional or developmental disability are at a greater risk of bullying, with the rate almost twice as high as their peers.

Building an environment that is welcoming for all students and one that openly acknowledges and values individual difference sets a high expectation of acceptance and understanding for the whole school community.

All students, particularly those most vulnerable, need to be provided with the tools to understand bullying and the strategies to deal with these situations.

Students with disability will benefit from participating in the whole school approach to bullying prevention, but may also require additional strategies tailored to their specific needs.

Things to know:

- Students with disability have a much higher prevalence of bullying than their peers.
- Students with disability, particularly those with autism, are more likely to display a significant reaction to bullying. This can be an immediate or after a long period of targeting.
- Some students with disability are more vulnerable to manipulation by other students and often more likely to react. This can provide reinforcement and entertainment for other students, and encourage these students to continue this behaviour.
- Sometimes students with disability will tolerate higher levels of bullying from others because they believe that this may lead to friendship and inclusion.
- Many students with disability have issues with social skills and have fewer support networks, therefore becoming regular targets for bullying.
- Often students with disability are reluctant to ask for assistance and are unsure of the processes.
- Many students with disability are alone at break times and this isolation can make them an easier target.
Strategies to reduce bullying of students with disability

Supporting students with disability to understand bullying involves identifying strategies that are compatible with their individual needs, interests and ability to comprehend bullying incidents.

Sometimes explicit teaching is required to teach different or new behaviours. Some students may require support to develop proactive strategies that avoid incidents. This may include developing play and social skills, as well as developing coping strategies.

**When teaching about bullying consider:**

- presenting information visually, simply and clearly to support comprehension and minimise misunderstanding;
- adapting bullying program resources; consider the student’s social comprehension level that is sometimes different than his/her same-aged peers;
- ensuring resources target the student’s visual learning preference and have minimal ‘writing’ to improve engagement with the student;
- using a range of video, role-play or practise techniques;
- explicitly teaching what the rules and consequences mean and check in to ensure understanding;
- developing visual supports to clarify what students are learning and to work out alternate ways of handling situations involving bullying;
- revising information presented regularly and supporting students with disability to adapt this information to a range of environments and situations by practising/teaching in a range of environments and situations;
- identifying peer supports. Buddy programs, educating students about differences, teaching peers how to be peer supports and what responsible bystanders do and say reduces bullying;
- building a strong relationship with parents and working closely to identify and respond to specific ongoing incidents.

*This information sheet has been adapted with permission from the Autism Spectrum Disorder – online resource transition package [https://ahrc.eq.edu.au/](https://ahrc.eq.edu.au/).*