



A guide to dealing with bullying: for parents of disabled children

Information for families

UK

Introduction

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 is for parents of disabled children. It contains information about spotting the signs of bullying, the action you can take, your child's rights and stories and tips from other parents. We hope this guide will give you ideas about preventing and stopping bullying.

We spoke to a number of parents of disabled children who helped us to write and update this guide. The quotes we included are their stories, thoughts and experiences. We thank them for sharing their insight and experience.

Throughout this guide we use the term 'disabled children'. We use this term to include disabled children, children with special educational needs (SEN), children with a medical condition and children with additional needs.

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What is bullying?

Bullying can take place anywhere: in schools, in the wider community and online. Although bullying can take place between two people, it often involves the presence of others.

The Anti-Bullying Alliance defines bullying as 'the repetitive, intentional hurting of one person by another, where the relationship involves an imbalance of power. Bullying can be carried out physically, verbally, emotionally or through cyberspace.'

Bullying is often aimed at certain groups of people, for example because of race, religion, disability or sexuality. Bullying can be:

- verbal: name calling, insulting, teasing
- physical: pushing, shoving, hitting, kicking, damage to personal property and belongings

- indirect: spreading nasty stories, exclusion from friendship groups, rumour spreading
- cyberbullying: sending nasty text messages, email, Facebook and other social media posts, sharing photos on forums, websites and instant messages.

Disabled children may also experience forms of bullying like:

- manipulative bullying: where a person is controlling someone
- conditional friendship: where a child thinks someone is being their friend but times of friendliness are alternated with times of bullying
- exploitative bullying: where features of a child's condition are used to bully them.

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"He wanted to please them, wanted to be friends, so he didn't see it as a problem."

"It wasn't long before people realised that they could take advantage of her."

"He's hypersensitive to smell. They'd spray deodorant in the room so he had to leave the room."



Disabled children are more vulnerable to bullying

Published research suggests that disabled children are more likely to be bullied and that children with combinations of difficulties are more likely to be affected.¹ A survey by the charity Mencap discovered that eight out of 10 children with a learning disability have been bullied.

Why are disabled children more vulnerable to bullying?

Disabled children may be more vulnerable to bullying because:

- of negative attitudes towards disability
- of a lack of understanding of different disabilities and conditions
- they may be seen as 'different'
- they may not recognise that they are being bullied
- they may be doing different work or have additional support at school
- they may be more isolated than others due to their disability
- they may have difficulties telling people about bullying
- they may find it harder to make friends as a result of their condition
- they may exhibit bullying behaviour
- they may experience lots of change; for example, moving from a mainstream to a special school, or spending periods of time in hospital.

It is understandable to feel worried, but it's important to remember that not all disabled children are bullied.

"Don't assume your child is going to be bullied but be prepared in case they are."

"Prepare your child for school. If you're worried that they're going to be a target for bullies think, 'How do I prepare them for this?' Build their self-confidence and self-esteem."

Spotting if your child is being bullied

It might be hard to know if your child is being bullied. Some children hide their feelings and don't find it easy to tell an adult what is happening. Children with communication difficulties may not understand they are being bullied or may have difficulty in telling someone what is happening.

"My son has been bullied on school transport. He was a victim of 'happy slapping' but didn't tell us about it because he thought the boys were being his friends. We found out about it, not from our son, but through a friend whose daughter had come home crying as she was so upset about what she had witnessed on the bus."

"It's really hard to find out from him what's happening. He doesn't realise that it's bullying and that they're not just playing."

Tips from parents on how to spot signs a child is being bullied

We asked parents how they realised their child was being bullied. They came up with a number of clues to look for:

- becoming withdrawn
- coming home with cuts and bruises
- refusing to go to school or a youth club – anywhere where the bullies 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
- sleep problems
- getting more headaches, stomach aches and other minor illnesses
- wanting to change their journey or time of their journey to school.

"He looked really fed up and was quieter than usual. He felt sick on a Monday morning which I think was anxiety. I knew something wasn't quite right."

"He'd be upset in the morning, saying he didn't want to go. He'd think of anything to try and get out of going to school he was so unhappy."

"He was coming home with his clothing torn, his hood missing, sometimes with bruises on him. He was often upset and started having nightmares."

Some children, though, do tell their parents that they're being bullied.

"We were lucky. When it started, she told us straight away."

Talking to your child

If you think your child is being bullied, try to talk to them about it. However, some children find it hard to talk about it and will not respond to direct questioning.

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"I didn't push the issue if he was reluctant to talk, I'd wait for him to open up. I'd ask him questions about his day, 'What did you have for lunch? Did you see so and so today? Did you play with him? Who did you play with?'"

Tips for talking to your child about being bullied

If you are worried that your child is being bullied, you could ask the following types of questions:

- 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.

"I can't just ask him what happened at school, I have to skirt around the issue."

"When I asked about the bruises he would lie and say he fell over. Eventually after a couple of days and some gentle questioning from us, he then said what happened."

If your child has difficulties explaining what is happening

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, 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).

"I drew a diagram of a body and asked him to show me what had happened to him. It was horrible when I realised the extent of this."

The National Autistic Society (NAS) has information about different communication tools and resources you could use. See page 31 for contact details.

"I can't just ask him what happened at school, I have to skirt around the issue."

