



# 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 it will give you ideas about what might work, things you could try and help you feel that you are not alone.

We spoke to a number of parents of disabled children who helped in writing this guide. The quotes included throughout the guide are their stories, thoughts and experiences. We thank them for sharing their insight, wisdom and help.

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.

## Contents

What is bullying? .....	3
Spotting if your child is being bullied .....	5
Coping with the effects of bullying and developing strategies .....	7
Bullying at school.....	11
Moving schools.....	18
If your child is exhibiting bullying behaviour.....	19
Bullying outside of school, on mobile phones and the internet.....	20
Reporting bullying outside of school or college .....	23
One parent's story .....	24
Useful organisations .....	25

## What is bullying?

Bullying can take place anywhere, in schools, in the wider community and online. 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.'

The Department of Education's *Preventing and Tackling Bullying* guidance (2011), defines bullying as 'behaviour by an individual or group, repeated over time, that intentionally hurts another individual or group either physically or emotionally. Bullying can take many forms (for instance, cyberbullying via text messages or the internet), and is often motivated by prejudice against particular groups, for example on grounds of race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, or because a child is adopted or has caring responsibilities. It might be motivated by actual differences between children, or perceived differences.

'Stopping violence and ensuring immediate physical safety is obviously a school's first priority but emotional bullying can be more damaging than physical; teachers and schools have to make their own judgements about each specific case.'

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: bullying by text messages, mobile phones, email, chat forums, websites and instant messaging.

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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.

*"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 may be more vulnerable to bullying**

Children are more likely to be bullied when they are seen as 'different'. Some people's prejudices about disability can make disabled children more vulnerable to bullying. Disabled children are more likely than their peers to be bullied. 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 transitions which means they have to settle into new groups. Examples of transitions are moving from a special unit to a mainstream school, spending periods of time in hospital and returning to school.

It is understandable to feel anxious about bullying, 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.

*“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
- ‘losing’ belongings
- reluctant 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
- difficulties sleeping
- 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 about bullying

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

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*"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."*

*"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, Bullying UK suggests asking 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.

### **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 'Useful organisations' on page 26 for their contact details.

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](http://www.dontstickit.org.uk) that shows how bullying makes a cartoon character, Sam, feel and what he should do to change the situation.

## **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

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

out on opportunities to develop their confidence and social skills.

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

*"She now attends school part time and attends a special school for one day a week. She also receives counselling. Everyone underestimated the damage done by the bullying."*

### **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 deal with bullying.

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*"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, on the internet and through support groups. Call our freephone helpline for more information and see useful contacts on page 24.

### **Strategies for addressing 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 your child is being bullied via text, on the phone, or the internet, see page 20.

*"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."*

### **Ideas parents have suggested to us**

We asked parents what they had done to deal with the bullying, and how they helped their children. Suggestions they made included:

- drawing pictures of the bullying and some different ways your child could deal with it. You could draw pictures in the style of a cartoon strip which show 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 26.
- 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
- giving your child the opportunity to safely express their feelings with you
- talk about bullying with your child at home, when appropriate.

## 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 not alone
- show that 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
- 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.

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

- Changing Faces has information about strategies to develop social skills and on making friends
- The National Autistic Society has information about 'Circles of Friends' (see page 15).

For contact details of these and other organisations that can help, see 'Useful organisations' on page 24.

You can find tips on how to work with school staff on page 11.

## Your feelings

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?"*

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.'"*

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*"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
- get support to help you deal with the situation from friends and family, local support groups and anti-bullying organisations
- enjoy time together as a family.

*"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 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*

Bullying can impact on 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.

*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 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, like talking to the school.

*"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 siblings of a child who has a disability or long-term condition can be supported and some of the typical issues that come up. Call the Contact a Family helpline for a free copy.

## **Bullying at school**

It can be hard for any parent to approach their child's school about bullying. Parents of disabled children may find it especially hard as there may be other factors influencing their contact with the school. For example, you may have struggled to get your child a place there,

the placement may only just be working out or your child may be experiencing difficulties with other aspects of school life. However, schools do have an obligation to promote and safeguard the welfare of all children and have responsibilities regarding bullying and disablist bullying.

### **Letting the school know your concerns**

If your child is being bullied at school, let the school know straight away. Some schools have communication systems for parents, like home-school diaries or homework diaries. If your child's school has a similar system you can use this to tell the school about your concerns.

