



What Should You Do if Your Blind or Visually Impaired Child is Bullied?

10 GUIDEPOSTS TO HELP STOP BULLYING

A child with visual impairments faces unique challenges in keeping pace with his or her sighted peers. Add bullying to the mix and you have a problem that can be overwhelming for the student, the parent and the school staff. The solutions are as varied as the classmates, schools and communities where the bullying occurs. Here are 10 guideposts to help stop bullying.

A. PREVENTION

1. Recognize that bullying happens to visually impaired kids:

Many people cannot conceive of the idea that a blind or visually impaired child would be the victim of bullying. Unfortunately, children with glasses are traditionally the *first* individuals to be marked by bullies. The University of Bristol conducted a 2005 study that showed children with glasses are bullied 35 to 40% more than children without glasses.¹ Bullies perceive those with *any* amount of visual impairment to be weak and therefore a prime target for their aggression.

2. Be alert that bullying might be happening to your kid:

Since children with special needs often occupy a lower social standing among their peers, they lack a support system—which the bully recognizes. Bullying can go unreported because children with disabilities often struggle with self esteem issues. They may fail to report the abuse due to their feelings of intimidation, humiliation, or embarrassment. It's important to speak with your child about bullying. Tell your child in no uncertain terms that bullying should never be tolerated and there is no shame attached to reporting it.

¹ Horwood J, Waylen A, Herrick D, Williams C, Wolke D, ALSPAC Study Team. Common visual defects and peer victimisation in children. *Investigative Ophthalmology and Visual Science*. 46: 1177

A. PREVENTION

3. Make sure your child's school knows the specific problems your child faces when being bullied:

Establish a rapport with your child's teacher and principal. Educate them to the nature of your child's visual impairments and to your child's strengths and vulnerabilities. For example, if your child has had food thrown at him in the cafeteria, school staff should be on the lookout to prevent recurrences.

4. Teach your child to be a self advocate:

Teach your child that she has a lot to offer both classmates and school. Encourage your child to get involved with her peers. The more friends your child has, the less likely bullies will target her, since bullies tend to victimize loners without a support network. Encourage your child to speak out when something seems wrong. If she is perceived as having a strong character, that is often enough to discourage a bully from targeting her.

➡ What is Bullying?

Bullying is when someone repeatedly hurts or threatens another person on purpose. Bullying comes in many forms. It can happen in person, in writing, online, on cell phones, in school, on the bus, at home — anywhere. Wherever it happens, it's NOT acceptable.

5. Beware of cyberbullying:

The cyberbully uses the Internet and social media tools to harass his victims. Matthew Kaplowitz, co-author of *How to Talk to Your Kids About Bullying and School Violence* and producer of digital media for students with disabilities, recommends that you oversee your child's computer activities. "Consider installing Internet security filters. They will help you regulate your child's online experience. Check text messages to make sure that offensive messages aren't being sent to your child. Teach your child *never* to reveal personal information online."



From CN's bullying prevention public service spot, *Stop Bullying: Speak Up - Dude, What Would Happen?*, in which (L-R) C. J. Manigo, Jackson Rogow, and Ali Sepasyar play the respective roles of the bullied, the bully and the bystander.

B. INTERVENTION

6. Be supportive:

If you discover that your child is being bullied, don't wait. Speak to her about it immediately. Listen to your child's feelings. Be understanding and supportive. Explain that they are not responsible for being bullied nor is there any shame in being bullied—bullying must never be tolerated. Share a story about how you or someone you know was bullied. You are also likely to have strong feelings in the matter, but try to generate an impression of calmness. This is your child's experience—and it's a very personal experience.

7. Gather information:

Find out everything you can about the incident(s). Who was involved? What led up to the altercation? How long has the bullying been going on? Learn about the school's anti-bullying policy. Get all your facts organized so you can approach the situation efficiently and effectively.

8. Communicate your concerns calmly with the school:

Positive communication is usually the key to getting results. Approach your child's teacher and the parents of the bully in a calm, objective manner. Let your de-

meanor show that you are just there to find a practical solution to an unfortunate problem. The other parties involved might respond defensively if they feel you are angry or judging them. You are all going to have to work together on a solution, so eliminate resistance before it begins by communicating calmly.

9. Be persistent:

Bullying is not to be tolerated after it has been discovered and reported. If the bullying continues and your child's teacher doesn't rectify the problem in a prompt fashion, do not hesitate to take the matter to a higher authority. Alert the school's guidance counselor or principal. If this fails to bring satisfaction, notify the district supervisor. You probably won't meet such opposition but always be prepared to take your grievance up the 'chain of command'. Keep a written record of all the communications and conversations you've had with teachers and school staff or school administration.

10. Utilize your child's Individualized Education Program (IEP):

If the bullying of your child is based on his visual disability and the harassment is interfering with your child's learning,

the school is legally obligated to stop the persecution. Your child's school is also required to provide supportive services that address the effects of the bullying. Set a meeting with the IEP team to collaboratively figure out an anti-bullying action plan.

Final Word: There is no quick fix to the problem of bullying.

It is a serious situation that requires the ongoing involvement of family, school staff, and community members.

Once you have come to a resolution, share your experiences with the special needs community. We're all in this together and the more information that is available, the easier it is for everyone.

This article was prepared in collaboration with the **National Association for Parents of Children with Visual Impairments (NAPVI)**, www.spedex.com/napvi, **Hands & Voices**, www.handsandvoices.org, and **Bridge Multimedia**, www.bridgemultimedia.com.



➡ **Related links:**

Stop Bullying: Speak Up: A website, produced by the Cartoon Network, that educates kids about the problem of bullying and encourages them to spread the word about bullying awareness and prevention.

www.cartoonnetwork.com/promos/stopbullying/index.html

National Bullying Prevention Center: A website created by PACER, a parent training and information center for families of children with disabilities, to address bullying through educational, creative, and interactive resources.

www.pacer.org/bullying/

StopBullying.gov: A website that provides information from various government agencies about how students, parents, educators, and community members can prevent or stop bullying.

www.StopBullying.gov

Bullying and the Child with Special Needs: A website that offers a comprehensive report and online resources regarding bullying and children with disabilities.

<http://www.abilitypath.org/areas-of-development/learning--schools/bullying/>