A parent

Mencap's antibullying campaign, 'Don't stick it, Stop it' has a website for children and young people with a learning disability, www.dontstickit.org.uk that shows how bullying makes a cartoon character, Sam, feel and what he should do to change the situation.

How to respond if your child tells you they are being bullied

It's natural to be angry and upset when you find out your child is being bullied, but it's important to respond to your child calmly and quietly. If your child sees you get upset they may feel anxious and not tell you everything that's happened. Keep calm, this guide will help you understand what to do next and where to go for further help.

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

The effects on your child

Being bullied is a horrible experience for any child, but the impact of bullying on disabled children may be different. For example, a child with communication difficulties may already find it hard to mix with others in social situations but if they are bullied, they may become more withdrawn. This means they might miss out on opportunities to develop their confidence and social skills.

"She struggles with friendships and sustaining friendships. She's lost her self-esteem."

Support for your child

There are lots of ways to help develop your child's confidence. Many parents we talked to described different forms of support that had been put in place to help their child.

"She has a mentor at the school which she sees once a week. They work on building her self-esteem and self-worth and help with friendships. They worked on her confidence and gradually brought her out of herself, building up the confidence she lost. It's so nice to see the difference."

Your child can also find support on the phone, online and through support groups. Call our freephone helpline for more information and see 'Useful organisations' on page 29.

How you can help your child deal with bullying

Disabled children may experience bullying in different ways and have different needs. A range of responses are needed. There is no 'one size fits all' approach. If people are bullying your child by text messages, on the phone, or online, see page 26.

"Treat the child as an individual. Work with the situation, if something doesn't work find an alternative."

Some children, due to the nature of their disability, might not be able to understand the process or the ideas behind some ways to help deal with bullying.

"She was taught a few strategies but I'm not sure she used them. Some of it was too difficult, too abstract for her."

Many parents we spoke to felt a range of emotions when they found out their child was 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.

"I went to high anxiety within seconds. I wanted to get in there and get it sorted. It took an enormous effort and support from my partner to take stock of the situation and to be patient."

"I felt that I'd let her down because I didn't know. I really didn't know. It was my worst nightmare and so frightening. Why is this happening? Is it something I've done?"

Ideas parents suggested to us

We asked parents what they have done to deal with bullying and how they helped their children. Suggestions parents made include:

- Drawing pictures of the bullying and ways your child could deal with it. You could draw a cartoon strip which shows 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 'Useful organisations' on page 29.
- Giving your child the opportunity to safely express their feelings with you



- Drawing a map of the school and get your child to colour in different areas to show how safe they feel; for example, green for safe for the classroom, the toilets might be red for danger, or orange for the less visible parts of the playground.
- Practicing responses your child can use if they're bullied, like saying no, walking away confidently, telling someone.
- Working on social skills, reading facial expressions and body language, listening skills and tone of voice.
- Talk about bullying with your child at home, when appropriate.

You can find tips on dealing with the school on page 16.

It can be very difficult letting your child go to school after you find out they're being bullied.

"At work, my mind used to wander. I'd be thinking, 'it's lunchtime, I hope he's okay.'"

"I felt sick with nerves making him go to school every day. I worried about what was happening."

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
- if there is a support group for your child's condition, contact them. They will probably have had similar enquiries from other parents
- remember you're not alone and it can be resolved
- reassure yourself that you're doing a good job
- contact your local parent carer forum for support from other parents in your area, see 'Useful organisations', on page 29
- get support to help you deal with the situation from friends and family, and anti-bullying organisations
- enjoy time together as a family.

Call our freephone helpline on 0808 808 3555 for advice and details of local and national support groups.

"Sometimes parents can feel that they have to handle this on their own. This doesn't have to be the case, support is out there. You're not the only one in

Bullying can affect the whole family. Many of the parents we spoke to experienced a range of emotions when they found out their child was being bullied, from anxiety and guilt to anger. It's important to remember there is a way forward.

this situation. You will come out the other side, hopefully for the better."

Even if the bullying was resolved, some parents still felt anxious:

"Now it's in the back of my mind as it's happened once before. I notice any comments about so and so not playing with him. I'm trying to reassure myself I'm doing a good job."

"I felt anxious that the bullying was continuing even after it was resolved. I was worried if it was still continuing, is he being left out, is he interacting with other children? I spoke to the school about this and they let me come in at lunchtime and discreetly watch my son in the playground, so I could see him playing with others."

The effects on siblings

Bullying can impact on the whole family. Children and young people who have disabled siblings or relatives can also be

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 part of a family
- tell them 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 and let them know how much they contribute to the family
- 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
- seek opportunities for your child to meet other children and develop social networks. Call our freephone helpline for details of local and national support groups.

There is a lot that you can do to help support your child with these issues. A number of organisations provide resources for parents to help you, including:



- Changing Faces has information about strategies to develop social skills and on making friends
- The National Autistic Society has information about 'Circles of Friends'
- Mencap have a Young Ambassadors scheme, where young people are trained and supported to act locally as spokespeople who raise awareness and promote the importance of supporting young people with learning disabilities
- Childline has online information and ideas for children and young people to help build self-esteem.

For contact details of these and other organisations that can help, see 'Useful organisations' on page 29.



affected by bullying. They may experience bullying because of their sibling's or relative's disability.

