



Northern Ireland
Anti-Bullying Forum



Parent/Carer Toolkit



Parents can feel a range of emotions when they discover their child is being bullied. While initial feelings may include isolation, anger, sadness and guilt, it is important for you to remember there is a way forward.

This guide contains information about spotting the signs of bullying, the action you can take, your child's rights, strategies and tips. We hope it will give you ideas about what might work, things you could try and will help you feel that you are not alone.

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What is bullying?

The Northern Ireland Anti-Bullying Forum (NIABF) defines bullying as the repeated use of power by one or more persons intentionally to hurt, harm or adversely affect the rights and needs of another or others.

Bullying is a form of unacceptable behaviour, but not all unacceptable behaviour can be considered bullying. Bullying usually has three key elements:

- It is repeated behaviour that happens over a period of time
- It involves an imbalance of power
- It is intentionally hurtful behaviour

All unacceptable behaviour must be challenged, whether it is bullying or not.

There are many different ways that bullying behaviour can be displayed. This could include:

- Being called nasty names, teased, made fun of, threatened or put down
- Being hit, kicked, punched, tripped up or knocked over
- Having belongings stolen or damaged
- Having rumours or gossip spread about you or people talking about you behind your back
- Being left-out, excluded or isolated
- Being forced to do something you don't want to do or know that is wrong

It is also important to know that bullying **is not**:

- A disagreement or 'falling-out'
- A one-off fight or argument
- Someone being 'nasty' through an ill thought through word or action
- A 'relationship' issue where pupils just need to learn how to get along better

Cyber bullying

Cyber bullying is bullying behaviour that is displayed through mobile/smart phones or the internet. This could include:

- Hurtful, embarrassing or threatening material posted online (eg. on social network websites)
- Nasty messages sent as texts, emails or other websites or apps
- Being excluded from an online game
- Fake profiles on a social network to make fun of others

Avoid Labels

The term bullying is highly emotive, often causing great anxiety, fear and shame to both the children involved and their families. None of us wants to hear that our child has been bullying others, however if this is the case it is important that we concentrate our disapproval on the behaviour, not the child.

For that reason, we should avoid using the word 'bully' to describe a child. To call a child a bully is to label the child, not his or her behaviour. It suggests that it is something that they are, as opposed to reflecting the unacceptable behaviour that they have engaged in. Our problem is not with the child, but rather with his or her behaviour.

We must help them to understand why their behaviour is unacceptable, recognise the impact that it is having on another or others and support them to identify ways that they can rectify the situation.

How to spot signs a child is being bullied

You may be unsure if your child is involved in a bullying incident. He or she could be displaying bullying behaviour, being bullied or upset because they have seen others behaving badly. If you suspect that your child is involved in bullying then look out for these signs:

- Becoming withdrawn
- Coming home with cuts and bruises
- 'Losing' belongings
- Reluctant to go to school or a youth club - anywhere where the person(s) displaying bullying behaviour are
- Doing less well at their schoolwork
- Changes in their mood - becoming depressed, angry, unhappy
- Changes in their behaviour, for example wetting the bed
- Showing aggression at home with siblings and other family members
- Feeling anxious
- Difficulties sleeping
- Wanting to change their journey or time of their journey to school.

But there could be other reasons for these signs, so try to avoid jumping to conclusions. Ask yourself the following questions:

- Is there anything else bothering my child?
- Have there been changes at home like a new baby, or divorce or separation?

If there has not been any other changes and you suspect bullying may be the cause of the distress and anxiety, it is important to try and act as early as you can.



Tips for talking to your child about being bullied

If you are worried that your child is being bullied, asking the following types of questions may help:

- What did you do at school today?
- Who did you play with?
- What did you play?
- Did you enjoy it?
- Would you have liked to play with someone else or play different games?
- What did you do at lunchtime?
- Is there anyone that you don't like at school? Why?
- Are you looking forward to going to school tomorrow?

Ask questions to suit the needs of your child. The type of questions you ask may depend on the age of your child, their level of understanding and their anxiety about the situation.

