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Empowering Our Children: Strategies to Reduce Being Bullied and Teased

Parents and teachers hope that the integration will be enjoyable and successful, but while some children will be welcoming, 'maternal' and kind to the child with Asperger's syndrome, some will be 'predatory' and consider the child with Asperger's syndrome as an easy target for teasing and bullying. From my clinical experience, the comments most frequently used as an act of verbal teasing or abuse when the target is a child with Asperger's syndrome are 'stupid' (or 'retard'), 'psycho' and 'gay'. These derogatory comments can be observed in the interactions of typical children but can have more significance for children with Asperger's syndrome. Such children value intellectual ability as one of their strengths, which can be a constructive form of compensation for low social self-esteem if they are not successful in social situations. To be called 'stupid' is a significant personal insult and likely to create considerable distress. The insult of 'psycho' can also be perceived as a personally meaningful insult, especially if the child has to see psychologists and psychiatrists and take medication. The child may start to question his or her sanity and worry about the potential for future mental disturbance. Unfortunately, in schools today, the description 'gay' is perceived as a powerful insult. Children with Asperger's syndrome may make a literal interpretation of the comments of other children, and assume that the description could be genuine and that they may indeed be homosexual. Thus, a few comments designed to confuse, tease or infuriate can have life-long implications for the child with Asperger's syndrome.

Bullying

There are some places and circumstances at school where bullying is more common, such as hallways, on school transport, during sports and in situations when the incident is less likely to be detected by an adult. Bullying can also occur close to the child's home by children of neighbours, family friends and older siblings. Bullying usually occurs with a peer audience or bystanders and can take a wide variety of forms. The most common are verbal or physical confrontation and intimidation, injury and destruction of personal property, and derogatory gestures or comments. If adults committed such actions, they would be liable to receive criminal convictions for assault, be reprimanded by their employers for harassment, or dismissed.

There are other types of bullying that are perhaps more subtle but devastating in their effects. Someone might openly steal a possession such as a hat and torment the child as he or she tries to retrieve it; or engage in malicious gossip, spreading rumours; or make comments that cause humiliation; or use obscene gestures. Another form of bullying that frequently occurs with children with Asperger's syndrome is peer shunning or social exclusion, such as not

being included in a group at meal times, not having questions answered, deliberately being chosen last in a game or team, or not being invited to a social event. While parents and teachers are encouraging the child with Asperger's syndrome to interact with his or her peers, some typical children do not welcome the child's request to join the conversation or activity. Improved social skills are of little practical value if peers deliberately and maliciously reject the child with Asperger's syndrome.

Some forms of bullying are relatively rare for typical children but in my clinical experience appear to be more common when the target of a bullying action is a child with Asperger's syndrome. Because such children are often socially naive, trusting, and eager to be part of a group, they are able to be 'set up' by other children. For example, another child may make a socially inappropriate or bizarre suggestion, and the child with Asperger's syndrome, who has limited social understanding and is not 'street wise' (and therefore does not recognize the social meaning, context, cues and consequences), can be persuaded to follow this through. Another child or adult, unaware of what went before, assumes that the child with Asperger's syndrome was fully aware of the significance and implications of what he or she said or did. The consequent rebuke or punishment of the child with Asperger's syndrome becomes a cause for amusement by those who made the suggestion or gave false information.

Another act of bullying is to torment the child with Asperger's syndrome (ensuring that a teacher does not detect the provocation) and enjoy the benefits of the child's reaction. Children with Asperger's syndrome can be impulsive in their response to such goading without thinking of the consequences to themselves. Other young children in the same situation would delay their response so as not to be 'caught', or would recognize how to respond without getting into trouble. When the child with Asperger's syndrome retaliates with anger to this provocation, perhaps causing damage or injury, the covert 'operative' appears to be the innocent victim, and receives compensation from the supervising adult.

The effects of bullying on children with Asperger's syndrome

Research has confirmed that typical children who are the target of bullying are at greater risk for low self-esteem, increased levels of anxiety and depression, lower academic achievement, and increased social isolation. The psychological consequences of bullying in the typical population can last for more than 10 years. Children with Asperger's syndrome are more prone to these consequences because of their already low self-esteem, predisposition to anxiety and difficulty understanding why someone would behave that way, questioning why they were the target and what else they could have done to stop it. Clinical experience suggests that the psychological consequences of being the target of frequent bullying and teasing are likely to last many years and be a major contributor to clinical depression, anxiety disorder and problems with anger management.

I have discussed incidents of bullying during childhood with adults with Asperger's syndrome, and noted that they have considerable difficulty understanding why they were the target so often, or the motivation of the children who tormented them. Their main way of trying to understand why they were singled out is to repeatedly replay the events in their thoughts. The person is re-living but not resolving past injustices. This can be a daily experience, even though the incidents occurred decades earlier. As the event is repeated in their thoughts, so are the emotions experienced again. Adults with Asperger's syndrome may require psychotherapy to overcome the deep and entrenched traumas caused by being the

target of persistent bullying, which often began in early childhood. They cannot easily forgive and forget, or have closure, until they understand why.