Some siblings in families we spoke to had experienced this:

"She came home in tears saying they'd been saying various things out loud – 'that's her with the spaz brother!'"

"Her brother was bullied at school. Sometimes she was also bullied. You know how rumours are spread – things he'd done in the past. On one hand she felt so protective, so defensive of her sibling. On the other huge resentment – he was causing her to get this grief which was out of her control."

Parents stressed the importance of talking about the situation within the family and

also getting outside help to deal with the bullying. A child may try and protect their sibling at school, so let the school know what is happening.

"We make bullying a point of discussion rather than a taboo issue. We talked about what she should be saying to people, how to explain his condition. Hopefully it made it clearer about how to explain it and her stronger to deal with it."

Our Siblings guide

Contact a Family has a *Siblings* guide with information on how brothers and sisters of a child who has a disability or long-term condition can be supported and some of the typical issues that come up. Call our freephone helpline for a free copy.

Bullying at school

UK schools, including academies and free schools, don't have to have an anti-bullying policy by law (although a lot do), but they do have to have a behaviour policy which outlines measures to encourage good behaviour in schools, particularly preventing all forms of bullying among pupils.

Anti-bullying policies

A good 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. The policy may be available on the school website, or ask the school for a copy.

Private, fee-paying schools are not required to have a behaviour or anti-bullying policy, but it is good practice to do so.

It can be hard for parents to approach their child's school about bullying. It is important to let the school know your concerns straight away, though. Schools have a duty of care towards their pupils. This means that a school must look after the safety and wellbeing of their pupils as a reasonable parent would.

Discipline and behaviour policies

You can also request copies of the school's discipline and behaviour policies. These may be available on the school's website and can be useful if your child reacts to bullying or if your child exhibits bullying behaviour because of their condition.

When the school is developing and implementing their discipline policies, schools are advised to take into account pupils' needs, including disabled 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.

"When he was first diagnosed with ADHD, I requested a copy of the school's anti-bullying policy and discipline policy. I didn't feel I needed to refer to it but knew I had it as back up if necessary."

"I wrote my concerns in his communication book and the teachers looked for any incidents."

Government anti-bullying guidance

In England, the Department for Education's *Preventing and Tackling Bullying advice* (2014), outlines the legal duties and powers schools have to tackle bullying. This includes guidance on dealing with the bullying of children with special educational needs and disabilities.

The guidance is aimed at schools, but you may find it useful to read, especially

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What the school can do

- Have a named person your child can tell about the bullying. This could be their teacher, support worker or special educational needs coordinator (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.
- Be responsible for the behaviour of pupils beyond the school gate, especially on school transport – behaviour outside of school can be included in the school behaviour policy.
- Provide training for school and local authority staff in special educational needs and disabilities.
- Be aware of unstructured times, like lunchtime, breaks and moving around the school. These times aren't always covered in statements or co-ordinated support plans, yet support is often needed during them.
- Don't remove the child who is being bullied from the situation – remove the child who is exhibiting bullying behaviour instead.
- Improve 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.
- Be flexible and use different anti-bullying strategies – not just one approach.
- Review the anti-bullying policy regularly and involve parents and pupils, including disabled children and parents of disabled children, in the reviews.
- Work with your child on social skills like practising letting other people speak first, listening to other people's opinions without reacting aggressively, and understanding body language.
- Give praise and encouragement to children affected by bullying.

"The most useful thing the school did over the next couple of weeks after the bullying was reported, was to ensure that his self-esteem was not damaged in any way. They praised him for all the good things he did."

if your child's school is struggling to resolve the bullying. The guidance can be found on the Department for Education website. For guidance for schools in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, see 'Useful documents on page 29.

Contacting the school

It's best to put your concerns in writing. Some schools have communication systems or policies, such as home to school books or diaries. If your child's school has a system, then follow it to let the school know about your concerns. If the school does not, then write or email the school. If you have previously told the school about your worries, then write to the head teacher and ask for a meeting. We have included a sample letter on page 33 of this guide.

Some of the parents we spoke to used these systems:

"I wrote my concerns in his communication book and the teachers looked for any incidents."

"The school had a policy about communication. You had to use the child's diary which would go to the class teacher. Then you could speak to the head of year, vice-head and head."

"I emailed the head and asked for a meeting. The school addressed the issues immediately – we were very lucky and had a good outcome."



Who to speak to

We asked parents who they spoke to when they found out their child was being bullied. The person at school they talked to varied – for some it was the class teacher or Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO). A SENCO is the member of staff who has responsibility for co-ordinating special educational needs provision in England. Other parents said they spoke to the head of year and others to the head teacher.

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"When I found out what was happening, I went straight to the teacher, head teacher and my son's support staff."

Tips on dealing with the school

We asked parents for their tips on raising concerns about bullying with the school. Parents' suggestions included:

- ask for a copy of the school's anti-bullying policy and behaviour policy
- keep a record of all the incidents (see page 32 for a bullying log you can use)
- take photos if there are any physical injuries to show the school
- if your child is unable to attend school because of the stress of the bullying, get this confirmed by your GP and let the Education Welfare Officer know about the situation
- ask for the bullying to be recorded in your child's individual education plan, statement or co-ordinated support plan (Scotland), if they have one
- work with the school to resolve the issue. It may not happen immediately, but do keep meeting and working with them
- if the bullying continues, you may want to make a complaint. Follow the school's complaints procedure. See page 18
- get advice about disability discrimination and the disability equality duty. See page 20
- seek help from an organisation that supports children affected by bullying at school, see 'Useful organisations' on page 29.