If your child finds it hard to talk about being bullied, or has communication difficulties, you could:

- Draw pictures of your child's day, or ask them to draw what has happened during their day. For example, you could draw pictures of them at break, at lunchtime, in the classroom or moving about the school. Draw what games they played
- Use toys, puppets or pets to encourage your child to talk. You could use them to tell a story of a child being bullied and show how important it is to tell someone. Your child may feel more comfortable telling a toy or puppet what is happening
- Use a diary system or a box where you and your child write comments and questions you can talk about later
- Use scales to rate how your child is feeling at different times during their day. For example, you could use numbers or traffic light symbols, where the different numbers, or colours, mean different feelings. If you use a traffic light system, use green for feeling good, orange for okay and red for upset
- Use pictures of faces showing different expressions to explain feelings. You could draw pictures of happy, sad, angry, crying faces and ask your child to choose one to match how they feel
- Use visual prompts like pictures in books, communication boards (visual symbols organised by topic) and cue cards (that contain a message in a picture or written format)



Coping with the effects of bullying and developing strategies to stop it

No parent likes to think about their child being bullied or displaying bullying behaviour but the fact is, more than half of all children are involved - either as a perpetrator, target or witness. So, there's a good chance you'll have to deal with it at some point. If your child is being bullied there are things you can do to help them.

Tips to help your child

- “Listen without getting angry or upset,” says Sandra Hiller, Family Lives. “Put your own feelings aside, sit down and actually listen to what your child is telling you - then show you have done so by ‘playing back’ to them what you hear. Ask your child: “How do you want me to take this forward?” rather than just taking over so they don’t feel excluded from deciding what to do or end up even more stressed/worried than they were already.”
- Reassure your child it’s not their fault. There’s still a stigma attached to bullying and some children feel they’ve brought it upon themselves. Remind them that many celebrities have been bullied too. Being bullied isn’t about being weak and displaying bullying behaviour isn’t about being strong.
- Encourage your child to try to appear confident - even if they don’t feel it. Body language and tone of voice speak volumes.
- Sometimes people say nasty things because they want a certain reaction or to cause upset, so if your child gives them the impression they’re not bothered, the person(s) displaying bullying behaviour are more likely to stop. Role-play bullying scenarios and practise your child’s responses. Talk about how our voices, bodies and faces send messages just the same way our words do.
- A process for helping children to develop more appropriate responses to a range of situations through reflecting is called ‘Worth a Re-Think’. This structure is excellent at reflecting on what happened, the resulting feeling and the outcome. Then repeating this with alternative choices of actions and feelings and how this may change the outcome. It is important to validate all suggestions including more angry responses and to discuss the outcomes if this action was chosen. During this time you can practice various scripts to equip your child with resources for managing challenging situations which they may face.

1. Talk with your child using the 5 questions below. You may need to simplify the language to suit your child’s age and understanding.

Happenings →	Thoughts →	Feelings →	Behaviour →	Consequence
What happened?	What did you think?	How did you feel?	What did you do?	Consequences
Sarah said I couldn’t play with her	I had no friends and no one likes me	I felt sad and lonely	I sat on my own on the bench	Didn’t enjoy lunchtime and didn’t take part in my afternoon lesson because I felt sick

2. “Next time someone says that you can’t play with them, what could you do differently to have a fun dinner time (consequence) and feel good”?

Happenings →	Thoughts	Feelings	Behaviour	Consequence
What happened?	What did you think?	How did you feel?	What did you do?	Consequences
Sarah said I couldn't play with her	She is wanting to play with Amanda today and that's ok. I have other friends I like to play with. I can play with Sarah tomorrow	A bit sad not to play with Sarah	Go and play with Cora. She is good fun and likes to play with me	Had fun at lunch time and enjoyed the afternoon

- Don't let the bullying dominate their life. Help your child develop new skills in a new area. This might mean encouraging them to join a club or activity like drama or self-defence. This builds confidence, helps keep the problem in perspective and offers a chance to make new friends. Ease up on pressure in other less-important areas like nagging about an untidy bedroom.
- Drawing pictures of the bullying and some different ways your child could deal with it. You could draw pictures in the style of a cartoon strip which show your child walking away from the bullying or telling someone. Then talk about the different responses, what might not work and which is best for your child.
- Using 'social stories' to help your child understand what bullying is and learn skills to cope with what's happening. Social stories describe a situation and focus on a few key points, such as what will happen and how people might react. The goal of social stories is to increase a child's understanding and make them more comfortable in different situations. You can use social stories to explain times and places where bullying might happen, like break times, assemblies, or queuing for lunch. The National Autistic Society has further information about social stories, see www.autism.org.uk
- Talk about bullying with your child at home, when appropriate. It is very tempting to ask your child as soon as they get home "what did she do today?" or "did they leave you alone today?" Try to avoid this. Seek out the positives of the day and assess their mood from their responses and behaviour. Continue to keep the lines of communication open and encourage your child to talk about anything if they are concerned.



