

Be a Buddy, Not a Bully

Supporting Autistic Learners
in Safe and Inclusive Schools



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1.

Understanding autism

Autism is a neurodevelopmental difference: in other words a difference in how a person's brain develops and works. Autistic people think, learn, communicate and experience the world in ways that may be different from non-autistic people.

Different does not mean less. It simply means different.

Autistic learners may experience differences in:

- Communication
- Social interaction
- Sensory processing (how the brain responds to sound, light, touch, smell and movement)
- Need for routine and predictability
- Emotional regulation

Some autistic learners may need a lot of support in daily life. Others may need only small adjustments. Every autistic person is unique.

Autistic learners also have strengths. Many show:

- Strong attention to detail
- Deep focus on interests
- Creativity
- Honesty
- Strong memory
- A strong sense of fairness

It is important to know that autism is not caused by bad parenting. It is also not something that needs to be "fixed". Support should focus on helping the learner cope, participate and feel safe.



Social differences and autism

Social rules have been developed by non-autistic people. However, autistic people might not socialise in the same ways as non-autistic people because they experience the world and see things differently.

Autistic people might:

- Find eye contact difficult
- Be very direct
- Use and understand body language differently
- Have flat or exaggerated facial expressions
- Have differences in speaking tone and/or voice pitch
- Some autistic people can empathise on a very deep level



Autism and empathy

Empathy is the ability to understand how someone else is feeling. People used to think that autistic people just don't understand other people's thoughts, feelings, and intentions. But the Double Empathy Problem as outlined by Dr. Damion Milton shows misunderstanding between autistic and non-autistic people can happen both ways. Autistic people may find it hard to understand non-autistic people but non-autistic people may also find it hard to understand autistic people. This is because people think and communicate in different ways. These differences can cause confusion and misunderstanding for both sides. When two autistic people interact with each other, they often feel more comfortable and understand each other more easily.



How to be a friend to an autistic person

Autistic and non-autistic people can have strong, real friendships when they try to understand each other. They may speak, think, and feel differently—but both ways are OK. Differences don't mean something is wrong—they just mean people are unique.

What non-autistic people can do

- Learn how autistic people might think or feel.
- Don't expect eye contact or small talk if it's uncomfortable.
- Be clear when talking (avoid hints or sarcasm if not understood).
- Ask how you can help or be supportive.
- Respect things like needing quiet or space.

What autistic people can do

- Let your friend know how you prefer to communicate.
- Be patient if your friend uses small talk or acts differently.
- Communicate what makes you feel safe or comfortable.
- Share interests—it helps friendships grow!
- Show care in your own way (even if it's different).

Good friendships between autistic and non-autistic people are possible and valuable. It works best when both people listen, learn, and respect each other's way of doing things.



2.

What is bullying?

Bullying is repeated behaviour that is meant to hurt, embarrass or exclude someone. It usually involves an imbalance of power. This means the person being bullied feels unable to defend themselves.

Forms of bullying

Physical bullying

- Hitting, pushing, tripping, kicking, spitting, taking or damaging belongings

Verbal bullying

- Name-calling, teasing, threats, insults, sarcasm

Non-verbal bullying

- Hostile body language or expressions such as eye-rolling, aggressive staring, and derogatory gestures

Social (relational) bullying

- Humiliating someone in front of others
- The spreading of rumours and gossip
- The exclusion or isolation of a person on purpose
- Verbal taunting or harassment – adults often misinterpret this as teasing, but teasing is defined as harmless and for fun and becomes bullying when it is repeated and causes distress

Cyberbullying

- Harassment – rumours, threats, or embarrassing information spread online
- Impersonation – pretending to be someone else online to make fun of or hurt someone
- Photographs – using pictures to humiliate someone online (Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat or WhatsApp groups)



Where does bullying take place?

- On the school playground
- Between classes in the passage
- Outside the school playground
- In class
- After school
- On the way home

Why are people bullied?

Learners are sometimes targeted because they are seen as different. This could include:

- Disability
- Appearance
- Having few friends
- Being emotionally reactive
- Standing out in some way
- Their size
- Skin colour



Autistic learners may be more vulnerable to bullying because of communication differences, sensory needs or difficulty reading social situations.

Sometimes we may have negative first impressions, assumptions or even feelings when we meet someone who is different from us. But when people with differences come together, our communities grow stronger, so it is important to learn about and accept people's differences.

The Role of Bystanders

Bullying is not just about two people — the person being bullied and the person doing the bullying. It often involves others who are watching. These people are called bystanders.