Meeting with someone at the school

If you are worried about meeting with the school, take someone with you. You could take a friend or relative to support you, or someone from a local organisation or national support group may be able to go with you.

The parent partnership service (England and Wales only) or a local advocacy service or supporter in Scotland may also be able to help. Parent partnership services provide advice, support and information to parent carers whose children have special educational needs. Not all offer support to deal with bullying at school but some can.

When you meet with the school, the bullying may not stop immediately and some actions may take longer to put in place. You may need to have several meetings to fully resolve the bullying and agree the support put in place for your child.

"I got unbelievable support from my parent partnership service. They helped me with letter writing, and with the statementing process for her emotional needs because of the bullying."

For details of your local parent partnership service, see 'Useful organisations' on page 29.

"Don't try to deal with it all yourself. Make sure you ask for help and get help. Write everything down. If there's an accident or incident at school ask for an incident report. That way you can see if there are any patterns."

"I rang the school as soon as I found out. We met with the teacher before school started the next day. No one knew I was going in. The school's response was very good. They moved heaven and earth to help us, which was half the battle. He listened and said he would do something about it. I felt apprehensive about leaving her there. But they [the children exhibiting bullying behaviour] left her alone."

If your child is at an independent or private school, call our freephone helpline on 0808 808 3555 for further information about the action you can take.

The school's response

Many of the parents we spoke to had positive responses from schools and found that the bullying was dealt with and support was put in place. Here are some of their experiences:

"I emailed the head and asked for a meeting. My child came to the meeting with me. The school addressed the issues immediately – we were very lucky and had a good outcome. We have a very supportive head who said he would address it. There was none of this, 'that doesn't happen here.'"

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.

Dealing with bullying

There are a number of methods used by schools to deal with bullying. Some of these are listed below. Not all schools will use these, some use a combination and others have policies that just focus on behaviour. Ask the school for their behaviour and anti-bullying policy to see what they do.

- 'Circle of Friends' was developed to promote the inclusion of students with disabilities and difficulties into mainstream school. It's a programme involving pupils, teachers and parents.
- 'Telling schools' – if the child being bullied is unable to or too scared to tell a teacher, all other children know it is their duty to report it.
- Peer support programmes – everyone in the school knows bullying is not

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acceptable and older pupils volunteer and are trained to care for younger pupils. These volunteer pupils are identified by a badge or ribbon.

- 'No blame' support groups – bullies are not blamed and are encouraged to work in a group together with a teacher to suggest a solution.
- 'Whole school individual approach' this uses mentoring in addition to circle time, restorative justice and quiet clubs.
- Group and individual sessions based on listening and behavioural therapy, looking at anger management, social skills and resilience, emotional issues and relaxation.
- Provide training and resources that encourage staff and children to think of ways to make their school more inclusive, helping them to challenge bullying in their school.
- Develop projects that provide opportunities for disabled and non disabled children to spend time together, looking to bust the myths and change views and attitudes.

The National Autistic Society has further information about Circle of Friends. See 'Useful organisations' on page 29.

Taking further action

Unfortunately, some parents don't have such a positive response from the school and have to take further action.

"We had a meeting with the school but the head said that bullying didn't happen in his school so there wasn't a problem. There was an anti-bullying policy but as my daughter wasn't being bullied there was no need to use it."

"They said to get used to it as all children get called names."

"They were totally ineffective and we were made to feel the onus was on us, not the school, to deal with it."

If you have spoken to the class teacher and you are not satisfied with their response or the action they have taken to resolve the bullying, you can speak to the head teacher.

"If the school hadn't addressed it, I would have taken it further like contacting the parent partnership service, going to the school governors, or else speaking to the local authority."

If you are still not satisfied with the action the school has taken to resolve the bullying after you've spoken to the head teacher, you can make a formal complaint.

Making a formal complaint

All schools must have a complaints policy. This may be available on the school website, or ask the school for a copy.

Make your complaint in writing and state clearly that you are making a formal complaint. Depending on the school's complaints procedure you may need to address it to the head teacher or chair of governors. However, it is a good idea to send the letter to the chair of governors anyway. Keep a copy of the letter for your records.

Help with making a complaint

A local voluntary organisation or advice agency may be able to help you with writing the letter. See 'Useful organisations' on page 29.

Getting a response to your complaint

As each school has its own complaints procedure, the response of the governors will vary. However, there are some common elements. There is usually a timescale within which you can expect to receive a response to your complaint. The governors will often appoint a sub-committee to hear your complaint and decide what action should be taken. In most cases, you can attend the sub-committee and take someone with you for support. In other situations, school governors will only accept 'paper submissions', meaning written complaints. The head teacher or another teacher will also attend and present their case.

"We had a governors meeting and they acknowledged that my daughter was bullied. The school assured me that lessons would be learnt."

Local authority maintained schools and complaining to the local authority

Most complaints about schools are dealt with internally but check the school complaints policy to see if the local authority has a role in reviewing complaints. Some local authorities have specialist staff such as anti-bullying coordinators or inclusion coordinators who may be able to help.