Tips for building your child's confidence and self-esteem

To develop your child's confidence and self-esteem, you could:

- Praise and encourage your child for all the good things they do and when they're trying new things. Tell them what they have done that you liked
- Put a picture of your child with family members on a wall in their room to remind them that they are not alone
- Show that you have confidence in them, for example, "tying laces is hard, but I know you'll get there in the end"
- Spend time with them and take time to listen to them
- Work on social and communication skills, for example how to take turns, how to introduce themselves. You can do this through play and in day-to-day family life
- Reassure your child that you love them and being bullied is not their fault. There is a lot that you, as a parent, can do to help support your child with these issues

Your feelings

Many parents feel a range of emotions when they find out their child is being bullied, from anxiety and guilt to anger. It's important to try to remain calm and remember there is a way forward and steps you can take to help your child and change the situation.

Managing your feelings

It is natural to have these feelings but there are things you can do to help cope:

- Talk about how you are feeling, perhaps with your family and friends
- Remember you're not alone and it can be resolved
- Reassure yourself that you're doing a good job
- Get support to help you deal with the situation from friends and family, local support groups and anti-bullying organisations
- Enjoy time together as a family

It is important to talk about the situation within the family and also getting outside help to deal with the bullying, like talking to the school.



What is expected from schools?

The Education and Libraries (NI) Order 2003 places specific duties upon the Board of Governors of a grant-aided school:

- **Article 17** - To safeguard and promote the welfare of registered pupils at all times when the pupils are at school or in the control or charge of a member of school staff
- **Article 18** - To ensure that there is a written child protection policy, to determine the measures to be taken to protect pupils from abuse and to review these measures on a timely basis
- **Article 19** - To consult with the pupils and parents before making or revising the Discipline Policy. Principals are also required to consult with pupils and their parents before determining measures to encourage good behaviour and to prevent bullying.

Letting the school know your concerns

Within a school's anti-bullying policy it should clearly state the different stages for parents to report a bullying concern. This is therefore a general guide to best practice. Please refer to a copy of the school's anti-bullying policy for specific details of their reporting stages.

The key stages of reporting a bullying concern within school are:

1. **Stage 1** - Report to the Class Teacher / Form Teacher / Year Head
2. **Stage 2** - Report to the Principal
3. **Stage 3** - Report to the Board of Governors

It is advisable that you complete all three stages of reporting concerns in order, to ensure that you have given the school a fair opportunity to resolve your concern. Unfortunately there is not necessarily a quick resolution and so it is important that you try to allow the school adequate time to implement their proposed action. To do this however, parents need to be confident that 'something is being done' and so it is in the school's best interest to keep parents informed of progress.

Communication between teacher, parent and pupil is key. For you as a parent it is really important to provide as much information regarding incidents at each stage and as soon as possible.

Stage 1 - Reporting concerns to the Class/Form Teacher or Year Head

- Inform the child's class teacher, either at a meeting or over the phone, of the bullying concerns, giving details of incidents, times/dates, people involved etc.
- Agree with the teacher what will be done by the school/you and in what timescale.
- During this time when the school is taking action, keep talking to your child at home and keep recording any bullying incidents that occur. Give this new information to the teacher. It is also important that you present a confident demeanour to your child with the expectation that this matter will be resolved.
- Remember, try to give an appropriate length of time to see results from a school's action— there is not always a quick resolution.

