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Autistic young people and bullying

‘Autistic children are 15 times more likely to be bullied’, shrieked the headlines recently. It’s enough to frighten the calmest of parents. But the truth is rather more complicated. And, thank goodness, rather less alarming. It’s a huge topic to fit into a few paragraphs!

I’m currently writing a book with lots of successful anti-bullying coping strategies, written for families with autistic members. Here I’ll try to briefly unpick some initial facts for you and give you a couple of pointers!

I’ll start by telling you that I am autistic and that the more I read, and the more autistic children and adults I meet, the happier I am that we’re a positive part of what makes humans successful and fulfilled. But we do appear to struggle more with bullying than the average neurotypical person.

For instance, most kids are quick to recognise the social ‘games’ that people, including their peers, play. Autistic children may be less likely to play these social games. They are more inclined to take things at face value and both not wish to, nor be adept at, playing them. (Why bother when you could be doing something more interesting?). But they DO recognise that things are not ‘quite right’ and this can leave them anxious and trying to control a confused emotional state.

Bullying behaviour

It is vital to understand that bullying behaviours are part of what it is to be human. Bullying is simply power used inappropriately. For instance, we insist that our children hold our hands when crossing roads. We know that it’s for their safety and is an appropriate use of power but they tend to find it overbearing and rail against it. They may see it as ‘bullying’ (an inappropriate use of power). Should we stop? Obviously NOT! But you can see the difficulty. From an early age we are busy getting our children to behave in ways that are both safe and that the rest of

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society thinks is acceptable. We also try very hard to do it in a way that still allows them to think for themselves so that they are not submissive and open to abusive relationships in the future.

Children copy adult behaviours and they live in a TV and internet age in which whole TV programmes are devoted to ridiculing and bullying celebrities. It is human nature to compare ourselves with others, but when feeling less than confident, some folk gain their self-esteem by laughing at, rather than with, others.

Any child who is in any way different will attract interest and attention - appearance and speech being the main contenders. Once that child is aware of this negative attention it can severely reduce their confidence. And any child (or adult for that matter) who is lacking in confidence presents as an easier target for ridicule and bullying than those who feel they're okay. Being picked on lowers that confidence further, and so the cycle of bullying begins.

Coping with bullying

I feel that a really important part of coping with bullying is for the child to know they are autistic and to understand the positives and potential difficulties that come from this. Some parents try to hide this knowledge but believe me, we have always known we were different! Knowing there's a name for it, with a set of possible characteristics, plus ways of coping is invaluable information. And makes us proud to belong to an autistic community – and find friends and allies there.

However, if autistic people appear to be less willing to join in and socialise they may also be less aware of what bullying is and when they're being bullied. They may need you to [explain what bullying is](#).

Dealing with anxiety about everything but including bullying, appears to be a major problem for autistic people and I use two main strategies here. Hopefully you'll find them just as useful as your pupil or child.

Breathing

Feeling we're being bullied makes us stressed and anxious. Breathing then becomes shallow and less oxygen goes to the brain. This means it's harder to think rationally and we're more likely to behave in emotional ways – lashing out, running away or simply frozen to the spot. So, learning to take a deep breath is vital.

Practice with the child, standing with feet slightly apart then breathing into your stomach and saying silently to yourself "I'm OK, I can do this!" Then imagine breathing that thought out down through your legs and feet, through the floor and making the thought grow roots that spread far and wide under the floor!

If you've done this well, by now you will have completely run out of breath and will gasp in a huge deep breath! Which will make it much, much easier to think more clearly about the situation. It's rather like being a tree – if you have shallow roots a strong wind will blow you

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over. If they're deep and strong you'll sway a bit but you won't be completely floored. Try it and see!

NB for younger children, get them to imagine a colour that makes them feel brave and breathe that in instead.

Time out

By this I mean time out together! Research (Weare, 2012), has shown that where parents spend a little time using mindfulness with their children they are a lot calmer during the day. It's probably the last thing rushing parents feel like doing but the benefits of either sitting together or lying on the floor side by side and just being calm for a few minutes both before and after school (and if you feel it would be helpful, also at bedtime) are invaluable. Try using the timer app on your phone with a soothing sound to signal time's done, then start with 2 minutes at each time, and very slowly increase to 5, and eventually 10 minutes as it becomes more manageable and enjoyable.

And finally

The really important thing to remember, as parents and carers - or teachers - is that those children who genuinely feel good about themselves (because we have made it clear that we love and accept them for who they actually *are* rather than as something to mould into what we would *like* them to be) are better at recognising bullying, better at dealing with it and less likely to be bullied.

There are various other successful anti-bullying strategies but that knowing for certain that our parent, carer, or teacher genuinely accepts that autism has many, many good points and that they adore us for who we actually are – different but equally valid - is the absolute best support we can give them.

References

[Weare, K. \(2012\). Evidence for the impact of mindfulness on children and young people. The Mindfulness in Schools Project. Accessed on 19 October 2018](#)

Further reading

[The National Autistic Society - Bullying](#)