Complaining to the Department for Education (DfE)

The Department for Education can review complaints about local authority schools in England when the internal complaint procedure has been exhausted. You can make a complaint by completing the online complaint form at www.gov.uk.

In Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland different agencies will have a role in reviewing complaints, see page 29 for 'Useful organisations'.

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Academies and free schools and complaining to the Education Funding Agency (EFA)

The Education Funding Agency can review complaints about academies and free schools. They cannot overturn a school's decision but they can look at whether the complaint was dealt with appropriately and check that the complaints procedure meets legal requirements. You can download the procedure for dealing with complaints on the Department for Education website www.gov.uk/complain-about-school

"Keep pushing to get things sorted. Keep on the school's back. If the school isn't being responsive go to the governors, go to the education board. Don't take no for an answer."

Disability and equality in schools

The Equality Act 2010 made it unlawful to discriminate against disabled pupils and prospective pupils in all aspects of school life. This means that schools can't treat a disabled person less favourably than others for a reason which relates to their disability.

Under the Act, disabled children have the right not to be discriminated against. Schools also have a legal duty to take reasonable steps to avoid disadvantage for disabled children. If you feel that your child has experienced discrimination, you can complain to the governors of the school. If you are not satisfied, you may be able to make a claim for disability discrimination. Call our freephone helpline for advice and see 'Useful organisations' on page 29.

Taking things further

There may be other routes available, such as making a complaint to OFSTED in England or Estyn in Wales. You may need to have exhausted all other routes of complaints and even then can only complain in limited circumstances. If you are thinking of this, seek specialist advice. See 'Useful organisations' on page 29.

Local Safeguarding Children Boards

Local Safeguarding Children Boards (LSCBs) exist in England and Wales to safeguard and promote the welfare of children in their area. Many LSCBs consider anti-bullying a key part of their work and may have information about the authority's anti-bullying policy, or details of where families can find this and other help. All LSCBs have a website, which you can find by searching the internet or through contacting the Safe Network at www.safenetwork.org.uk

Legal action

Legal action should be seen as the last resort. You may consider taking legal action against the school for not protecting your child from bullying, but unfortunately there is little chance of success unless you have plenty of evidence that bullying has caused physical or mental harm. This will need to be backed up by reports from medical professionals and the school. If you are thinking of taking legal action, seek specialist advice first. Legal action can be a costly and lengthy process and getting legal funding is very difficult. See 'Useful organisations' on page 29.

Some types of bullying are against the law (see page 28).

"Incidents will happen, but the new school intervenes. There's someone there at break. There was an incident when one child was throwing dirt on my son's head and at other children. They sat the whole class down and said it was unacceptable. They have a circle time and work with children. He attends a friendship group one afternoon a week. He's doing speech and language therapy on asking and answering questions. It's a million times better."

Keeping your child off school

If the bullying continues, you may feel unable to send them to school but you may risk a fine or court action if you keep your child at home. If your child is too anxious to attend school, see your GP and contact our freephone helpline for advice.

Moving schools

Because of bullying and the school's response, some parents we spoke to moved their child to a different school. Parents were keen to add that this may not always be right for everyone.

Finding a place at a different school may not be easy, particularly if the school you prefer is full and you may need to appeal for a school place.

In England if your child has a statement of Special Educational Needs, in Scotland a Co-ordinated Support Plan, you will need to contact your local authority and request a review or change of school

Talk to the school to explain how your child's condition affects their behaviour. Also, ask the school what support is available to meet your child's special educational needs.

placement. Call our freephone helpline for further advice.

"The school has recommended that she attends a smaller school, yet there are none in our area."

"Moving schools isn't for everyone, but if you're thinking about moving schools go and look at the new schools, see what you think. It may work."

Some parents whose children moved schools had positive experiences.

"I removed him from the school and it's the best thing I've ever done. The new head said she got a pale withdrawn child. Now he's a bouncy boy who adores school and has so many friends."

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“Moving schools was the best thing we did. He thinks the school is brilliant and loves it. The school seems to be more knowledgeable of SEN. The communication with the school is much better. They will put a note in his bag the day anything happens.”

Home schooling

If the bullying is not being addressed, you may feel that you have no choice but to remove your child from school. This may be for a short period whilst waiting for a school place, or a longer term arrangement. As a parent, you have the right to home educate your child. You do not have to follow a set curriculum but must provide education that is suitable to the age, ability and aptitude of your child and to any special educational needs they may have.

If your child has a statement, or Coordinated Support Plan in Scotland, call our freephone helpline for further advice before withdrawing your child from school.

Alternative provision

Alternative provision is education arranged by local authorities for pupils who, because of exclusion, illness or other reasons, would not otherwise receive suitable education. In some areas, local authorities may agree that your child can attend specialist alternative provision for children who have experienced bullying.

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 react violently to prolonged bullying.

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.

They could also be angry, bully as a reaction to being bullied themselves and because they are lonely and believe it makes them more popular with their peers.

It is important that you try to challenge behaviours and build up your child's self-esteem to help them find ways of showing they are valuable and worth taking notice of that don't have a negative effect on others.

“I got a call from the head. Other parents had complained that he had threatened their children. The head tried to explain to them that he was autistic but the parents said that their children were no longer allowed to play with him in case he threatened them again.”

Tips for parents to help deal with aggressive behaviour

"My child dealt with bullying by swearing at them. The school responded by punishing him – not for standing up to the bullies but for swearing."