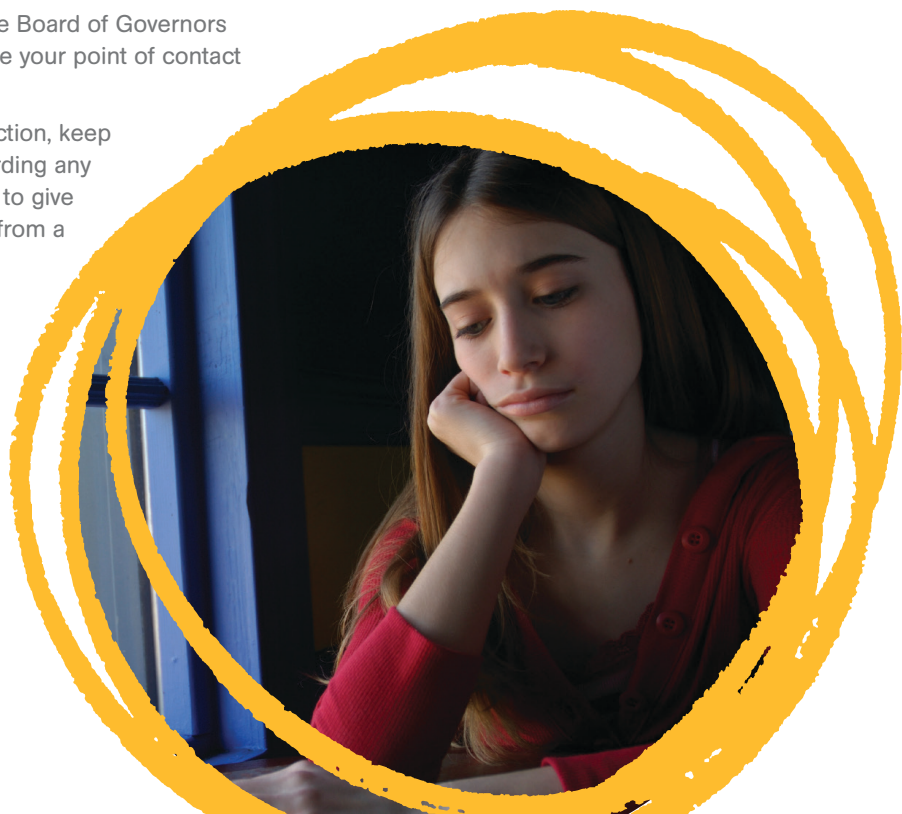
- Make contact with the teacher according to the agreed timescales to check on progress.
- If the bullying incidents continue, or you are dissatisfied with the response from the teacher, then you can move onto Stage 2.

Stage 2 - Reporting concerns to the Principal

- Phone or write to the Principal and request a meeting to discuss your child. If you want you can take a friend or family member to the meeting for support. Inform the school of your intention to do this.
- In advance of the meeting try to prepare an account of the incidents that have occurred (including details such as date, time, location of incidents, people involved etc.), and highlight from your knowledge what the teacher's response has been, following your previous discussions (Stage 1).
- At the meeting ask if someone is taking notes and request a copy. Explain your concerns, providing details of incidents, people involved and how your child has been affected. Refer to the school's anti-bullying policy identifying procedures and strategies that may help, which still need to be implemented.
- Discuss and agree with the Principal actions, timescales and follow up meeting to report progress.
- During this time when the school is taking action, keep talking to your child at home and keep recording any bullying incidents that occur, again maintaining to your child a confident expectation of a positive resolution to the issues.
- Remember, try to give an appropriate length of time to see results from the school's action - there is not always a quick resolution. You should be in contact with the Principal according to the agreed timescales. Try to keep all copies of letters and notes from meetings for your records. If you are dissatisfied however with the response from the Principal then you can move on to Stage 3.

Stage 3 - Reporting concerns to the Board of Governors

- Write to the Chair of the Board of Governors, requesting a meeting to discuss your child with the school's Governors. Inform the secretary if you intend to take a friend or family member to the meeting for support.
- In advance of the meeting prepare an account of the incidents that have occurred (including details such as date, time, location of incidents, people involved etc.), and highlight from your knowledge what the school's response has been, following your previous discussions (Stages 1 & 2). Again, refer to the school's anti-bullying policy, identifying procedures and strategies that may help, which still need to be implemented.
- At the meeting ask if someone is taking notes and request that a copy is made available to you. Explain your concerns, providing the list of incidents.
- Discuss and agree with the member(s) of the Board of Governors actions and timescales and agree who will be your point of contact to check how the situation is progressing.
- During this time when the school is taking action, keep talking to your child at home and keep recording any bullying incidents that occur. Remember, try to give an appropriate length of time to see results from a school's action - there is not always a quick resolution but in the meantime you can keep checking in with the person agreed above as to progress.



Tips on approaching the school

- Work with the school to resolve the issue. It may not happen immediately, but do keep meeting and working with them
- Keep a record of all the incidents
- Take photos if there are any physical injuries
- Ask for the bullying to be recorded in your child's individual education plan, statement (if they have one), and speak about it at their annual review
- If your child is unable to attend school because of the stress of the bullying, go to your GP
- Ask for a copy of the school's anti-bullying policy, behaviour policy and complaints procedure
- If the bullying continues, you may want to make a complaint. Follow the school's complaints procedure. Put your complaint in writing and keep a copy of it. If you're not happy with the way your complaint is being resolved, go straight to the next stage
- Make sure you get support for yourself and ask for help if you need it.

