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Issue 31

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[Bullying and Children with ASD](#)

*Bullying* is a term that is used by students, parents, teachers, clinicians, and researchers in inconsistent ways. For the purposes of this newsletter, the definition from the American Psychological Association (APA) will be utilized: *Bullying is a form of aggressive behavior in which someone intentionally and repeatedly causes another person injury or discomfort. Bullying can take the form of physical contact, words, or more subtle actions (e.g., spreading rumors, intentionally excluding someone). The bullied individual typically has trouble defending him or herself and does nothing to 'cause' the bullying.* There are two components of bullying that distinguish it from other forms of aggression: (a) it is a repetitive act that occurs over time (as opposed to only once), and (b) it involves an imbalance of power between the bully and the victim (i.e., due to strength/size, intelligence, or social status/popularity differences). Estimates of how frequently bullying occurs among school-aged neurotypical children and those with ASD or other diagnoses differ significantly depending on how the term is defined and who is the informant (i.e., students, parents, teachers, other observers). Conservatively, it appears that about 10% of primary and junior high school students are bullied weekly. In contrast, as many as 35-45% of similarly-aged children with higher functioning forms of ASD may be bullied (a rate similar to that observed among students with ADHD or a stutter).

One of the reasons for the discrepancy in prevalence of being bullied between children who are neurotypical and children characterized by ASD is that the constellation of social, communication, and cognitive flexibility limitations that are the hallmarks of ASD act as a beacon for negative peer attention. According to Patricia Howlin, *the inability of children with ASD to stand-up for themselves and the ease with which they can be reduced to tears of rage or frustration by others make them the perfect victims.* In addition, higher functioning children with ASD are more vulnerable because other students may not understand why they look, speak, or act differently with the result that they are not afforded the patience given to children with more obvious disabilities. Consistent with such a hypothesis is evidence that *the probability of being bullied almost invariably decreases with the degree of handicap within all categories of disability.*

Another factor that appears to contribute to the greater incidence of bullying among students with ASD is their propensity to be *provocative victims*. The term provocative victim (i.e., bully/victim) refers to individuals who can be both aggressive and anxious, who irritate others around them, who are disruptive and easily over-stimulated, and who are inclined to keep conflicts going even when they lose. Unlike victims who are more passive, provocative victims inadvertently insult others or otherwise respond to conflict in a way that only makes the situation worse. As a result of their deficits in social-cognition and often co-morbid executive functioning difficulties, higher functioning children with ASD are at greater risk for being provocative victims. For example, poor social understanding may cause a child with ASD to believe that an accidental bump by a peer occurred on purpose, with the result that they lash-out aggressively at the other child instigating conflict. Similarly, the naïve honesty of many children with ASD may lead them to matter-of-factly point out characteristics of others that should not be mentioned (e.g., “*You smell funny*”) or make cruel-sounding statements (e.g., “*I don't like you and don't want to sit with you*”) triggering retaliation and conflict. Consistent with such expectations, a recent survey by Anderson found that 20% of parents of children with ASD believed that their child had bullied others (as opposed to only 8% for neurotypical siblings).

In recognition of the greater risk of bullying faced by children with ASD (particularly those in inclusive settings), a variety of interventions can be considered. Fundamentally, these interventions should attempt to reduce risk for and increase protection against peer victimization. Some of the goals that should be considered include: (a) helping children with ASD develop positive relationships or, ideally, reciprocated friendship with some of their peers, (b) providing training to improve their social-cognitive skills and interpersonal competence, (c) offering didactic feedback in order to help them identify, understand, and respond effectively to bullying, (d) increasing adult surveillance during the parts of the school day (i.e., unstructured times such recess, lunch, between classes) and developmental phases (i.e., early adolescence) that represent the greatest risk for bullying and, (e) developing a school culture of respect for diversity/difference and intolerance of bullying of anyone.

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### Behavior Tip

When students with ASD become perceived as *bullies*, it is often because they are unable to regulate their angry or upset feelings toward another person or situation. Proactive strategies can be put into place to help mitigate against these reactions and at the same time promote appropriate ways of dealing with frustration. One such strategy involves designating a “safe person” in the school who the student can go to in times of anger and anxiety. Ideally, a safe person would be an adult who has a trusting rapport with the student and who is familiar to them. When the student is faced with a situation where they are pushed to their limits and feel like they have to retaliate, they can seek out their safe person instead, who will help guide them through this period of frustration. In combination with this strategy, a visual calming script can be used with the student, describing different relaxation techniques and activities they can follow to help them self-regulate and respond more appropriately.

