

Aspergers Syndrome and Bullying

Statistics show children with Aspergers Syndrome are more at risk of being bullied, with up to 94% of children with Aspergers Syndrome being victims of bullying. The data shows that they are subjected to victimization on average 1-2 times a week. Having Aspergers Syndrome means these children are part of a vulnerable population and are easy targets.

Statistics also show that the consequences of not dealing with bullying can be disastrous - especially on children with Aspergers Syndrome. Contrary to the fictitious statements made in the media, being bullied doesn't build character; nor does it toughen children up. Research shows that children who are extremely emotionally resilient survive bullying incidents, but will still remember the minute details of their ordeals many years later. However the outcome for those with Aspergers Syndrome and related neurobiological conditions is much worse, and often leads to self-harming behaviours and/or suicide.

Aspergers Syndrome children tend to replay episodes of bullying over and over again in their minds – “looping” the details into a continuous picture show playing over again and again. This means the consequences of a single bullying incident can have lasting effects on self-esteem, anxiety and depression levels in an Asperger child. Imagine then the effects of weekly or daily bullying episodes.

The side effects of being bullied include:

- Low self esteem
- Lower academic performance
- Increased anxiety
- Increased depression
- School refusal
- Increased risk of self-harm/suicide

Aspergers Syndrome children frequently fail to tell parents/teachers they are being bullied. Often this is because they don't recognise insidious behaviours such as peer rejection/exclusion as an act of bullying. The combination of social difficulties, communication problems and a delay in processing, coupled with their low tolerance to frustration and sensory sensitivity can result in a deterioration in behaviour and/or a meltdown. Meltdowns tend to make a child with Aspergers Syndrome stand out – and if you stand out you are an easy target for bullying.

Aspergers Syndrome is a highly complex condition. Children with AS are often naïve and gullible and are usually not aware of what is “in” in popular culture among their peers e.g. fashion, music, hairstyles etc. This puts them at a distinct disadvantage.

Children with Aspergers Syndrome are very honest and this can lead them to making provocative statements and/or comments, which may inflame tempers in others, causing them to lash out, and leaving the Asperger child bewildered by what he sees as an unprovoked attack against him.

Children with Aspergers Syndrome tend to catastrophise events and situations, focussing on the negative and the possibility of failure. This leads them to feel helpless and powerless and triggers an increase in anxiety. Subsequently, children with AS use lots of energy being anxious, which means they are less able to cope socially and or academically. Making social blunders or answering a question incorrectly in class can once again make them an easy target for bullying.

Children with Aspergers Syndrome are usually quite socially isolated, having very few or no friends, so they lack the large social networks of their peers. This is another contributing factor towards being an easy target.

Aspergers Syndrome children often have poor personal hygiene habits, and this can lead to teasing, humiliation and bullying. Children with AS also display more motor clumsiness and balance issues than their peers, so they are truly disadvantaged when it comes to defending themselves.

It's evident that the complex nature of Aspergers Syndrome characteristics can be a "neon billboard" attracting bullies. So what strategies can help minimise the risks of bullying for children with Aspergers Syndrome?

Social skills lessons should address bullying recognition – describing behaviours and/or scenarios. Children can be directed to problem-solving strategies and solutions, perhaps using role-play or video play-back as tools.

Educating the student body and faculty staff about Aspergers Syndrome helps raise awareness and empathy. This is of double benefit – teachers are more AS friendly in the playground and students will be a) less likely to engage in bullying activities and b) be more empathetic towards AS students, often becoming a playground "buddy".

Schools should provide a safe space for students with Aspergers Syndrome, where they can go when they feel a meltdown coming on, or need some timeout. This helps minimise the "stand out" quality involved in having a meltdown.

But by far the best way to decrease bullying behaviour within a school environment is to encourage bystanders to intervene. One way to do this is to reward bystanders for reporting antisocial/bullying behaviour. If a bully has no supporters he will be less successful in his bullying attempt. If the bully's peers see his behaviour as "uncool" he'll be less motivated to engage in it. Changing the balance of power, so that bystanders are "cool" and bullying is socially unacceptable is the key to wiping out bullying. So encourage your Asperger child's school to adopt pro-active practices such as this. Your son or daughter's quality of life may depend on it.

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