Example strategies the school may employ

- Have a named person your child can tell about the bullying. This could be their teacher, support worker or SENCO. Make sure your child knows where they are based in the school and how they can find them
- Have a safe place your child can go to during breaks or lunchtimes. This may be a quiet area, a designated classroom or the library. Make sure the lunchtime supervisors are aware of this
- Create a sign or signal your child can use at school to communicate with staff if they need to leave the room
- Contact the behaviour support team in the Education Authority
- Encourage communication between teaching staff and lunchtime supervisors so they're aware of what could be happening in the playground and classrooms
- Provide a safe area of the playground which has more supervision
- Allow children the opportunity to stay indoors at lunch and break times, for example, by setting up lunchtime clubs and activities
- Provide support at times of transition, like moving from primary to secondary school and moving from a special school or unit to a mainstream school
- Review the anti-bullying policy regularly and involve parents and pupils in the reviews
- Work on social skills like practising letting other people speak first, listening to other people's opinions without reacting aggressively, understanding body language
- Give praise and encouragement.

Anti-bullying policies

All schools should have an anti-bullying policy in place. The policy should set out the steps that will be taken by the school when incidents of bullying are reported or identified by staff, parents and children. You may find it useful to request a copy of the policy.

Discipline and behaviour policies

You can also request copies of the school's discipline and behaviour policies. These may be useful if your child reacts to bullying or if your child exhibits bullying behaviour because of their condition. When they are developing and implementing their discipline policies, schools are advised to take into account pupils' needs. This is so the sanctions are reasonable and proportionate given the pupil's special educational needs, disability, age and any religious requirements affecting the pupil.

If your child is exhibiting bullying behaviour

If a child is being bullied they may bully someone else because they're mimicking behaviour or releasing their frustrations. Sometimes a child may exhibit bullying behaviour because of their condition. For example they may have a high pain threshold and so play roughly, they may copy other children's behaviour, they may crave sensory input in different ways or they may have behavioural difficulties. Sometimes a child may react violently to prolonged bullying.

The school's response

If your child behaves or reacts in any ways like those examples mentioned above, the school may use sanctions to respond to the behaviour. School discipline and pupil behaviour policies advise schools how they might take account of a child's disability when applying the school's behaviour policy. This may mean the school takes different action or makes reasonable adjustments when applying the policy. You may find it useful to ask for copies of the school's behaviour and discipline policies. If your child has an individual education plan or statement it may include how to manage their behaviour.

Why don't schools just get rid of 'bullies' or at least punish them severely?

Parents are often surprised when schools just don't automatically suspend, isolate or expel pupils who exhibit bullying behaviour, or at least punish them severely. Of course a parent's first concern is their own child's safety and happiness and it is natural to wonder why a school wants to work with their tormentors instead of just automatically punishing them (of course there are circumstances when sanctions are necessary).

There are three reasons:

1. The majority of children and young people throughout their education have seen, exhibited or been at the receiving end of bullying type behaviour. The 'growing-up' process is about learning what is and is not appropriate. There is no evidence that young people are born 'bullies' or 'victims' – their roles and how they interact with each other change with age, where they are, how their personal life is at that time or who they are with.
2. If schools simply moved the problem onto another school, then others will continue to suffer. Surely the best thing to do is to deal with the problem and try to stop this form of behaviour? Sometimes a young person acting in an inappropriate manner is a sign of deeper issues in their lives, and we have a duty of care for them too.
3. The most important reason is that there **are** ways of changing behaviour. Helping young people to understand how their actions make people feel, the effect of their behaviour on others, giving them support to manage the problems they are facing in their own lives – all of these things can change bullying behaviour for good rather than just park. Many relationships that were felt to be acrimonious at one stage often are repaired as the young people progress through school, and indeed many new friendships forged!

When people who are targets of bullying behaviour are asked what they want to happen, they very rarely talk about revenge, they almost always say: 'I just want it to stop'. Maybe we should think the same way?



Tips for parents to help deal with aggressive behaviour

If your child displays bullying behaviour towards other children

- You could talk to your child about what has happened using the “Worth a Re-Think” structure on page 5
- Reassure them that you love them but don’t like their behaviour
- Praise and encourage them whenever possible
- Use ‘social stories’ to explore how they are feeling and how the other child may be feeling. Visit www.autism.org.uk for more information on Social Stories
- If your child has difficulties in understanding feelings, use pictures of faces showing different expressions (happy, sad, angry) to explain feelings and how the other child may be feeling
- Ensure the school is aware of any reasons which may have an effect on their behaviour.