### O.T. Corner

Individuals with ASD and sensory processing/modulation difficulties may at times present behavioral characteristics that could be perceived as *bullying*. In addition to their limited understanding of more complex social situations and weak social-communication skills, sensory-based challenges can influence their interactions with peers.

On one hand, students with marked sensory sensitivities can be inflexible and resistant to changes in routine, plans, and expectations in an effort to avoid certain sensory input that are aversive or disruptive to them. In such cases, they may become bossy, insistent and/or put pressure on others to get their own way. For example, this could be seen when a student insists on being the last in the class lineup or positioned with their back against the wall in class, in order to avoid unpredictable touch coming from behind them. Another example could be that a student with poor auditory filtering and sensitivity may be telling others to be quiet and trying to control the conversation at all times. As well, overreaction to sensory stimuli can take the form of a “fight” reaction (as part of the “freeze, fight or flight” survival mechanism). In such cases, impulsive physical reactions (e.g., pushing, hitting, kicking, etc.) can be observed in reaction to unpredictable physical contacts, sudden loud noises, a particular pitch of voice, or following a sensory overload. In some cases, when a student with ASD also has features of obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), he/she may fixate on a particular peer for no apparent reason and behave inappropriately (e.g., touching, tapping, or smelling them.) or even act aggressively toward them. When this pattern of *bullying* behavior is observed, it is important to consider the possibility that a sensory interest/aversion is the underlying cause (e.g., the student likes/dislikes the smell of the other child's hair, tone of their voice, or the texture/pattern of their clothing). In such cases, identifying what is triggering the student's awkward or aggressive reaction may assist the school team in implementing appropriate strategies, such as avoiding particular smells/products, seating the respective students far apart from each other, providing fidgets of similar textures, introducing a social story that explains and teaches appropriate behavior to facilitate both improved sensory comfort for all and to support more cohesive social interactions.

On the other hand, students with severe under-responsiveness to sensory input may present behaviors that could be mistaken for *bullying*. Such students may adopt a sensory seeking pattern of behavior and constantly be “on the go”, running and bumping into others without respect for their personal space, or touching people to the point of irritating them. As well, individuals with poor processing of tactile and proprioceptive input have difficulty controlling their movements and determining the appropriate amount of force required when playing and manipulating objects. They may be described as clumsy, routinely breaking things, or inadvertently hurting others through play and physical interactions. Therefore, it is important to address the possibility that there is a sensory component underlying the problematic social behaviors of a student with ASD.





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Our team is composed of professionals with a variety of specializations. Designated as a Centre of Excellence within the province, our mandate is to assist LBPSB schools in the implementation of best practices for the inclusion of students with ASD and to serve as a resource to the other English school boards in Quebec. Our team provides assistance to students and families and works to support educational personnel in augmenting their capacity to meet a wide range of needs in the classroom. We do this through direct intervention, coaching, consulting, professional development, and the sharing of materials.

We're on the web! <http://coeasd.lbpsb.qc.ca>

## Read all about it

*The Journal of Best Practices by David Finch*

In this book, David Finch provides a candid, humorous, autobiographical account of his life living with Autism Spectrum Disorder. Diagnosed in his adult life, Finch works hard to become a better father and husband and to navigate the dynamic social world more successfully. In this honest and very personal account, Finch shares both the benefits and the challenges of living with ASD.

This book is available in the ASD library. Please contact Janet Neville at [jneville@lbpsb.qc.ca](mailto:jneville@lbpsb.qc.ca) for more information about how to borrow this book.

## WWW.

Self-regulation is something everyone continually works on, whether we are cognizant of it or not. We all encounter difficult circumstances that test our limits from time to time. If we are able to recognize when we are becoming less regulated, we can try to do something about it to feel better and get ourselves to a better place. This comes naturally for some, but for others it is a skill that needs to be taught and practiced. This goal is the main focus of the *Zones of Regulation*. Learning about self-regulation can better equip our students to deal with their social environment.

Learn more at:  
[www.zonesofregulation.com](http://www.zonesofregulation.com)

## Apps for Learning

Whether it is at school, at home or during therapy sessions, teaching and providing opportunities to practice social skills offers our students on the spectrum essential tools to navigate the interpersonal world.

Jessica Chasse is a Speech and Language Pathologist (SLP) who has created a very useful list of apps to support the teaching and learning of social skills. Like most Apps, they should not replace the interaction with the teacher/adult. To access the list, follow this link and click on the Social Skills Autism Apps List at the bottom of her blog entry.  
<http://goo.gl/3edbCi>

## Coming Soon!

**Save the Date:** Upcoming ASD Seminar Series-April 1, 2014 in LBPSB Board Room.