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Autism Spectrum Disorder: NETWORK NEWS

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AUTISM & BULLYING

A key concern in schools is prevention of and intervention with regard to bullying. Educators, administrators, and policy-makers take this issue seriously as the negative impact of bullying on victims is well-reported in the literature. In the short-term, the consequences of bullying typically include a decline in academic performance, feelings of distress, loneliness, or isolation, and reduced school engagement. The effects of bullying can also be long-lasting and result in school refusal and the development of mood problems such as anxiety and depression[1]. Over the last 15 years, researchers[2,3] have explored how bullying affects students with a diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Rates of victimization specific to autistic students along with risk factors and intervention strategies have also been addressed by various authors.

Prevalence

Bullying affects between 5-40% of elementary and high school-aged students worldwide. The likelihood of victimization appears to be 3-5% higher for gender-identified males versus females[3]. Studies indicate that autistic students are five times more likely to be the victims of bullying than other students; this translates to rates that vary between 7-94%[1,4]. In one study, up to 75% of adolescents with Asperger Syndrome reported having been victimized and 94% of mothers indicated that their autistic child had been the victim of bullying during the previous year[3]. However, one important investigation reveals that students educated in inclusive schools are less likely to bully autistic students than those who are not regularly exposed to peers with autism[5]. More specifically, school exposure and personal contact with autistic people is associated with more positive attitudes toward autistic individuals, an increase in prosocial emotions, and higher social-moral reasoning[5]; suggesting that connection with autistic peers promotes empathy.

Autistics as Victims of Bullying

There are several factors that may contribute to autistic students being at increased risk for victimization from peers such as communication and social skill deficits, cognitive rigidity, and atypical reactions to sensory input. For example, autistic students who have a monotone voice may be mocked or teased by other children. Similarly, their tendency to interpret the comments of others literally may cause them to respond in ways that unintentionally provoke laughter or ridicule by their classmates.

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Students who have deficits in *theory of mind* (i.e., the understanding that others have intentions, beliefs, and emotions different from one's own and that such intentions affect people's actions) may misinterpret bullying situations as non-bullying[3]. In other words, they may have greater difficulty recognizing when they are being bullied than other students. If this is the case, it is possible that the rate of victimization for autistic students is actually higher than what is reported in the literature. Additionally, this failure to recognize when they are being mistreated may cause autistic students to be victimized for longer periods of time. Once they do recognize that they are the victims of bullying, their self-concept, social confidence, and willingness to trust can be drastically affected.

In addition, rigid adherence to rules and a desire to fit-in may contribute to autistic students being more vulnerable to negative peer influence. Furthermore, elementary and high school students with ASD tend to have both fewer friends and a lower status in terms of popularity. Both these characteristics are established risk factors for victimization[1,3].

Autistics as Perpetrators or Victim-Perpetrators

It is also important to note that along with being at greater risk for victimization, autistic students are sometimes the perpetrators of bullying[6.] Although the incidence of ASD adolescents as bullies is equivalent to the rate of non-ASD adolescents as bullies, autistic students with comorbid ADHD symptomatology are about five times more likely to bully than ASD students without associated attentional deficits[3].

There are several reasons why autistic students may adopt bullying behaviour. First, they are more likely to be characterized by both poor impulse control and a tendency toward reactive aggression[3]. For example, responsive behaviours such as throwing objects, pushing, and lashing-out are more common among ASD students than for their classmates, especially during elementary school. Autistic students who are still learning to regulate their emotions may respond aggressively when they are frustrated, disappointed, or surprised. They may project their own negative emotions onto their peers as a coping mechanism. Second, concrete and rigid thinking often causes autistic individuals to want to do things their own way and this may lead them to try to control their classmates. In order to avoid altercations, classmates may feel forced to give-in to the demands of autistic students at the expense of being able to follow their own ideas or share their opinions. Classmates will sometimes express fear of angering their autistic peers and may feel anxious about possible retaliation if they go against them[6].

