

Students with Disabilities and Bullying:

Top five things for parents, educators, and students to know

1. The impact – Bullying affects a student's ability to learn

Many students with disabilities are already addressing unique challenges in school. When they are bullied, it can directly impact their ability to learn and grow.

Bullying is not a harmless rite of childhood that everyone experiences. Research shows that bullying can negatively impact a child's access to education and lead to:

- School avoidance and higher rates of absenteeism
- Lower grades
- Inability to concentrate
- Loss of interest in academic achievement
- Increase in dropout rates

Although only ten U.S. studies have been conducted on the connection between bullying and developmental disabilities, all of these studies found that children with disabilities were two to three times more likely to be bullied than their nondisabled peers. (Disabilities: Insights from Across Fields and Around the World; Marshall, Kendall, Banks & Gover (Eds.), 2009.)

For more information, read [Common Views About Bullying](#).

2. The definition – Bullying based on a student's disability may be considered harassment

The Office for Civil Rights (OCR) and the Department of Justice (DOJ) have stated that bullying may also be **considered harassment** when it is based on a student's race, color, national origin, sex, **disability**, or religion.

Harassing behaviors may include:

- Unwelcome conduct such as verbal abuse, name calling, epithets, or slurs
- Graphic or written statements
- Threats
- Physical assault
- Other conduct that may be physically threatening, harmful, or humiliating

Read the online blog article from the U.S. Department of Education titled "[Keeping Students with Disabilities Safe from Bullying](#)."

3. Advocating for yourself and others has a significant impact

Parents, educators, community members, and students all have an important advocacy role to play in preventing and addressing bullying.

Advocacy—Providing support for students who are being bullied, are vulnerable to being hurt or harmed, or are isolated from other students.

Self-Advocacy—Speaking up for yourself, communicating what you need, and taking action.

Talk with youth about bullying

It is important that adults understand how to communicate with youth about a bullying situation. Some children have an easier time talking to adults about personal matters and may be willing to discuss bullying. Others may be reluctant to share information about the situation. There could be a number of reasons for this: the student bullying them may have told them not to tell or they might fear that telling someone will make matters worse.

When preparing to talk to children about bullying, adults should consider how they will handle the child's questions and emotions and what their own responses will be. Adults should be prepared to listen without judgment, providing the child with a safe place to work out their feelings and determine next steps.

For more information read, [Help Your Child Recognize the Signs of Bullying](#).

Adult intervention is important

It is never the responsibility of the child to fix a bullying situation. If children could do that, they wouldn't be seeking the help of an adult in the first place.

Peer to peer advocacy—Supporting and educating youth as advocates

Most students don't like to see bullying, but they may not know what to do when it happens. Peer advocacy—students speaking out on behalf of each other—is a unique approach that empowers students to protect those targeted by bullying.

Peer advocacy works for two reasons. First, students are more likely than adults to see what is happening with their peers and this influence is powerful. Second, a student telling someone to stop bullying has much more impact than an adult giving the same advice.

For more information, visit [Peer Advocacy](#).

Self-advocacy – The importance of involving youth in decision making and planning

Self-advocacy means that the youth experiencing bullying is able to communicate what they want and need in a straightforward way.

Self-advocacy is knowing how to:

- Speak up for yourself
- Describe your strengths, challenges, needs, and wishes
- Take responsibility for yourself
- Learn about your rights
- Obtain help or know who to ask if you have a question

The person who has been bullied should be involved in deciding how to respond to the bullying. This participation can provide students with a sense of control over their situation, and help them identify someone who is willing to listen, take action on their behalf, and reassure them that their opinions and ideas are important.

Teens, learn more about what you can do by reading, “[Drama: Is it Happening To You?](#)”

The **Student Action Plan Against Bullying** is a self-advocacy resource. It includes three simple steps to explore specific, tangible actions to address bullying:

- Define your experience
- Reflect on your ideas
- Develop potential solutions

Download the **Parent and Educator Guide to Using the Student Action Plan Against Bullying**

For more information, visit [Self-advocacy](#).

4. Law and policy – There are legal protections and provisions for students with disabilities who are being harassed

Federal

As a parent of a student with disabilities, it’s important to know the federal laws and resources specifically designed for your child’s situation. Parents have legal rights when their child with a disability is the target of bullying or harassment related to their disability. According to a 2000 Dear Colleague Letter from the Office of Civil Rights, “States and school districts also have a responsibility [...] to ensure that a free appropriate public education (FAPE) is made available to eligible students with disabilities. Disability harassment may result in a denial of FAPE under these statutes.” Under these federal laws, schools are 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. If the school is not taking necessary action, parents may consider filing a formal grievance with the Office of Civil Rights.

For more information, visit [Rights and Policies](#).

State

In addition to the federal laws, all states have laws that address bullying. Some have information specific to students with disabilities. Many school districts also have individual policies that address how to respond to bullying situations. Contact your local district to request a written copy of the district policy on bullying.

For a complete overview of state laws, visit [StopBullying.gov](#).

5. The resources – Students with disabilities have resources that are specifically designed for their situation

Individualized Education Program (IEP)

Students with disabilities who are eligible for special education under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) will have an Individualized Education Program (IEP).

The IEP can be a helpful tool as part of a bullying prevention plan. Remember, every child receiving special education is entitled to a free appropriate public education (FAPE) and bullying can become an obstacle to that education.

For more information, read PACER’s [Individualized Education Program \(IEP\) and Bullying](#).

Dear Colleague Letters

A 2014 Dear Colleague letter from the Office for Civil Rights states that bullying of any kind, not just on the basis of a student's disability, may result in a violation of FAPE, and reiterates schools' responsibility to address behavior that may result in disability-based harassment or violations of FAPE.

For more information, visit [Rights and Policies](#).

Template Letters

Parents may use one of these template letters as a guide for writing a letter to their child's school. These letters contain standard language and "fill-in-the-blank" spaces so that the letter can be customized for a child's specific situation.

- Version for a Student with a 504 Plan, download the ([Word Doc](#) | [PDF](#))
- Version for a Student with an IEP Plan, download the ([Word Doc](#) | [PDF](#))

The letters can serve two purposes:

- It will alert school administration of the bullying and your desire for interventions
- It can become your written record when referring to events. The record (letter) should be factual and absent of opinions or emotional statements.

The two letters—"Student with an IEP, Notifying School About Bullying" and "Student with a 504, Notifying School About Bullying"—are for parents who have a child with an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) or Section 504. The bullying law of the individual state applies to all students as noted in the law. When bullying is based on the child's disability, federal law can also apply under Section 504, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act.