Bystanders can take on different roles:

Reinforcers

They laugh, cheer, or provide an audience. Even if they do not join in directly, their reactions encourage the behaviour.

Assistants or Supporters

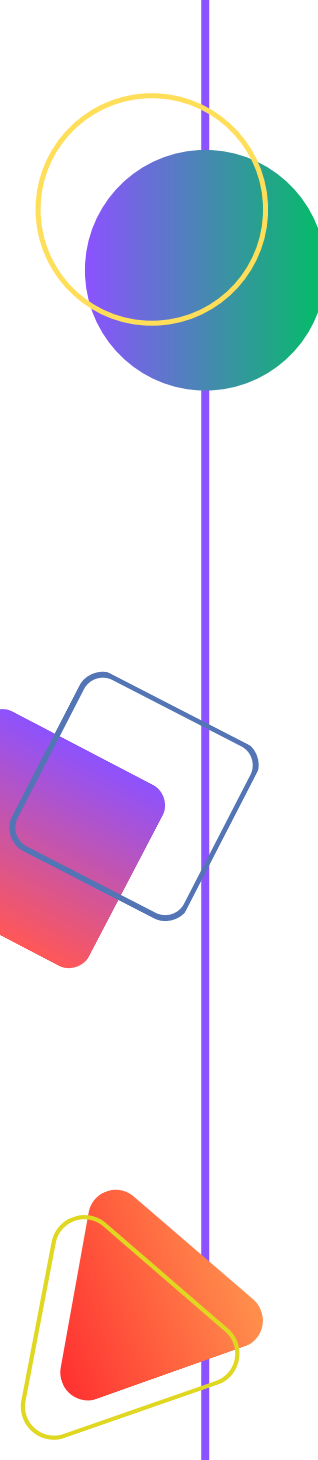
They actively join the bullying, either physically or by helping spread rumours or messages.

Defenders

They step in to support the learner being targeted, or they report the incident to an adult.

Outsiders

They see what is happening but do nothing. They may walk away, ignore it, or pretend not to notice.



When bystanders do nothing, it can feel like silent approval. The learner being bullied may feel even more alone. The learner doing the bullying may feel supported or powerful.

Why Do Bystanders Stay Silent?

- They are afraid of becoming the next target
- They want to protect their own social standing
- They do not know what to do
- They think it is not their responsibility
- They believe adults will not take it seriously

Adults can also become bystanders. When we dismiss bullying as “children being children” or overlook teasing because it seems minor, we unintentionally allow it to continue.

Teaching Integrity and Courage

Part of preventing bullying is teaching children that doing the right thing is not always easy — but it matters.

Children need to learn:

- It is okay to tell an adult
- Supporting someone who is being bullied is brave
- Laughing, filming, sharing or encouraging the behaviour makes a bystander part of the harm.

Without an audience, bullying often loses its power.



Signs that a child may be experiencing bullying

Be very aware and monitor any changes in a child which could be the result of bullying:

- Not wanting to go to school or certain lessons
- Fear of certain classes or times of day, for example being frightened to walk to or from school, or travel on school transport
- Repeatedly feeling ill in the mornings
- Drop in academic performance
- Unexplained bruising and cuts
- Changes in eating or sleeping
- Unexplained damaged belongings or clothing
- Missing money or possessions
- Appetite changes (stress or bully taking packed lunch or their money)
- Changes in peer relationships
- Behavioural changes such as becoming withdrawn, aggressive, tearful
- Stealing money to give to the bully
- Self-harm or talking about suicide

Autistic learners may “freeze” when they feel overwhelmed or stressed. When this happens, they might struggle to explain what happened, find the right words, or respond to questions. They may also agree to things or go along with situations they do not fully understand, especially if they feel pressured, confused, or afraid of getting into trouble.

Because of this, careful and patient listening is very important. Giving the learner time to process, avoiding leading questions, and create a safe and calm space can help them share what they experienced more accurately.



4.

Creating an inclusive school culture

Preventing bullying starts with the school culture. School culture is the “feel” of a school. It is the way people speak to one another, how differences are handled, and whether learners feel safe to be themselves. When learners feel accepted and valued, bullying decreases.