Strategies to reduce the frequency and effects of bullying

It is essential to have a team approach to reduce the frequency of bullying. The team includes the target of the bullying, school administration, teachers, parents, a child psychologist, other children, and the child who engages in acts of bullying. It is important that schools develop and implement a code of conduct that specifically defines bullying and ways to stop it. The definition should be broad and not restricted to acts of intimidation and injury. There will need to be staff education, and consensus and consistency in determining what are bullying actions and what are appropriate consequences. The first stage in a program to reduce bullying in a school and for an individual child is a staff in-service training program. Staff will need to be trained in how to supervise situations where bullying is more likely to occur, how to respond to acts of bullying, and how to provide appropriate consequences and resolution.

Equitable justice

The concept of justice is extremely important. Before considering the degree of responsibility, it will be necessary to conduct a calm and objective assessment of all the facts—to be an impartial detective. The degree of injury or damage should not be viewed as the *only* measure of the degree of responsibility and consequences. The child with Asperger's syndrome may have been the target of many acts of bullying over a considerable length of time and has eventually responded with an act of physical aggression, which may be dramatic but is sometimes the only means the child knows of stopping such acts.

A map of the child's world

Carol Gray recommends creating a map of the child's world and identifying places where the child is vulnerable to or safe from acts of bullying. Some areas will need more supervision, and more safe-havens can be created. One of the problems with a prevention program that relies primarily on staff surveillance is that acts of bullying are usually covert, with only around 15 per cent of such actions observed by a teacher in the classroom and only five per cent in the playground. However, other children often witness acts of bullying and they will need to be key participants in the program.

Positive Peer pressure

The code of conduct on bullying in schools should include input from peers. There should be regular class discussions to review the code, specific incidents and strategies. The children themselves may need their own training program on bullying. The program can include information on the long-term consequences for both those children who commit acts of bullying and for their targets. Those children known to bully others need to be reminded of the short-term consequences in terms of the agreed code of conduct and punishments, as well as of the long-term consequences on their ability to form friendships and achieve successful employment. They should also be alerted to their risk of developing mood disorders and the greater possibility of committing criminal offences. The 'silent' majority of children, who are not involved in bullying as either perpetrator or target, need to be encouraged to rescue both the child who is the target of, and the child who engages in, bullying.

Bystanders, who generally find it disturbing to witness acts of bullying, will need new strategies and encouragement to constructively respond to such acts. Their previous responses may have included relief that they are not the target; being immobilised by fear of being a target themselves if they intervene; having a diffused sense of responsibility by being in the majority group; not being sure what to do; being advised not to get involved; and adherence to a code of silence, with peer pressure not to report what is happening. Unfortunately, some bystanders can perceive the event as being humorous or deserved by the target, which provides overt encouragement for the child committing the bullying act. They can be taught to state clearly that what is happening is wrong, that it must stop, and that if it does not stop it will be reported. This may mean stepping between the perpetrator and the target. There are some children within the silent majority who have a high social status, a strong sense of social justice and natural assertiveness. These children can be personally encouraged, and can be highly successful in intervening, to stop bullying. Their high social status may also encourage other children to express their disapproval. Peer pressure can reduce bullying.

A guardian

The teacher can encourage a 'buddy' or guardian system, with the guardian recruited from the group of high social status children with a social conscience. His or her role is to monitor the circumstances of the child with Asperger's syndrome, to confidentially report any incident, to encourage the target to report the incident, and to publicly state that the situation is not funny and that the teasing or bullying must stop.

Another valuable characteristic of the guardian is to repair the emotional and self-esteem damage inflicted on the child or adolescent with Asperger's syndrome. An adult may be sympathetic and provide reassurance but the restorative value of a supportive comment from a popular peer can be a very effective antidote.

Strategies for the target

There are strategies that can be used by the child who is the target of a bullying act, such as trying to avoid potentially vulnerable situations. A child with Asperger's syndrome may try to find a socially isolated sanctuary but this can be one of the most vulnerable situations. Safety is in numbers. The best place to 'hide' is in a group of children, or at least near them. It is important that children with Asperger's syndrome are welcomed into, or nearby, a group of children when predators are approaching a potential target. That welcome will need to be part of the class code on bullying. Other options can be the provision of activities in a supervised classroom during break times, such as a chess club; or an opportunity for like-minded individuals to meet as a group in the playground.

The child must respond in some way, but what should he or she say or do? The general advice is for such children to try to stay calm, maintain their self-esteem, and respond in an assertive and constructive way. Staying calm and maintaining self-esteem is difficult for children with Asperger's syndrome, but self-talk strategies can be used to maintain self-control. Children who are a target need to know and remember that they are not at fault, they do not deserve the comments or actions, and the people who need to change their behaviour are those who are committing the bullying acts.

Carol Gray recommends the creation of one simple spoken response that is true and used consistently. Examples are, 'I don't deserve this, stop it'; and 'I don't like that, stop it'. It is advisable to avoid telling a lie (for example, to say 'I don't care'). This would in any case be difficult for children with Asperger's syndrome, who are known for their reluctance to lie. Another response to avoid is replying with a sense of humour. Children with Asperger's syndrome would have considerable difficulty creating humour in such a situation. If the target child is unsure whether the actions of the other person are friendly or not, a reply could be, 'Are you teasing me to be friendly or not friendly?' The child will need to clearly state his or her feelings: 'What you are doing/saying is making me feel (confused, angry, etc) .' It is important that the child states that the bullying will be reported. The child can then try to leave the situation, moving towards an adult or a safe group of children. If the bullying occurs in class, then the teacher can allow the child who is the target to move to another part of the classroom, perhaps without having to ask permission first.

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The text is taken from *The Complete Guide to Asperger's Syndrome*, published by Jessica Kingsley Publishers