

Bullying Prevention for Children with Disabilities: Using the IEP, 504, or Creating Your Own Plan

When any child is bullied, it is important to take action to stop the bullying as soon as possible to prevent it from happening again. Using tools like an IEP (Individual Education Program) or 504 plan can help design strategies for bullying prevention that take into consideration the child's disability, social skills, the environment around them, and more. When a child does not have an IEP or 504 plan, families can still help by constructing a plan together with a team of caring adults at school to work on similar bullying prevention strategies. Enlisting adults like teachers, counselors, and other staff can create a safety net for children with disabilities that allows them to receive their education in a healthy environment.

Students with disabilities who are eligible for special education under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) have an IEP. Students who have disabilities and do not require specialized instruction may be entitled to a 504 plan. Every child on an IEP or 504 plan is entitled to a free appropriate public education (FAPE), however bullying can become an obstacle to that education. When bullying affects a student's participation in school, the school is required to respond to harassment or bullying of a student with a disability. The school must provide immediate and appropriate action to investigate, communicate with targeted students regarding steps to end harassment, eliminate any hostile environment, and prevent harassment from recurring. The best group to address appropriate strategies is the student's IEP or 504 team as they are familiar with the student and how their disability impacts them in school. If there is no IEP or 504 plan, it is important for parents to remember that there are adults at school who not only need to know about the bullying but want to know what is happening with the students in their care. Below are examples, tools, and suggestions for parents and staff to address the bullying of students with disabilities.

The IEP and bullying

Will, a 17-year-old boy with autism, is in high school. He has a paraprofessional assist him in the classroom, but moves independently between classes and in the cafeteria. A group of students recently saw that Will was very reactive to noise and started to try and startle him when he was in the hallways. This caused Will to panic, become emotional, and freeze until his paraprofessional found him. Will began avoiding school and participated in school activities only when he was accompanied by an adult.

Will's parents sent an email to his IEP case manager detailing what was happening and requesting an IEP meeting to address the bullying. The team met to consider strategies that would address Will's sensitivity to loud noises and crowded, socially confusing situations, such as the school hallways. They wrote those strategies into the IEP.

In addition to making plans to address Will's sensitivities, his parents and the IEP team considered implementing the following measures to protect him from further harassment:

- Having an aide or a trusted pair of students who are familiar with Will's disability walk him to his next class. (Students are not responsible for disciplining any misbehaving classmates; rather they serve as witnesses who will report any bullying.)
- Outfitting him with noise-canceling headphones, ear plugs, or pods for all trips through communal spaces where noise and crowds might occur
- Choosing an adult that Will should go to if he is harassed or afraid during the school day to validate his feelings, reinforce that he is not deserving of the harassment, and discuss possible solutions

- Drafting a self-advocacy goal to teach Will tools for responding to such situations
- Asking all teachers to exchange a nonverbal cue with Will as soon as he arrives in class to make sure he is okay. Teachers would also be asked to send an email to his case manager if he reports harassment and allow him to go to a trusted adult if he is too distraught to remain in class.
- Assigning specific staff to discreetly monitor Will in communal spaces or unstructured environments
- Evaluating progress each week through a joint call with the case manager, Will, and a parent

The 504 plan and bullying

Kara has a physical disability and struggles to walk, move safely throughout the school, and participate in classes requiring certain physical skills. Kara has a written 504 plan which outlines services and accommodations she requires in school due to the impact of her disability. Some students have recently been mocking the way she walks when the teacher isn't looking. Kara is embarrassed and doesn't want to go to school and has difficulty focusing in class.

Because this behavior is affecting Kara's desire and ability to benefit from her education, the other students' behavior is considered to be harassment based on Kara's disability. The 504 team should have a meeting to problem solve how to stop and monitor the harassment, as well as how to remediate the effects of the harassment on Kara's education.