Teaching About Differences

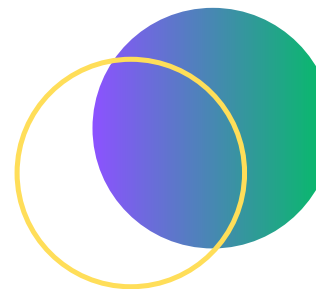
Children are naturally curious about difference. When adults avoid conversations about autism, disability or other differences, children often fill in the gaps with assumptions. Teaching learners about different conditions and disabilities may increase empathy. It may also reduce prejudice by heightening acceptance and understanding.

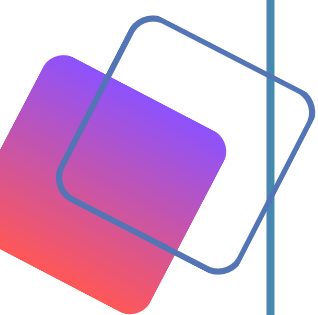
Schools can:

- Teach learners about autism, other neurodivergent differences, and disabilities in age-appropriate ways
- Explain that people communicate and experience the world differently
- Emphasise that different does not mean less
- Use assemblies, classroom discussions and storybooks to build understanding

Remember that a learner's diagnosis should never be shared without consent. Privacy protects dignity.

It is important for educators to lead in building understanding and reduce fear of differences.





Reflecting on Staff Attitudes and Bias

For staff to effectively stop the bullying of autistic learners in their schools, it is important for them to reflect on and challenge their own biases and assumptions about autistic people. This is one of the most important – and sometimes most uncomfortable – parts of prevention.

Every adult has biases. A bias is a belief or assumption we hold, often without realising it.

For example:

- Do we understand why the autistic learners behave the way they do?
- Do we expect autistic learners to “try harder to fit in”?
- Do we describe some learners as “difficult” more quickly than others?
- Do we excuse certain behaviours because a learner is popular or liked?
- Do we minimise teasing because it seems “harmless”?



When adults unknowingly hold stereotypes or stigmas about autistic behaviour or social differences, it can influence how bullying is understood and handled. This may lead to the harm being minimised or to responses that unintentionally reinforce exclusion instead of providing support.

Reflection questions for staff:

- Would I respond differently if this was done to another learner?
- Would I respond differently if another learner behaved this way?
- Am I assuming intent without understanding context?
- Have I listened carefully to the autistic learner's experience?



By unpacking our own beliefs and addressing misconceptions, we create a more inclusive and respectful school culture. This not only helps us to intervene appropriately when bullying occurs but also models acceptance and empathy for all learners, reducing the likelihood of bullying in the first place. Children watch how adults treat difference. If adults model respect, learners are far more likely to do the same.

A strong sense of belonging is one of the most powerful protective factors against bullying. Bullying thrives where learners feel isolated. It decreases where learners feel seen, heard, and valued.

5.

School policies and procedures

An inclusive school culture is important, but inclusion cannot rely on good intentions alone. Clear policies and procedures need to be in place to help ensure that bullying is handled consistently and fairly. Every school should have a clear anti-bullying policy to protect learners, staff, and families, and to make sure everyone understands what to do when problems occur.

A strong policy should include:

A clear definition of bullying

Bullying should be clearly defined, including the ideas of repetition and power imbalance. This helps prevent confusion between normal conflict and bullying, and makes it easier for staff to respond appropriately.

Clear reporting process

Learners and parents should know exactly how to report bullying. This includes:

- Who to report to
- How to report
- What will happen after the report

Every report of intimidation or bullying should be taken seriously and investigated. If reporting feels unsafe or pointless, learners may stop reporting and the bullying may continue unnoticed.

Fair investigation

All learners involved should be given the opportunity to share their side of the story. Assumptions should be avoided until all information has been gathered.

Autistic learners may need extra time or support to explain what happened, and this should be taken into account during the investigation.



Documentation

Written records are important to help identify patterns over time.

Documentation can show:

- Whether bullying happens in a specific place
- Whether it happens at certain times
- Whether the same learners are involved repeatedly

Without clear documentation, patterns may be missed and the problem may appear smaller than it really is.

Consequences and Restorative Action

Consequences should be clear and consistent. However, punishment alone does not stop bullying long-term. It is also important to help learners understand the impact of their behaviour and to support them in making things right.

Restorative approaches focus on repairing harm, rebuilding relationships, and teaching skills. These may include:

- Guided apologies, where the learner is supported to give a sincere and meaningful apology
- Repairing or replacing damaged property
- Mediated conversations, where a trusted adult helps the learners talk about what happened in a safe and structured way
- Emotional support, and teaching and practising more appropriate emotional regulation skills

Using restorative approaches together with clear consequences can help create a safer environment and reduce the chance of the behaviour happening again.