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."*

### **Who to speak to**

If you're using a communication system, you may also want to speak to someone at the school. It is a good idea to speak to the class teacher to begin with. However, if you feel the situation is serious, you could speak to the head teacher.

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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 Co-ordinator (SENCO). A SENCO is the member of staff who has responsibility for co-ordinating special educational needs provision. Other parents said they spoke to the head of year and others to the head teacher.

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

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

### **Meeting with someone at the school**

The bullying may not be resolved immediately. You may need to meet with the class teacher, or whoever you spoke to at the school, a couple of times and work with them to try and resolve the bullying. If you are worried about meeting with the school, take someone to the meeting with you. You could take a friend or relative. A local voluntary organisation or national support group may be able to offer support.

Your parent partnership service (England and Wales only) may also be able to help. Parent partnership services provide advice, support and information to parents and carers whose children have special educational needs. Not all parent partnership services are able to support parents whose children are being bullied, but some can.



*"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, contact your local authority, or the Contact a Family helpline on 0808 808 3555. You can also search for your local service at [www.parentpartnership.org.uk](http://www.parentpartnership.org.uk)

### **Tips on approaching the school**

We asked parents for their tips on how to approach the school if you have concerns about bullying:

- work with the school to resolve the issue. It may not happen immediately, but do keep meeting and working with them
- keep a record of all the incidents
- take photos if there are any physical injuries
- 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, and speak about it at their annual review
- if your child is unable to attend school because of the stress of the bullying, go to your GP and get a sick note
- ask for a copy of the school's

anti-bullying policy, behaviour policy and complaints procedure

- if the bullying continues, you may want to make a complaint. Follow the school's complaints procedure. Put your complaint in writing and keep a copy of it. If you're not happy with the way your complaint is being resolved, go straight to the next stage. See page 15 for more details
- contact the support group if there is one, for your child's condition, and an organisation that supports children affected by bullying. Call Contact a Family's freephone Helpline on 0808 808 3555 for details of support groups
- get advice about disability discrimination and the disability equality duty. See page 17 for more information
- if your child is off school for long periods because of their condition, make sure their class knows why. There may be ways your child and their class can keep in contact, perhaps through letters, emails or texts
- explain your child's condition to the school, offer them information and suggest people from local support groups who could talk to staff about it
- make sure you get support for yourself and ask for help if you need it.

*"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."*

### The school's response

Many of the parents we spoke to had positive responses from the schools and found that the bullying was dealt with

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

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.'"*

*"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."*

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## What you can ask the school to do

Parents also suggested to us that you could ask the school to:

- have a named person your child can tell about the bullying. This could be their teacher, support worker or 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
  - 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
  - encourage 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
  - use the 'Circle of Friends' programme (see page 15)
  - review the anti-bullying policy regularly and involve parents and pupils, including disabled children and parents of disabled children, in the reviews
  - work on social skills like practising letting other people speak first, listening to other people's opinions without reacting aggressively, understanding body language
  - give praise and encouragement.
- "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."*

*"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."*

### 'Circle of Friends'

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. The school recruits volunteers who will form the Circle of Friends, normally six to eight children. The aims are to:

- create a support network for your child
- give them encouragement and recognition for any achievements and progress they make
- work with them to identify any difficulties, and
- devise practical ideas to help students deal with difficulties and ways of putting them into practice.

Researchers has shown that the Circle of Friends can have a positive impact on the social acceptance of the focus children by their class mates, especially if the class teacher runs the circle of friends.<sup>1</sup>

Usually, the suggestion to use the Circle of Friends would be made by the SENCO or by an educational psychologist. But they may not know of it. Tell them if you think this approach would help your child.

The National Autistic Society has further information about Circle of Friends.

### Taking further action

Unfortunately, some parents didn't have such a positive response from the school and had 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."*

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 you're unhappy with the way the head teacher has responded or dealt with the bullying, there are other courses of action you can take.

*"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."*

If you're not satisfied with the action the school has taken to resolve the bullying and you've spoken to the head teacher about it, you can make a formal complaint. All schools should have a complaints policy. It is a good idea to request a copy of the policy before you make your complaint.

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## **Anti-bullying policies**

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. You may find it useful to request a copy of the policy.