In Kara's case, her parents worked with her private therapists as well as school staff to consider amending the 504 plan to include:

- Crafting a "[snapshot](#)" document about Kara's disability with Kara and her parents. This will be sent to teachers and staff as well as Kara's classmates' families to encourage them to understand her better and treat her with kindness.
- Encouraging students and friends to report inappropriate mocking to a designated staff member and to accompany Kara between classes
- Allowing Kara to leave the classroom a few minutes early so she can easily and privately move between classes
- Offering other students a chance to get to know Kara better by partnering her with one or two classmates for activities and classwork
- Intervening by staff if they notice any teasing or harassment of Kara
- Identifying an adult that Kara is comfortable reporting to in case of bullying or harassment outside of adult view. This adult would be required to make an immediate report to the assistant principal in the case of these behaviors and to notify parents.
- Presenting [PACER puppet shows](#) at school that discuss physical disabilities and the positive skills of a student with physical disabilities. When she is older, having the social worker do classroom presentations about kindness and the positive role a bystander can play.

Creating a plan for a students without an IEP or 504 plan

Ben has alopecia and covers up his lack of hair with baseball hats, but some of his middle school classmates have been taunting him by stealing the hats and calling him "Baldy." When a couple of teachers joined in the name-calling, Ben went to his mother and she contacted the school counselor and principal for help. Since Ben does not have an IEP or 504 plan, his mother requested to meet with the assistant principal and counselor, and together they worked to get the verbal harassment to stop.

When a child has neither an IEP or 504 plan, it is important to know that school staff still want to help resolve an issue like Ben's, but they need to know when bullying is occurring. When parents or caregivers hear stories like his, they should alert staff to help resolve the situation for all children involved. In Ben's case, his mother knew that he had a good relationship with the school counselor, so she reached out to her first. The counselor suggested other adults at the school to inform (the assistant principal, a specific teacher, and his basketball coach). This resulted in the assistant principal convening a meeting with these individuals that included Ben and

his mother. The focus was on Ben and not what actions the school would take with the other students and staff involved in the bullying. Parents should keep in mind that school leaders sometimes have limitations within the law, privacy concerns, or union contracts restricting how other students or staff are handled. It is important for parents to work collaboratively with the school.

While it is never the child’s responsibility to fix a bullying situation, it is important that Ben practice self-advocacy by speaking up about the bullying and having input into the resolution.

In Ben’s case, the following action items were approved by the group with specific dates and timelines for follow-up by his mother and staff:

- Convening meetings for the principal and assistant principal to speak to any staff involved in the name-calling
- Training for all faculty and staff on bullying prevention with emphasis on recognizing the signs of bullying, fostering a healthy environment for students in the classroom and on sports teams, appropriate intervention strategies, and proper reporting procedures
- Implementing a “no name-calling” policy for any school space
- Reporting any signs of retaliation or backlash immediately to the principal or assistant principal
- Evaluating progress in two weeks through a conference call with Ben, his mother, and staff
- Supporting Ben’s self-advocacy by asking him for his ideas to improve the bullying situation
- Continuing conversations regarding the impact of bullying on Ben and whether there is now a need for a 504 plan

Overall strategies to consider for bullying intervention and prevention

- It is important to document bullying events and develop a record of what is happening to the child. This written record is useful to share when talking with educators, law enforcement, or other individuals who may need to assist parents in intervening against bullying. As the most invested parties, parents should do their best to keep track of events. This is helpful so that emotions alone do not drive the discussion.
- It is helpful to be able to think clearly about what to do by creating a concrete, written plan that will protect the child. Use this template to determine possible action steps: [Parent Action Plan](#).
- When reporting school-based bullying, meetings may include the principal, vice principal, school counselor, social workers, school police officers, and teachers. The best way to be an advocate for a child is to be well prepared for these meetings and to share information in writing with meeting participants beforehand. Consult [Working With the School - What Parents Should Know About Bullying](#) for more ideas on conducting productive and collaborative meetings with these professionals.
- Consider involving the child when generating goals and strategies for bullying intervention or prevention. Use the [Student Action Plan](#) to guide the discussion with the child and the [Parent and Educator Guide to Using the Student Action Plan](#) to further assist with the dialogue.
- Every school has different policies and procedures for how school staff should respond to bullying. The federal website, [StopBullying.gov](#), provides some guidance and best practices for addressing bullying in schools, as well as law and policy surrounding bullying.
- Bullying prevention is a community issue, and everyone plays an important role. As a parent, it is important to become involved at the school or in the community by educating and raising awareness about bullying prevention. Consider holding an event, fundraiser, or a Run, Walk, Roll Against Bullying in partnership with the school, the school parent organization, or in your local community. PACER provides [free resources](#) for those looking to hold an event, provide information to schools, or take other steps to get their community involved in bullying prevention.