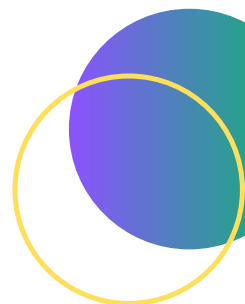
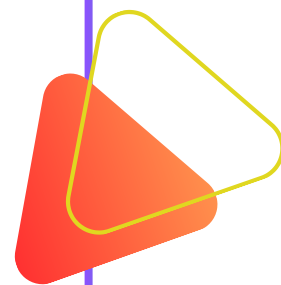
Regular Review

Policies should not sit in a file. They need to be reviewed regularly to make sure they are being followed and that they are working in practice.

When reviewing policies, it is helpful to ask:

- Are reports of bullying increasing or decreasing?
- Are certain learners repeatedly involved?
- Are staff responding in a consistent way?

An anti-bullying policy is only effective if it is applied in everyday situations.



The way adults react when bullying is reported can influence whether learners feel safe to speak up in the future. When a learner reports bullying, they are taking a risk. They may worry about retaliation, embarrassment, or not being believed. A calm, fair, and supportive response helps create trust and shows that the situation is being taken seriously.

Adults should:

Take every report seriously

Even if the incident seems small. What feels minor to an adult may feel overwhelming or frightening to a child. Listening carefully and showing concern helps the learner feel heard and supported.

Stay calm

Strong emotional reactions, such as anger or panic, can shut down communication and make the learner feel unsafe. Calm and steady responses help the learner feel more secure and make it easier to understand what really happened.

Listen carefully

Allow the learner to speak without interruption. Give them time to explain in their own way.

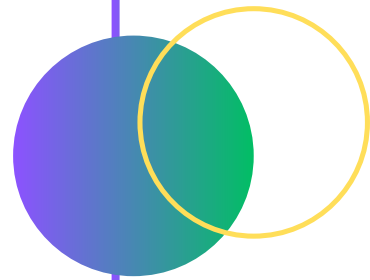
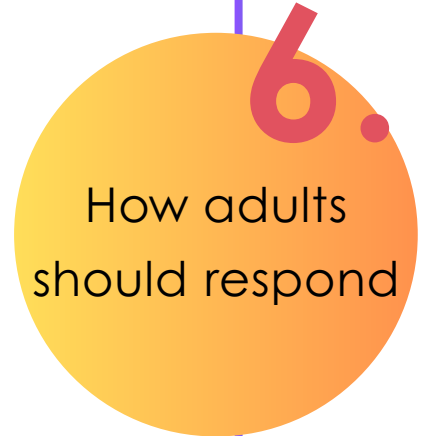
Ask open-ended questions, for example:

- “Can you tell me what happened?”
- “How did that make you feel?”
- “Has this happened before?”

Autistic learners may need extra time to process questions and respond, so patience is important.

Investigate fairly

Speak to all learners involved before making conclusions. Try to avoid deciding who is “right” or “wrong” before hearing the full story. A fair process helps build trust and leads to better decisions.



Address behaviour, and avoid labels

Avoid labels such as “bully” or “victim”. Instead, focus on the behaviour that happened. For example:

- “The behaviour we saw was hurtful.”
- “We need to address what happened.”

Labels can follow learners for many years while behaviour can change with the right support.

Do not minimise the situation

Avoid statements such as:

- “Children will be children.”
- “It was just a joke.”
- “You need to toughen up.”

These responses can make the learner feel unheard and may increase the harm. Taking the situation seriously helps learners feel safe to report problems.

Supervision is important

Bullying often happens when there is less adult supervision, for example:

- During break times
- During transitions between classes
- On transport

A visible adult presence can reduce opportunities for bullying and helps learners feel safer.

Documentation helps identify patterns

Incidents should be written down clearly and consistently. When bullying is not documented, it can be dismissed as a once-off event. Good documentation helps identify patterns over time and protects both learners and staff.



7

Supporting the learner who is bullying

It can be tempting to focus only on the learner who has been harmed. However, long-term prevention also requires supporting the learner who is engaging in bullying behaviour. Bullying is a behaviour, not a fixed identity, and with the right support, behaviour can change.

Understanding the behaviour

Learners bully for different reasons. For example, they may feel insecure, struggle with anger, want social status, have experienced bullying themselves, or have difficulty understanding other people's feelings. Understanding the possible reasons for the behaviour helps guide the response and makes it more likely that the intervention will be effective.