## **Discipline and behaviour policies**

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

When they are 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."*

## **Government anti-bullying guidance**

In England, the Department of Education's *Preventing and Tackling Bullying* guidance (2011), 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 if your child's school is struggling to resolve the bullying. It explains schools' legal duties and suggests ways schools can prevent and respond to bullying. The guidance can be found on the Department for Education website.

## **Making a formal complaint**

If you make a complaint, make it 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. In England and Wales, try asking the local parent partnership service.

## **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 evidence.

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

### **Complaining to the local authority**

If you are not happy with the way governors have attempted to resolve your complaint, you can make a complaint to the director of education at your local authority. In England and Wales, local authorities have integrated all services for children and young people into one department – so you may need to make your complaint to the director of 'Education and Learning' or 'Children's Services', depending on the name of the department.

*"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."*

### **Disability and equality in schools**

The Equality Act 2010 requires schools to take an active approach to promote equality and eliminate discrimination. This includes a requirement on schools to promote positive attitudes towards disabled people and to eliminate harassment. Schools are required to publish equality scheme to show how they are meeting these duties. You can ask for a copy of the school's scheme.

Schools should promote positive attitudes towards disabled people. This may mean, for example, encouraging the participation of disabled children in the development of anti-bullying policies, including disabled

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.

role models in lessons and assemblies and ensuring disability awareness training is provided for staff.

### **Unlawful discrimination**

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, and schools have to make positive so a disabled person is not disadvantaged for a reason relating to their disability.

Contact a Family: **0808 808 3555**  
**[www.cafamily.org.uk](http://www.cafamily.org.uk)**

## If you think your child has been discriminated against

If you think your child has been discriminated against for a reason relating to their disability, or think the school is failing to make reasonable adjustments, or is not fulfilling its legal obligations, please seek specialist advice. The Equality and Human Rights Commission and the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland can provide advice about disability discrimination and the possible courses of action open to you. See 'Useful organisations' on page 24 for details.

### Other routes of complaint

There are other routes available, such as making a complaint to the government department which covers education (the Department for Education if you live in England), or to the relevant Ombudsman. If you are thinking of this, seek specialist advice. You may need to have exhausted all other routes of complaints before and even then can only complain in limited circumstances.

### Legal action

Some parents consider taking legal action in an attempt to deal with the bullying. This can be a long, hard process and is not guaranteed to get the results you want. If you are thinking of taking legal action, take advice to find out if you have a case. Coram Children's Legal Centre advise if you have a case and provide details of solicitors who specialise in education law. If you live in Scotland, you can contact the Scottish Child Law Centre.

### Coram Children's Legal Centre

Tel: 0845 345 4345

[www.childrenslegalcentre.com](http://www.childrenslegalcentre.com)

If your child is attending an independent school, some procedures are different. Please call Contact a Family's free helpline on Tel: 0808 808 3555 for further information about the action you can take.

### Scottish Child Law Centre

Tel: 0131 667 6333

[www.sclcl.org.uk](http://www.sclcl.org.uk)

## Moving schools

Because of bullying and how it was dealt with, some parents we spoke to moved their child to a different school because of bullying and how it was dealt with. Parents were keen to add that this may not always be right for everyone.

*"In some cases, a child may have gone to the wrong school for them and if they move the situation resolves itself. In other situations, it could occur again unless the support is put in place."*

*"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."*

### Legal issues to consider about changing schools

Moving schools may not be an easy. If the new school is full, you will have to go before an appeal panel to try and get a

place at the school. If you live in Scotland, you may need to make a placing request. If your child has a statement of special educational needs (SEN), the name of the school on the statement needs to be changed. For advice on these issues ring our helpline.

### Other issues to think about

When thinking about a move to a new school, you may also consider:

- how the move will affect your child and how they feel about moving?
- what support is available for disabled children in any new school?
- what help will be available to meet your child's special educational needs?
- how accessible is the new school?
- will the move upset your child's routine?
- how your child will travel to and from the new school?
- how your child will fit into an established year group?
- how much your child will miss their friends from the old school and how easily they will make new friends?

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."*

*"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."*

## 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 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.

*"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*

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**[www.cafamily.org.uk](http://www.cafamily.org.uk)**

*parents said that their children were no longer allowed to play with him in case he threatened them again."*

Sometimes a child may react violently to prolonged bullying.

