



3. Bullying and Exclusion

Spotlight on
Supporting Autistic
Girls and Gender
Diverse Students
at School

Neuro-affirming tips and strategies to support autistic girls and autistic gender-diverse students experiencing bullying and exclusion*:

 Be aware of the different types of bullying. It is not always obvious. Covert bullying can include hidden or out-of-sight actions such as making up stories to get someone in trouble, withholding information, intentionally leaving someone out or spreading rumours.

 Autistic girls and gender diverse students are especially vulnerable to being manipulated by bullies and may not be aware of, or understand that they are the target of bullying. They may need to be guided about green flags and red flags in friendship (see Peer Relationships Tip Sheet).

 Some autistic students may need assistance in understanding the difference between friendship or peer relationship problems they might be able to address themselves (e.g., a disagreement), and a situation where they should seek help from an adult (e.g., sustained 'teasing' as a form of bullying). They also may need guidance in interpreting actions that are accidental versus intentional – although it is critical not to invalidate or gaslight their experiences. If a situation has distressed them, acknowledging this needs to be the starting point.

 Ensure that autistic students have a "safe" person (i.e., a trusted teacher, support staff or trusted friend) and safe place on school grounds that they can access as needed.

 Offer lunchtime structured activities, such as music, drama, Lego, or reading groups, or allow for a quiet space like the library to be open during breaks. These allow for a safe space for vulnerable students to go to during unstructured play times (where bullying and exclusion may be more likely to happen).

 Consider an exemption from restorative practices, as lived experience tells us that these practices can be traumatic for autistic students. Many autistic students will understandably not feel able to face their bully and talk it out, some may need additional processing time, and others may not be able to vocalise how they are feeling.

Restorative practices are also challenging for autistic students who are highly empathetic and who are driven by a strong sense of personal or social justice.

 When a bullying situation against an autistic student has occurred, listen to them and validate their experience. Support them in communicating in ways that work for them (it may not be verbal) and allow them time to process.

 Autistic students who are vulnerable to being bullied, but who mask or internalise their distress may not be able to tell you what is happening. Keep checking in, especially if you notice changes in their regular behaviour, or if there appears to be a shift in peer dynamics in the classroom.



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Be the change. Aim to reduce stigma around autism by taking a whole-school approach (involving leadership, educators, students and parents) which embeds all positive and inclusive attitudes about all forms of diversity, including neurodiversity.

Additional Tips for Families Around Bullying:

- Listen and reassure your child that they were right in coming to you for support. Assure them that bullying is not their fault. They may need help in understanding the choices or next steps to take in the situation and may need you to be an advocate for them.
- Document the bullying and contact the school when required. Schools have a duty of care to ensure safety for all students. Arrange a meeting with your child's teacher, wellbeing coordinator, principal or support team to share your concerns.
- Ensure there is a safe person and place at school that your child can turn to should they be bullied, excluded, or need help, or a break from their peers.
- Be aware that some autistic children may need help interpreting bullying behaviour. They may not understand some of the "covert" bullying tactics, and they may need help in understanding what is going on.
- It may be helpful to monitor your child's social media and online interactions. Have clear discussions with them on what to do if they think they are experiencing any harassment online.
- Encourage your child to get involved in outside-of-school-activities that they enjoy and help build their confidence. This may help them to form friendships separate to their peer interactions at school.
- Keep a very close eye on your child's mental health if they are being bullied or excluded. Professionals such as a psychologist can assist your child directly, as well as supporting you in advocating for your child.

*Disclaimer: This resource provides some high-level strategies around supporting autistic students who are at risk of being bullied. It does not address the complexity of bullying behaviour or the significant trauma and mental health impacts of bullying, nor does it address school policies or procedures around bullying. Yellow Ladybugs acknowledges that bullying of autistic young people is a systemic and societal issue grounded in stigma, discrimination, ableism, and systems and processes that too often fail to properly address this issue.