Accountability

The learner should be helped to understand:

- What they did
- Why the behaviour was harmful
- What the consequences are

The focus should be on responsibility rather than shame. When learners feel shamed or humiliated, they are less likely to change their behaviour.

Developing empathy

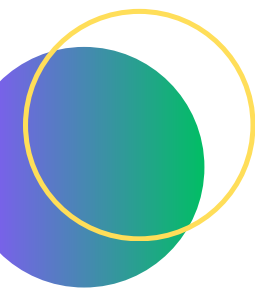
Empathy is a skill that can be developed over time. Guided conversations can help the learner think about the impact of their actions, for example by asking questions such as:

- "How would that feel if it happened to you?"
- "What do you think the other learner experienced?"

Supportive reflection helps build emotional awareness and understanding.

Teaching new skills and alternatives

Some learners engage in bullying because they do not yet have the skills needed to handle difficult situations in a more appropriate way. For behaviour to change, it is important not only to stop the behaviour, but also to teach the learner what to do instead. Simply telling a learner to stop bullying is often not enough. They may need support to develop the needed skills such as conflict resolution skills and/or emotional regulation skills such as managing anger or walking away before a situation escalates.



Give opportunities for positive contributions

It can also be helpful to give the learner opportunities to contribute in positive ways, for example by taking part in helpful tasks in the classroom or school. This can support the development of empathy, responsibility, and self-esteem.

Repairing harm

As discussed earlier, when it is appropriate and safe, restorative actions can help the learner take responsibility and make things right. This may include steps such as giving a genuine apology or repairing or replacing damaged property.

Restorative steps should be guided by adults so that they remain meaningful and supportive, rather than forced. The goal should be to support behaviour change and learning, not to humiliate the learner.

8.

What learners can do

If a learner is being bullied

It is important to remember that bullying is never the fault of the person being bullied. Being bullied can make a person feel scared, embarrassed, angry, or confused, and these feelings are understandable. Everyone deserves to feel safe and supported. Telling someone what is happening can feel difficult, but it can help the situation change.

A learner can:

- Tell a trusted adult, such as a teacher, parent, or counsellor
- Stay in areas where adults are present when possible
- Walk or spend time with friends instead of being alone
- Save messages or screenshots if the bullying happens online
- Block and report harmful accounts or messages

If a learner sees bullying happening

Learners who witness bullying can make a difference. They do not have to handle the situation alone, but their actions can help keep someone safe. Staying silent can sometimes allow bullying to continue, even when that is not the intention while speaking up in a safe way can help protect others and make the environment safer for everyone.

A learner can:

- Tell an adult privately about what was seen
- Avoid laughing or encouraging the behaviour
- Avoid filming or sharing the incident
- Stand near the learner being targeted, if it is safe to do so
- Offer to be a witness if an adult asks what happened



What to do when you suspect abuse

Very important: According to the Children's Act, it is a legal obligation to report suspected abuse. If a child discloses abuse during these lessons, it will be a crime not to report it. Be aware of this fact and contact a social worker or head office if you are unsure of how to deal with it. No matter what the policy of the school, or what another educator may tell you, educators have a statutory responsibility to report child abuse.

<https://www.childlinesa.org.za/educators/for-educators/child-protection-at-school/procedures-for-reporting-abuse/>

If you are in a situation where you suspect the abuse of a learner, but they have not actually said anything to you, please follow the procedure outlined by Childline in the link above:

- Continue to talk to the learner
- Most learners who are being abused find it difficult to talk about it. By having ongoing conversations, the time may come when they are ready to talk about it.
- Keep a diary. This is a good way to keep note of your concerns and the way the learner is behaving. It can also help to spot patterns of behaviour.
- Talk to the learner's teacher. The teacher might have noticed them acting unusually too.
- Get someone else's perspective. Talk about your concerns with a trusted friend or family member or with an online counsellor from Childline. Ask them what they think of your concerns.

Organisations that can help

Autism South Africa

Childline: for immediate assistance please call their toll-free number 116

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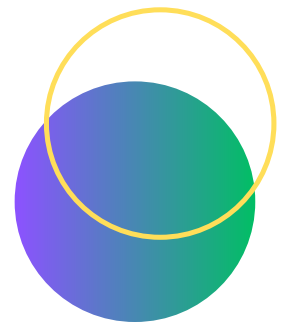
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