If your child bullies other children

You could talk to your child about what has happened, why they behaved as they did and what they could do instead. If they have any communication difficulties, see 'Talking to your child' 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 the National Autistic Society website in 'Useful organisations' to find out about social stories.
- If your child has difficulties understanding feelings, use pictures of faces showing different expressions (happy, sad, angry) to explain feelings and how the other child may be feeling.

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.

We have a free guide, *Understanding your child's behaviour*, that you can ask for from our freephone helpline on 0808 808 3555.

How schools help children with special educational needs

Most children with special educational needs will go to mainstream schools. Some children with special educational needs will go to a special school where they can get the specialised teaching and support which meets their needs.

In every school there will be a Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO) who is responsible for arranging and coordinating the extra support given to a child with special educational needs.

Schools must follow a 'graduated' approach to meeting a child's special educational needs. This means that increasing levels of support are given where necessary.

School-based support in England and Wales for children with SEN is called School Action and School Action Plus. In Scotland it is called Additional Support and in Northern Ireland, Stages 1 and 2 of Additional Support.

Children with statements (or Coordinated Support Plans in Scotland)

If your child has a Statement of Special Educational Needs, (or Coordinated Support Plan in Scotland), the help they receive may need to be reviewed. For further information and advice, call our freephone helpline.



The school's response

If your child behaves or reacts in any ways like those examples mentioned on page 22, the school may use sanctions to respond to the behaviour. Guidance on school discipline and pupil behaviour policies advise schools to 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.

If your child has an Individual Education Plan, a Statement, or a Coordinated Support Plan (Scotland), it may include strategies and support to manage their behaviour.

"We encouraged him to talk to someone when he was bullied. At school he could go to a support worker or a teacher. At home if a kid in the street says something, we encouraged him to come home and let it out at home. We couldn't always stop the bullying but we could work with him on how to deal with it when it happens."

One parent's story

"My son, Jacob, was being picked on by another boy. Jacob has a learning disability. He was being picked on by a boy who also has special needs but he is higher functioning than Jacob. He was upset, saying he never wanted to go to school again and was finding it difficult to go to sleep at night. It was very difficult to get him out of the home in the morning.

"However, the teaching staff were absolutely brilliant about it, I wrote my concerns in his communication book and the teachers looked out for any incidents and noticed this boy tripping him up. They spoke to this boy about his behaviour and how he should behave.

"They also spoke to Jacob about the incident and reassured him to go to them for help in the future over

subsequent issues and, to me, the most useful thing they did over the next couple of weeks was to ensure that his self-esteem was not damaged in any way, they made sure they praised him for all the good things he did and the communication between home and school was brilliant over this time so that we could also praise him and up his self-esteem and confidence.

"Jacob is now very happy and settled at school again and I commend the actions taken by his school.

"We need to ensure that bullying issues are not just about anti-bullying and disability awareness. We need to ensure that children and young people with additional needs are helped to be resilient individuals, skills which will prepare them for adulthood, as well as keeping them as confident and secure as possible within their childhood."

If your child is being bullied by a teacher or another member of staff at school

If you find out your child is being bullied by an employee of the school, stay calm. Remember it's much better to try to sort the problem out diplomatically because your child is likely to have contact with them over a number of years. Keep a record of what has happened and if the problem is not resolved, write to the head teacher and make a formal complaint. See page 18.

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Bullying outside school, on mobile phones and on the internet

Bullying doesn't just take place in schools, it can happen anywhere. If people are bullying your child in the community, by mobile phone text or online (known as 'cyberbullying'), let the school know what is happening. Schools have a legal duty to safeguard and protect pupils and manage their behaviour both on and off the school premises.

Bullying in the neighbourhood

Some of the parents we spoke to told us their children experienced bullying in their neighbourhood and community.

Talk to your local council or housing association about bullying

If you live in a council or housing association home, let them know what is happening. One parent kept a diary of the incidents to show the housing association. Councils and housing associations can take action against tenants who harass or intimidate other tenants. Some families told us they asked to be rehoused and so moved to a different area.

"We've moved away from the area now and it's much better. When we moved, I made sure that everyone knew of her disability and if they had a problem with her to come to me. Someone called her stupid recently and she went mad but I sorted it straight away."

On the way to school

If your child is being bullied on the

Tips to stop cyberbullying

1. Identify the bully or bullies if you can.
2. Stop responding to their messages or posts.
3. Save the evidence.
4. Block the bully.

way to or home from school, you can speak to the head teacher about what is happening. See 'Bullying at school' on page 13.

At leisure facilities and clubs

It is not a legal requirement for clubs or services to have an anti-bullying policy. It is, however, good practice to have one. Ask the club or service if they have an anti-bullying policy. You may also want to talk to the person organising the club to make them aware of any bullying and ask what action they can take. Some types of bullying behaviour are against the law. You can report this to a third party website or the police, see page 28.

Cyberbullying online, mobile phones and gaming

Technology can be fun, educational and a means to socialise, but can also be used to bully people. As more young people have mobile phones and access the internet, cyberbullying is increasing.

Disabled children and those with SEN are more likely to be targeted, especially if their disability is visible or identifiable.

What makes cyberbullying different from other types of bullying?