*"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."*

### **The school's response**

If your child behaves or reacts in any ways like those examples mentioned above, the school may use sanctions to respond to the behaviour. In England, the guidance on school discipline and pupil behaviour policies advises schools how they might 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. You may find it useful to ask for copies of the school's behaviour and discipline policies.

If your child has an individual education plan, statement or a co-ordinated support plan (Scotland), it may include how 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."*

## **Bullying outside school, on mobile phones and on the internet**

Bullying doesn't just take place in schools, it can happen anywhere. If your child is being bullied in the community, via mobile phone text or online (known as 'cyberbullying' see page 21), let the school know what is happening, as there may be action they can take and support they can offer your child while the bullying is being resolved. 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 said their children experienced bullying in their neighbourhood and community.

*"She used to play outside with the neighbours. It wasn't long before people realised that they could take advantage of her. They used to wind her up until she hit them back, call her 'spaz'. This escalated and we had eggs thrown at the windows. One time the windows were broken. We went to the police about that. In the end we were scared to walk out of the door."*

### **Talk to your local council or housing association about bullying**

If you live in a council property or housing association property, 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 victimise other tenants. Some families told us they asked to be rehoused and 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 way to or home from school, you can speak to the head teacher about what is happening. The school's anti-bullying policy may cover bullying outside of school.

### **At leisure facilities and clubs**

It is not a legal requirement for clubs or services to have an anti-bullying policy. But it is good practice for them to have one. You can 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 the bullying and ask what action they can take. You could also approach park keepers or play rangers about any incidents. Your local authority should have their contact details.

### **Cyberbullying on the internet and mobile phones**

Whilst new technologies are fun, educational and a means to socialise, these technologies can also be abused. Cyberbullying is sending nasty or threatening text messages and emails, making abusive remarks on social media on the internet, and taking and



sharing humiliating images or videos to deliberately upset, intimidate or harass another person. As more young people have mobile phones and access the internet, cyberbullying is increasing.

Some children are persistently cyberbullied and children with SEN are more likely to be targeted, especially if their disability is visible/identifiable.

### **How to stop and prevent cyberbullying**

Unlike older types of bullying, cyberbullying is not something a child can be advised to 'just walk away' from, because cyberbullying does not happen in a particular time or space. It can also involve someone, or a group of people who may try and remain anonymous. Ask

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**[www.cafamily.org.uk](http://www.cafamily.org.uk)**

## Tips for parents to help deal with aggressive behaviour

### If your child bullies other children

You could talk to your child about what has happened, why they are behaving 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 in understanding feelings, use pictures of faces showing different expressions (happy, sad, angry) to explain feelings and how the other child may be feeling
- ensure the school is aware of your child's condition and the effect that it has on their behaviour.

### 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.



your child if they know who is bullying them. If the cyberbully is another child at their school, tell someone in the school.

Once something is put out into cyberspace, it can spread rapidly and content can resurface in the future. So it can be very hard for anyone targeted to 'move on'.

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

Make sure your child knows not to retaliate or return messages to cyberbullies but do keep copies of emails texts and posts on social networking sites.

The charity Beatbullying works on the basis that young people are more likely to respond to advice and guidance from their peers. CyberMentors aged 11-17 and MiniMentors aged 5-11 are trained to

provide online peer support. You can ask your child's teacher if the school works with Beetbullying or another organisation. See 'Useful Organisations' on page 25 for contact details.

### **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 15 for details). In some schools, students can report bullying or hate crime online. This is useful if your child is scared of what will happen if they talk to the school directly. You can also consider asking the school to report it 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 do not have to pass on your personal details. Call our freephone helpline for details.

### **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 responsibility in England and Wales, so there may be action the police can take. Do not dial 999 unless your child is in immediate danger. Use the

Contact a Family: **0808 808 3555**  
**[www.cafamily.org.uk](http://www.cafamily.org.uk)**

## 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 immediately removed this boy and made him play in the infants' playground as a punishment; they also withdrew his golden time. 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, disability awareness, etcetera. 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."

non-emergency number; 101 in England and Wales.

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 organisations

There are 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 call our freephone helpline for contact details of support groups.

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

### **Anti-Bullying Alliance**

[www.anti-bullyingalliance.org.uk](http://www.anti-bullyingalliance.org.uk)  
Resources and information to help schools address bullying of children with special educational needs and disabilities.

