



What You Can Do to Stop the Bullying

For special needs children, social issues in school can pose serious concerns. Often their differences and particular challenges hinder them from building socially and developmentally appropriate relationships. Of further concern is how other children respond socially to the child with special needs. While schools attempt to create an environment of respect and tolerance for differences, especially through inclusion classrooms, there are times when children with special needs become the targets of bullies who make fun of them because they're "different" and use that child's disabilities as an object of ridicule.

Statistics show that special needs children are frequently the target of bullies for several reasons. Sometimes it's because their specific challenges prevent them from defending themselves. At other times, children are unfamiliar with particular behaviors that are a direct result of a specific disability. Sometimes bullying happens because other children are just being mean.

Perhaps you remember the local story of the 13-year-old girl with cerebral palsy being bullied and teased by classmates on her bus. The girl's father, who witnessed his daughter crying at the bus stop and refusing to get onboard, stormed onto the bus and made threatening comments to his daughter's tormentors. A couple of weeks later, the father apologized to some of the students and their families and admitted that he too had acted like a bully. Though any parent of a child who is being hurt can understand the father's initial reaction, it wasn't an effective approach that would benefit his child. Read on for some appropriate ways of handling bullying of your child.

Renee Clauselle, MD, is a practicing child psychologist and founder of Child and Family Psychology. For more information, call 516-750-4841 or visit www.psychologists4kids.com.



What to Do

- Speak with the school personnel who are responsible for your child during the time bullying is taking place. Follow up with a written letter or e-mail.
- If you don't get an appropriate response, ask to speak to that person's supervisor to make them aware of the problem.
- Speak with your child's school psychologist about how the bullying is affecting your child. I suggest pursuing counseling—in or outside of the school—at the first sign of distress or anxiety.
- Speak with your district's director of school personnel regarding ways to help your child feel safe at school. Safety is an academic issue. Children can't learn in environments where they don't feel safe, so your school should respond.

Resources

Say Something Now — www.saysomethingnow.com
Stop Bullying Now! — stopbullyingnow.hrsa.gov
New York State Department of Education's Special Education — www.p12.nysed.gov/specialed