In addition to the groups of ASD students who are either bullied or who are bullies, is a third category of ASD individuals who routinely alternate between being the victims of bullying and the perpetrators of it [2,6]. Initially, these students face peer rejection as a result of their rigid and inflexible thinking, atypical interests, or social immaturity and disproportionate reactions to frustration. This risk of peer rejection is greatest during the times in the school day when there is less structure or supervision (e.g., recess, lunch), because these are situations when their social-cognitive limitations are most obvious to peers. At the same time that they are being victimized, these autistic students may be making themselves targets by unintentionally annoying their peers. Such irritating behavior can involve tattle-taling, sharing confidential details about another person, or commenting on the mistakes or appearance of a peer. This behaviour is coined *innocent provocation* because, even though the student with ASD may be behaving in an

antagonistic way, they are not consciously trying to hurt the other person. Jaquelyn Fede, an autistic adult, has stated that: *I offend people unknowingly several times each day*[7]. A corollary to their propensity for innocent provocation is the tendency of autistic individuals to mistakenly attribute hostile intent to the ambiguous verbal or nonverbal behaviour of classmates. This negative attributional bias can lead ASD students to respond to misinterpreted social situations by responding aggressively toward the other person. However, following these situations, once the true intentions of the other are understood, the student with ASD is usually remorseful and willing to apologize for their behaviour.

The Quebec Education Act and the Act Respecting Private Education define bullying as *any repeated direct or indirect behaviour, comment, act or gesture, whether deliberate or not, including in cyberspace, which occurs in a context where there is a power imbalance between the persons concerned and which causes distress and injures, hurts, oppresses, intimidates or ostracizes*[14]. The typical bullying behaviour of autistic students can more accurately be viewed as a social-cognitive skill deficit compounded by limitations in emotion-regulation and coping strategies. When bullying by autistic students is interpreted in this way, the importance of explicit coaching, scaffolding, and support to reduce victimizing behaviour becomes that much more clear[4,6].

Intervention Strategies

Activities to promote theory of mind are essential to autistic students who are victims, perpetrators, or mixed victim-perpetrators. Better theory of mind leads to an improved capacity to perceive and interpret social situations accurately, as well as to the *real-time* ability to adjust one's behaviour in response to what is occurring. Developing better theory of mind will help students to detect the intentions of others and to recognize when they are potentially being bullied. Identifying bullying situations earlier allows the victim to seek help more quickly and end these episodes sooner[3].

Evidence-based anti-bullying programs that are currently in place in elementary and high schools for neurotypical students can be helpful for autistic students too[6]. However, autistic students may need additional repetition, as well as more explicit teaching and support in order to generalize skills to the everyday school context. Along with these skills, it is vital for autistic students to learn to assert themselves, to say "no" and to ask for help when necessary. Focusing on these self-determination skills from a young age helps students become more competent and confident[1,3]. Additionally, direct teaching of digital citizenship with clear rules, boundaries, and consequences regarding online activity is an important topic to discuss and revisit frequently with autistic students throughout their schooling[1].

Social behaviour maps[8] are another tool which may be used with perpetrators of bullying in order to help them recognize the impact of their actions on the thoughts, feelings, and responses of others. This improved self-awareness helps autistic students by encouraging them to think about how social relationships are formed and maintained. It also helps autistic students to improve their empathy and to practice taking responsibility for their actions.

Teachers also play an important role in helping students not to be *bystanders*[9]. All students, regardless of age, must be educated on how to recognize peers who are being bullied and what to

do when they witness bullying. They need to learn to report bullying to a trusted adult or to gather friends to stand alongside the victim so that they are not alone. Peer advocates need to be recognized and applauded for their compassion and courage. Promoting positive relationships between peers is vital to improving the school experience and quality of life of ASD students. In fact, a significant protective factor against bullying is for autistic adolescents to get together with friends at least once per week[1].

Finally, teacher awareness and sensitization to the experience and impact of bullying is essential to countering bullying episodes in schools. As not all autistic students are able to recognize when they are being bullied, educators must keep a watchful eye on them in order to help compensate for the social-cognition difficulties that are a hallmark of their condition. Teachers must also model acceptance and celebration of diversity. The daily actions and words of classroom teachers in support of inclusion have a much bigger and longer lasting impact than any manualized or targeted classroom sensitization program[10].

It is important to familiarize yourself and refer to your school's Anti-Bullying and Anti-Violence Plan when supporting your students in need.