Cyberbullying is a form of bullying that, because it happens online or on mobile phones, can happen 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Cyberbullying can be done anonymously. A bully might set up fake accounts and hide their personal details or their mobile number.

What you can do to stop and prevent cyberbullying

Cyberbullying is not something a child can be easily advised to 'just walk away' from. Ask your child if they know who is bullying them. If the cyberbully is another child at their school, tell the head teacher.

Cyberbullying can be very serious and can amount to a criminal offence under a range of different laws. Do supervise your children and make sure they are aware of advice on respecting others and staying safe on the internet. Ask your child to let you know if someone or something is worrying them, or 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.²



Make sure your child knows not to retaliate or return messages but do keep copies of emails, texts and posts on social networking sites. If your child or you can make a note of the dates and times of bullying messages, along with any details about the sender's internet details, this will help to identify them.

To find out how to do this see Think You Know, a website from the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre. It has information for parents, carers and children on what you need to know and how you can report bullying online or by phone at www.thinkuknow.co.uk.

The charity Beatbullying has lots of advice and information on their website to help children stay safe online, including safety

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advice and practical tips to deal with cyberbullying. Beatbullying believes that young people are more likely to respond to advice and guidance from their peers. CyberMentors aged 11 to 17 and MiniMentors aged 5 to 11 are trained to provide online peer support. See 'Useful organisations' on page 29.

When bullying becomes a hate crime

Any crime, like stealing from someone, destroying their things, or harassing them can be a disability hate crime if it is done because of a person's disability. Using mobile phones and the internet to bully people may also break several laws.

If your child is the victim of a hate crime you could tell the school (see page 13). In some schools, students can report bullying or hate crime on the school's website.

You can also consider asking the school to report a crime to the police on your behalf.

Third-party reporting websites

A third-party reporting website is a place where you can tell someone what has happened. The third-party reporting site then tells the police for you and does not have to pass on your personal details. Stop Hate UK offer independent and confidential Hate Crime reporting services in some areas. Check their website for a list of areas at www.stophateuk.org or you can call our freephone helpline on 0808 808 3555 for information.

Contacting the police

You can contact the police about bullying. If the bully is a child over 10 years old, they are over the age of criminal

"I went to the police to ask if it would be considered a disability hate crime, and the constable took us very seriously."

responsibility in England, Wales and Scotland, so there may be action the police can take. Do not dial 999 unless your child is in immediate danger. Use the non-emergency number; 101 in England, Scotland and Wales, or 0845 600 8000 for Northern Ireland.

You could also seek legal advice about how the law can protect your child or young person, See Useful organisations on page 29.

Some of the parents we spoke to had involved the police.

"I've been to the police. The bullies were spoken to by the police and warned but it made no difference."

"I went to the police to ask if it would be considered a disability hate crime, and the constable took us very seriously."



Useful documents

There are a number of key documents produced by national governments that you may find useful.

Preventing and Tackling Bullying: Advice for head teachers, staff and governing bodies (March 2014), Department for Education (England)
www.gov.uk

Respecting Others: Anti-bullying guidance circular 23/03, Welsh Assembly
www.wales.gov.uk

A National Approach to anti-bullying for Scotland's Children and Young People (2010) www.scotland.gov.uk

Pastoral Care in Schools: Promoting Positive Behaviour (2001) – (Northern Ireland) Department for Education
www.deni.gov.uk

Useful organisations

There are a number of organisations that provide support to children who are being bullied and their families. If there is a national support group for your child's condition, they may have resources to help. You can also call our freephone helpline for advice about bullying at school on 0808 808 3555, or contact details of local and national support groups.

Some organisations offer support and training for parents and young people.

Anti-Bullying Alliance

www.anti-bullyingalliance.org.uk
Resources and information for parents and schools to help address bullying of children with special educational needs and disabilities.

Anti-Bullying Network

www.antibullying.net
Scottish organisation providing anti-bullying support to school communities on the internet, with a parents and young people's section.

Beatbullying

www.beatbullying.org
Offers online information and practical advice on dealing with bullying for children, young people, parents and professionals. Also train CyberMentors and MiniMentors to provide peer support to children and young people.

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Bullies Out

www.bulliesout.com

Information and advice for children, young people and adults in Wales.

Bullying UK

www.bullying.co.uk

Helpline: 0808 800 2222

Offers information for parents, young people and professionals who are concerned about bullying.

Changing Faces

Tel: 0845 4500 275

www.changingfaces.org.uk

Supports people with differences in facial features, hands or body.

Childline

Helpline: 0800 1111 (24 hours)

www.childline.org.uk

Offer a helpline and online support for children on any issue, including bullying.

Childnet International

www.childnet-int.org

Works with organisations to help make the Internet a safe place for children. Has online information for parents, children and young people.

Children's Law Centre

Northern Ireland

Helpline: 0808808 5678

www.childrenslawcentre.org

Provides free information and advice on legal matters relating to children and young people.

Coram Children's Legal Centre

Helpline: 0808 8020 008

www.childrenslegalcentre.com

Provides free information and advice and

to children, young people, their families in England.

Education Support for Northern Ireland

www.education-support.org.uk

Information for parents, students and teachers about bullying and other issues.

Equality Advisory and Support Service (EASS)

Helpline: 0808 800 0082

www.equalityadvisoryservice.com

Provides information, advice and support on discrimination and human rights issues to individuals in England, Scotland and Wales.