### **Anti-Bullying Network**

[antibullying.net](http://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](http://www.beatbullying.org)  
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 (see page 23).

### **Bullies Out**

[www.bulliesout.com](http://www.bulliesout.com)  
Information and advice for children, young people and adults in Wales.

### **Changing Faces**

Tel: 0845 4500 275  
[www.changingfaces.org.uk](http://www.changingfaces.org.uk)

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

Supports people with disfigurements to the face, hands or body.

### **Childline**

Helpline: 0800 1111 (24 hours)  
[www.childline.org.uk](http://www.childline.org.uk)  
Helpline for children offering emotional support and counselling on any issue, including bullying.

### **Childnet International**

[www.childnet-int.org](http://www.childnet-int.org)  
Works with organisations around the world to help make the Internet a safe place for children.

### **Education Support for Northern Ireland**

[www.education-support.org.uk](http://www.education-support.org.uk)  
Information for parents, students and teachers about bullying and other issues.

### **Equality and Human Rights**

#### **Commission Disability Helpline**

England – Tel: 0845 604 6610  
Scotland – Tel: 0845 604 5510  
Wales – Tel: 0845 604 8810  
[www.equalityhumanrights.com](http://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](http://www.equalityni.org)  
Provides information and guidance on discrimination and human rights issues, including disability discrimination.

Contact a Family: **0808 808 3555**  
[www.cafamily.org.uk](http://www.cafamily.org.uk)

## Family lives

[www.familylives.org.uk](http://www.familylives.org.uk)

Helpline: 0808 800 2222

Run a website, [www.bullying.co.uk](http://www.bullying.co.uk) with information for parents, young people and professionals who are concerned about bullying.

## HandsOnScotland

[www.handsonscotland.co.uk](http://www.handsonscotland.co.uk)

HandsOnScotland is an online resource for anybody working with or caring for children and young people. The website provides information, advice and activities on how to respond to children and young people's troubling behaviour.

## Kidscape

Helpline: 08451 205 204

[www.kidscape.org.uk](http://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 – Don't Stick It, Stop It!

Helpline: 0808 808 1111

[www.dontstickit.org.uk](http://www.dontstickit.org.uk)

[www.mencap.org.uk](http://www.mencap.org.uk)

'Don't Stick It, Stop It!' is a campaign against bullying for young people with learning disabilities and their families.

## National Autistic Society

Helpline: 0845 070 4004

[www.nas.org.uk](http://www.nas.org.uk)

Offers support for 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.

## Respect Me

Helpline: 0844 800 8600

[www.respectme.org.uk](http://www.respectme.org.uk)

Scotland's anti-bullying service.

## Thinkuknow

[www.thinkuknow.co.uk](http://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](http://www.saferinternet.org.uk)

Information and resources on internet safety, and safe and responsible use new technologies, for parents teachers and children.

## References

1. Frederickson, N., & Turner J. (2003) 'Utilizing the classroom peer group to address children's social needs: an evaluation of the Circle of Friends intervention approach', *The Journal of Special Education*, 36 (4) pp. 234-245.
2. Beatbullying, *Virtual Violence: Protecting children from cyberbullying* (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 and revised 2010 and 2012.

### **Social networking**

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

#### **Facebook**

[www.facebook.com/contactafamily](http://www.facebook.com/contactafamily)

#### **Twitter**

[twitter.com/contactafamily](https://twitter.com/contactafamily)

### **Podcasts**

You can download podcasts from our website at:  
[www.cafamily.org.uk/news/podcasts.html](http://www.cafamily.org.uk/news/podcasts.html)

### **Videos**

You can watch videos on our YouTube channel at  
[www.youtube.com/cafamily](http://www.youtube.com/cafamily)

Contact a Family: **0808 808 3555**  
**[www.cafamily.org.uk](http://www.cafamily.org.uk)**

## 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**



Language Line  
services

Registered Office: 209-211 City Road,  
London EC1V 1JN  
Registered Charity Number: 284912  
Charity registered in Scotland No. SC039169  
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## 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* (UK)
- *Relationships and caring for a disabled child* (UK)
- *A guide to claiming Disability Living Allowance for children* (UK)
- *Additional support for learning – Scotland*
- *Special educational needs – England.*

A full list of Contact a Family publications is available from our helpline, or can be downloaded from our website [www.cafamily.org.uk](http://www.cafamily.org.uk)

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