If your child is being bullied and reacts violently

If your child reacts violently to bullying, you could:

- Talk about different ways they can respond to bullying.
- Draw pictures of the bullying and the different ways your child could deal with it. For example, you could draw cartoon strips which show your child hitting back, or walking away from the bullying, or telling someone. Then talk about the different responses - what might not work and which is best for your child.

You can also:

- Explore what could be reasonable responses to different levels of bullying, from teasing to more serious bullying
- Establish a safe place where they can go if they’re being bullied
- Make the school aware of the bullying and tell them how it is affecting your child
- Encourage your child to use other ways to let go of their frustrations
- Work on building their self-confidence and self-esteem
- Create a sign or signal they can use to show staff at school if the situation becomes too much and they need to leave the room.

Cyberbullying on the internet and mobile phones

Whilst new technologies are fun, educational and a means to socialise, these technologies can also be abused. Cyberbullying is sending nasty or threatening text messages and emails, making abusive remarks on social media on the internet, and taking and sharing humiliating images or videos to deliberately upset, intimidate or harass another person. As more young people have mobile phones and access the internet, cyberbullying is increasing. Some children are persistently cyberbullied and children with SEN are more likely to be targeted, especially if their disability is visible/identifiable.

How to stop and prevent cyberbullying

Unlike older types of bullying, cyberbullying is not something a child can be advised to 'just walk away' from, because cyberbullying does not happen in a particular time or space. It can also involve someone, or a group of people who may try and remain anonymous. Ask your child if they know who is bullying them. If the cyberbully is another child at their school, tell someone in the school. Once something is put out into cyberspace, it can spread rapidly and content can resurface in the future. So it can be very hard for anyone targeted to 'move on'. Cyberbullying can be very serious and can amount to a criminal offence under a range of different laws. Do supervise children and make sure they are aware of advice on respecting others and staying safe on the internet. Ask your child to tell you if someone or something is worrying them makes them feel uncomfortable. You could ask your child to give you tips on how to stay safe online. Does your child know how to block senders of nasty texts, change their account settings to 'private', withhold personal details, and report online abuse to website administrators and phone service providers? One study found that reporting an incidence of bullying to the network or internet service provider corresponded with a 43 per cent success rate in stopping the bullying problem.



Useful Organisations:

There are organisations that provide support to children who are being bullied and their families. Some organisations offer support and training for parents and young people.

NIABF

c/o National Children's Bureau
Tel: 028 90875006
www.endbullying.org.uk

Childline

Helpline: 0800 1111 (24 hours)
www.childline.org.uk
Helpline for children offering emotional support and counselling on any issue, including bullying.

Childnet International

www.childnet-int.org
Works with organisations around the world to help make the Internet a safe place for children.

Education Support for Northern Ireland

www.education-support.org.uk
Information for parents, students and teachers about bullying and other issues.

Equality Commission for Northern Ireland

Tel: 028 90 500 600
www.equalityni.org
Provides information and guidance on discrimination and human rights issues, including disability discrimination.

Thinkuknow

www.thinkuknow.co.uk
The Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (CEOP) online safety site has advice and tips for children, adults and professionals with information in English and Welsh.

UK Safer Internet Centre

Helpline: 0844 381 4772
www.saferinternet.org.uk
Information and resources on internet safety, and safe and responsible use new technologies, for parents, teachers and children.

Mencap – Don't Stick It, Stop It!

Helpline: 0808 808 1111
www.dontstickit.org.uk
www.mencap.org.uk
'Don't Stick It, Stop It!' is a campaign against bullying for young people with learning disabilities and their families.

National Autistic Society

Helpline: 0845 070 4004
www.nas.org.uk
Offers support for people with autism and their families and has resources for parent carers, school staff and young people on preventing bullying. There is also information on 'Circle of Friends' to promote inclusion in mainstream schools.

References

1. Frederickson, N., & Turner J. (2003) 'Utilizing the classroom peer group to address children's social needs: an evaluation of the Circle of Friends intervention approach', *The Journal of Special Education*, 36 (4) pp. 234-245.
2. Beatbullying, *Virtual Violence: Protecting children from cyberbullying* (2009) p44.
3. Contact a Family: *For families with Disabled Children: A guide to dealing with bullying for parents of disabled children*.



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