Instead of waiting for an incident of bullying to occur, is there a way you can be proactive in preventing bullying? Try including regular discussions about inclusivity and acceptance into your regular curriculum. These discussions do not only have to cover special needs, but could also address topics such as race, religion, LGBTQ issues, and anything else you feel your students may need to understand better in order to promote a more inclusive classroom.

Having ongoing conversations with your class about differences and acceptance will help students understand that different students should be celebrated, not targeted.

Try these approaches:

- Educate your students and share basic, easy facts with them.
- Keep it simple but leave room for questions.
- Teach your students that every single person is different.
- Look for books that talk about differences and promote inclusion. Have these readily available for your students or take time to read them out loud.
- Educate yourself. Are these issues that you would like to understand better? The more prepared you are, the easier it will be to answer spontaneous questions about differences and inclusion.

Don't forget, your school's Consultant in Inclusive Education (CIE) and Consultant in Autism Spectrum Disorder are always available to recommend resources, give workshops, or provide support if you would like to introduce discussions about special needs in your classroom!

BEHAVIOUR TIP [11,12,13]

Individuals who are perceived as being different or who do not conform to social norms can often become the target of bullies. Autistic individuals are at greater risk for being bullied than their peers because of the different ways they communicate and interact with others. For example, autistic students might be targeted on the playground for their preferred play styles (e.g., repetitive games, playing alone, scripting a story, etc.) or for their self-regulation strategies (e.g., hand flapping, body rocking). By not engaging in perpetrator's bullying attempts, they will become less of a target for the bully in the future.

Stop, walk, and talk is a strategy that is easy to remember for dealing with bullies. **Stop** means to put up a hand and this will indicate to the bully that they need to stop; **walk** means to walk away without showing a huge response; and **talk** means to tell an adult about the bullying. Bullies target individuals who they perceive as *different* and who they expect will be a fun target (i.e., someone whose buttons are easy to push). If an individual with ASD does not give a bully a strong reaction or an obvious reason to target them, it will decrease their appeal as a potential victim.

Modeling and role-playing self-advocacy can help autistic students recognize and respond effectively to bullying. Sometimes this strategy is called *emotional inoculation*. Try it out!

Steps:

1. Together with the student, identify a high probability situation (e.g., someone takes the toy they are playing with, name-calling, etc.)

2. Make it feel *real* - Set up the scenario, fictional people involved, etc.

3. Model the role-play for the student - How will you feel? What will you do? What do you say? Who do you tell?

4. Have the student try the role play and provide them with constructive feedback

5. Continue to offer opportunities for role play in a teaching environment until the student is responding independently and effectively

6. Provide practical and emotional support to the student as they learn to carry out this new skill in real-life situations

ASD TEAM MEMBERS

JACALYN ARMSTRONG
Consultant for Inclusive Education

PATRICIA ASSOUAD
Consultant for Autism (On leave)

DR. ANDREW BENNETT
Coordinator/Psychologist

JENNIFER BOOTH
Consultant for Autism (On leave)

PATTY CLORAN
Coordinator/Consultant for Autism

KATIE COHENE, PhD
Coordinator/Consultant for Autism

DATEVIG ETYEMEZIAN
Consultant for Autism

SABRINA GABRIELE
Consultant for Autism (On leave)

JADE LAWSANE
Consultant for Autism

ILANA LOGGIA
Consultant for Autism (On leave)

NATALIE MONGEAU
Consultant for Autism

HELENE PACKMAN
Speech & Language Pathologist

DR. AMIRA RAHMAN
Psychologist (On leave)

KIM SEGAL
Consultant for Autism

EITHNE SHEERAN
Consultant for Autism

HEAR ALL ABOUT IT

The Uniquely Human Podcast, created by Barry M. Prizant, Ph. D., is a series of conversations on autism and neurodiversity. This podcast amplifies the voices of autistic individuals and leaders in the field of autism research and education. The most recent speakers were Dr. Amy Laurent and Dr. Jacquelyn Fede who discussed their efforts to improve practice and perception through collaboration between the autistic community and educational practitioners.

Please check this out and hear from many other inspiring speakers online at: https://uniquelyhuman.com/

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