Equality and Human Rights Commission

www.equalityhumanrights.com

Provides information and guidance on human rights, including disability discrimination.

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.

Kidscape

Helpline: 08451 205 204

www.kidscape.org.uk

Provides a helpline for parents of children who are being bullied and offers confidence-building sessions for children who are being bullied.

Mencap Direct

Helpline: 0808 808 1111

www.mencap.org.uk

Provides advice and support and works with people with a learning disability and their parent carers to change laws and services, and challenge prejudice.

National Autistic Society

Helpline: 0845 070 4004

www.nas.org.uk

Supports 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.

National Network of Parent Carer Forums (NNPCF)

www.nnpcf.org.uk

Parent carer forums aim to improve local services for disabled children and their families in England by supporting and developing parent participation. Call our freephone helpline on 0808 808 3555 to find out if there is a forum in your area.

National Parent Partnership Network

www.parentpartnership.org.uk

Local Parent Partnership Services (PPS) offer advice and support to parents and carers of children and young people with special educational needs.

Respect Me (Scotland)

Helpline: 0844 800 8600

www.respectme.org.uk

Provides information for parents and young people in Scotland.

Scottish Child Law Centre

Helpline: 0800 318 8970

www.sclc.org.uk

Provides free legal advice for and about children in Scotland.



Stop Hate UK

www.stophateuk.org

Helpline: 0800 138 1625

Stop Hate UK work with young people and communities, and deliver training and consultancy across the UK. They provide 24 hour support to people who have been affected by hate crime.

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 responsible use of technology for parents, teachers and children.

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Bullying diary for parents

| Date and time | Where did it happen? | Description of incident: • what happened? • who did it? • who saw it? | How was your child affected at the time, and were there any later effects (injuries - are there photos?) | Did you tell the school? | If you told the school, then what did the school do? | Have things got better, stayed the same, or got worse for your child? |
|---------------|----------------------|--|--|--------------------------|--|---|
| | | | | | | |
| | | | | | | |
| | | | | | | |

Sample letter to send to school if your child is being bullied

Date

Dear (name of teacher or Head)

I believe my son/daughter is being bullied. This is upsetting her/him very much.

I would very much like to meet you to discuss what the school can do to stop the bullying.

(If you have spoken to the school before) I have spoken to the school about my child being bullied (give name of person you spoke to and dates) but no action has been taken/the bullying has not stopped/the bullying is getting worse. (Use any of these points or add your own.)

Please find attached a report of the bullying giving the details of what has happened.

I understand that the school has a duty of care towards my child and feel that the school is not following the law and/or guidance. To stop the bullying, I feel the school could... (see 'What the school can do' on page 14 of this guide).

I would like a copy of my child's school record. Please pass on this request to the chair of governors.

I would also like copies of the school's behaviour, anti-bullying and special educational needs policy.

(If the school is not doing what it must or should do, give details.)

I am available for a meeting on (give dates).

I would like to bring a friend or adviser with me (give name).

Yours sincerely,

(Your name)

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References

1. *Perspectives on bullying and difference: supporting young people with special educational needs and/or disabilities in schools* edited by C. McLaughlin, R. Byers and C. Oliver, (National Children's Bureau, 2012)
2. *Virtual Violence: Protecting children from cyberbullying* (Beatbullying, 2009), p44.

Disclaimer: Please note that inclusion of information in this guide does not imply endorsement of products or services by Contact a Family.

Contact a Family thanks all the families who contributed their stories.

Original guide written by Penny Roper. Revised September 2013 by the Anti-bullying Steering Group led by Angie Fenn.

The Anti-bullying Steering Group consists of Contact a Family, the National Network of Parent Carer Forums and Mencap.

Support Contact a Family

Help us continue to provide information, advice and support to ALL families with disabled children in the UK.

From cake sales, to running the London Marathon, or signing up to be a regular giver – there are many ways you can help.

Find out more on our website at www.cafamily.org.uk/fundraising, call us on 020 7608 8786, or email fundraising@cafamily.org.uk

Or why not get involved in our campaign work across the UK? Visit www.cafamily.org.uk/influencing

Social networking

Contact a Family is on Facebook and Twitter. Join us at:

Facebook

www.facebook.com/contactafamily

Twitter

twitter.com/contactafamily

Videos

You can watch videos on our YouTube channel at www.youtube.com/cafamily

Contact a Family

Free helpline for parents and families

0808 808 3555

Open Mon–Fri, 9.30am–5pm

Access to over 100 languages

www.cafamily.org.uk
www.makingcontact.org

Contact a Family Head Office:

209-211 City Road, London EC1V 1JN

Tel: **020 7608 8700**

Fax: **020 7608 8701**

Email: **info@cafamily.org.uk**

Web: **www.cafamily.org.uk**



Other information booklets available

This guide is one of a series produced for parents and groups concerned with the care of disabled children. Other guides include:

- *Understanding your child's behaviour*
- *Relationships and caring for a disabled child*
- *A guide to claiming Disability Living Allowance for children*
- *Fathers*
- *Siblings*
- *Living with a rare condition*
- *Living without a diagnosis*
- *Preparing for adult life and transition.*

Contact a Family publications are available from our helpline, or can be downloaded from our website at www.cafamily.org.uk

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