

Bullying and Students with Disabilities: Summary Report of Parent Focus Groups May 2004

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Background

Bullying is a problem that plagues students and schools. In recent years, it has received widespread national attention in the press and education journals. Reports from the federal government indicate that children with disabilities may be singled out for being “different” or more vulnerable than other students. In March 2004, the federal Health Resources and Services Administration launched a National Bullying Prevention Campaign.

The workload of the U.S. Office for Civil Rights (OCR) has reflected a steady pace of allegations of disability harassment. OCR and the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services (OSERS) report hearing about “the often devastating effects on students of disability harassment that ranged from abusive jokes, crude name-calling, threats, and bullying, to sexual and physical assault by teachers and other students.” (U.S. Office for Civil Rights, 2000)

The Urban Special Education Leadership Collaborative in partnership with the MetLife Foundation Read for Health Initiative at the Education Development Center, Inc. received support from the ILIAD IDEA Partnership Project to explore the perspective of parents of children with disabilities on the issue of bullying. The two groups also worked in collaboration with the Federation for Children with Special Needs. Two focus groups were conducted in Boston and Worcester, Massachusetts in May 2003. Each focus group consisted of 10-12 parents of students with disabilities. A few of these parents are also professionals in the field of educating families on disability issues. While all participants were parents of children with special needs, the groups were diverse in other ways: they were racially and ethnically diverse; they included parents of children of different ages; and they included residents of small and large cities and suburban towns.

Definition of Bullying

Focus group participants were given the following widely used definition of bullying to establish a common understanding. **Bullying is deliberately aggressive or hurtful behavior toward another person that is repeated over time.**

The groups agreed that bullying can be present in many forms including:

- Physical aggression— pushing, hitting, kicking, tripping
- Verbal aggression—name-calling, taunts, threats, saying things to hurt feelings
- Indirect aggression—excluding someone, spreading nasty rumors about a person

Facts about Bullying Shared with Participants

These facts refer to all students, not just students with disabilities.

- Studies show that 15-25% of U.S. students are bullied with some frequency (Nansel, et al. 2001) and that children with special needs or disabilities may be at higher risk of being bullied than other children (Rigby, 2002).
- Both boys and girls bully. Boys are more likely to use physical aggression, girls to use isolation and exclusion.
- In bullying situations, the role of bystander is as important as the role of aggressor and target. Bystanders may encourage violence or stop it.

Problems Identified

Most of the 22 focus group participants believed that bullying was as much, but not necessarily more, of a problem for students with disabilities as for others. Most pointed out that bullying is targeted towards children who are “seen as different” and less powerful. Their children become “easier targets” if they are small, socially awkward, or appear different. Some participants pointed out that racial or cultural differences complicate the problem. A few parents perceived that their child was bullied not because he or she had a disability, but because of skin color or language differences.

How Are Students with Disabilities Directly Targeted?

Participants acknowledged that their children with special needs may experience bullying differently from their same-age peers without disabilities. They said:

- Their children may not pick up on social cues.
- They may be thought of as “stupid” or “slow” and so be more vulnerable to bullying.
- They may think that they are being picked on because of their disability when this may not be true.
- Other children may pick on them or bully them because of the “difference,” not understanding it as a disability.

Who Are the Bullies?

Some parents in both groups said their children had been perceived as bullies themselves, not as the target of bullies. Children may be seen as bullies if they lack social skills and do not understand how their behavior affects others or when they exhibit behavior that can seem scary or threatening to peers. Moreover, they may be “set up” by being taunted until they respond by yelling or hitting that leads to punishment for their inappropriate response.

Perceptions of the School

Many schools deny that there is a bullying problem at all, according to the parents in the focus groups. Teachers and administrators have in the past dismissed complaints from students with

special needs, believing that the child typically overreacts. Parents feared that reporting problems might make them more complicated or cause reprisals or an escalation of the bullying.

One parent reported an incident where her daughter was bullied because of a teacher's insensitivity to her child's disability. The teacher kept the whole class from recess because the girl had not finished her work. The other children blamed the girl and began to harass her.

Participants did have some positive stories to report from schools. One mother told her child not to report a bullying problem to the school for fear that the school would overreact and make matters worse. When the child went to a counselor despite her mother's advice, the counselor told her that the school takes these incidents very seriously, and responded positively and proactively.

Most of the parents were not aware of their child's school taking a stand against bullying. However, a few participants reported that their schools talked with students and parents about bullying, or included an anti-bullying policy as part of the behavior contract that all students and parents are required to sign. One parent reported that his school includes education about bullying as part of a comprehensive effort to teach acceptance of differences and promotion of friendships.

Parents' Suggestions for What Other Parents Can Do

- Help your child develop "a strong sense of self." Recognize that "you can't isolate kids from mean people."
- Teach your child appropriate ways to respond to bullying without fighting, e.g., ignore it, get help from an adult, support other children who are being bullied.
- Educate the school about disabilities and what your child needs. Work with the school to prevent and respond to bullying problems.

Parents' Suggestions for What Schools Can Do

- Teach students and educators to understand and tolerate differences, especially differences that are not visible. Programs like "Kids on the Block," where puppets enact problem situations, can help. However, they tend to focus on visible disabilities.
- Teach social skills, "reward niceness," and assign "friends" to students with special needs. Include a social skills curriculum in the school.
- Educate all staff, including lunch staff and custodians, about bullying and how to respond to it.
- Consider carefully "zero tolerance policies." Since the behavior of children with special needs may be misunderstood, some situations may call for a more nuanced and individual response.
- Make sure there is adequate staffing on the playground, in the halls, and in other unstructured times and places.
- Make a systemic effort at accepting differences and incorporate that principle into school policies and practices.

Overall Reaction from the Group

Parents who attended the focus groups voiced their gratitude at being asked to share their opinions and experiences on this issue. Many indicated that bullying is a real problem, but one that is not often acknowledged by the school or community. The suggestions presented here should be considered a starting point, and not all-inclusive. Other parents and schools can learn from them and begin discussions of their own experiences and ways to make schools more welcoming and supportive places for all children. Some resources available to parents and school personnel on the issue of bullying are listed below.

References and Resources

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