

A Parent's Guide to Bullying

Involving Students with Disabilities

If you are reading this, you may be having trouble with your school preventing bullying or perhaps you just don't know how to work with the school on this issue. Students with disabilities have specific rights and protections to prevent and respond to bullying by a student or school staff.

Bullying a student with a disability that results in the loss of meaningful educational benefits is a violation of the right to a free appropriate public education.



What is bullying?

Listed below are some steps you can take to help your child. Except where noted, these suggestions apply to every school district in Massachusetts, including public, charter, collaborative, private day, and residential schools.

School-Wide Anti-Bullying Plans

- Every school must have a Bullying Prevention and Intervention Plan. *As highlighted below, MA law also requires that these plans specifically address the needs of vulnerable students, including students with disabilities.*
- It will help to get a copy of your school's Plan and review the contents.
 - ◆ *Schools are required to provide a copy of their Bullying Prevention and Intervention Plan annually to parents and students, translated and in age-appropriate terms. It should be posted on the school's website and updated every two years.*
- Every plan must include:
 - ◆ Procedures for students, staff, parents and others to report bullying in safe, private and age-appropriate ways
 - › *Each school must have modified written and verbal reporting methods that address communication, cognitive, emotional and physical challenges*
 - ◆ Procedures for promptly responding to and investigating all reports of bullying
 - ◆ Procedures for promptly and confidentially notifying parents of the victim and aggressor in the primary language of the home
 - ◆ The range of disciplinary actions that may be taken in bullying cases
 - › *Federal law provides some protections regarding disciplining students with disabilities who are accused of bullying*
 - ◆ Procedures for protecting students and restoring a sense of safety for a victim of bullying
 - ◆ Descriptions of bullying, cyber-bullying and retaliation
 - ◆ A strategy for providing counseling or referral to services for students and appropriate family members
- School staff must be trained annually on the school's Bullying Prevention and Intervention Plan. Ongoing professional development to build skills to prevent, identify and respond to bullying is also required for school staff.¹
- Any school staff working with a student with disabilities must receive specific training and consultation related to that student's particular type of disability.
- *Schools must provide students with age-appropriate instruction on bullying prevention; parents must be informed on how to reinforce this curriculum at home.*²
 - ◆ Anti-bullying curriculum must be accessible to students with all types and severities of disabilities

An IEP Team's Anti-Bullying Role

- Whether your child is being bullied or not, all IEP teams must consider annually the issue of bullying when writing IEPs. If the Team determines that a student's disability affects social skills development, makes the student is vulnerable to bullying, harassment or teasing, or if the student is on the autism spectrum, then the IEP must address teaching the skills needed for the student to avoid and respond to these challenges. Educational evaluations should include assessments for social skills and social and emotional status. These assessments can provide information regarding a student's vulnerability to bullying, both as an aggressor and as a target.
- When a parent or staff member believes a child is at risk of being bullied or is exhibiting bullying behavior due to a disability, the school must convene an IEP team meeting. The following questions will assist Team members in addressing this issue
 - ◆ Can the student understand and identify bullying attempts?
 - ◆ Does the student have self-advocacy skills to know what to do if bullied?
 - ◆ What has been done to integrate the student into the social life of the school throughout the school day and during extracurricular activities?
 - ◆ Where does the bullying occur?
 - ◆ Is the student socially or physically isolated?
 - ◆ Are there times of the day with less adult supervision or less structure where bullying is more likely to occur?
 - ◆ Does the student have someone he or she trusts at school for reporting incidents of bullying?
 - ◆ Does the student feel safe at school? If not, why not?
 - ◆ Parents can also discuss any concerns with the school's Bullying Prevention Plan.
- All IEP Teams must consider whether a student needs services and modifications in order to make progress in the school's anti-bullying curriculum² and ensure that students can fully participate in reporting and investigation procedures.
- It will be helpful to involve your child, when appropriate, in this process.
- There is a range of supports, accommodations, and services that can be part of your child's IEP to address bullying, including helping your child feel safe at school, communications and other supports described in the next section.



help



For additional resources on bullying go to MAC's website www.massadvocates.org/bullying

¹ With the exception of special education schools licensed by the state, the requirement for ongoing professional development does not apply to private schools.

² With the exception of special education schools licensed by the state, the requirement for anti-bullying curriculum does not apply to private schools.

Considerations for the IEP

Listed below are suggestions that can assist IEP Teams in discussing how to prevent bullying. This material is intended as guidance for Team members as they develop IEPs that help students build skills and proficiencies necessary to avoid and respond to bullying, teasing, and harassment as required by the Bullying Prevention and Intervention Law. **Most of these suggestions can be included in an IEP as accommodations, supports, or services provided by the school.**

Helping your child feel safe at school

- Notify all relevant school staff about bullying concerns, including guidance counselors, nurses, coaches, cafeteria workers, and bus drivers.
- Provide instructional personnel or supplementary aides and services during identified periods of the school day (lunch, recess, study hall, bus, free times) when your child requires additional support or instruction in order to respond to or avoid bullying.
 - ◆ Provide a bus monitor if your child is routinely a target or aggressor on the school bus
- Identify specific individuals to whom your child knows she/he can immediately report incidents of bullying; make sure your child knows that every adult is an available reporter.
- Identify a “home base” (a place in school where your child feels safe) with your child’s input and appoint a “safe person” chosen by you and your child to help your child during the school day.

Communication and Training

- Communicate to all staff that have contact with your child the specifics of the IEP as they relate to bullying, including the skills your child is working on and special considerations when bullying occurs.
- Provide ongoing consultation to your child’s teachers and other service providers from a professional (either in- or out-of-district) with expertise in your child’s particular disability

Direct Support for your Child

- Provide a social skills group to help your child develop social competencies and gain skills needed to identify a possible bullying situation and to respond. There are many types and Teams should consider what is best for the individual student:
 - ◆ Specifically designed social skills group
 - ◆ Social lunch group (Lunch Bunch)
 - ◆ Buddy system
 - ◆ Social recreation group
- Provide non-academic and extracurricular opportunities for your child to demonstrate strengths, practice social skills, and develop self-esteem.
- Provide one-to-one instruction by a school psychologist, speech and language pathologist, or other professional to help your child learn how to increase pragmatic skills (the social use of language) to reduce his/her vulnerability to bullying; these skills can include learning to read the nonverbal cues of communication and learning to understand and respond appropriately to bullying situations.
- Provide assertiveness and/or self-advocacy training.
- Provide supported and monitored opportunities for students to practice developing social skills in a larger group in the general school population. This helps to reinforce skills learned in small group settings.
- Obtain a Functional Behavioral Assessment and develop a Behavioral Intervention Plan that identify target or aggressor behaviors and proposes interventions for teaching children to reduce or avoid these behaviors. Make sure that classroom teachers are aware of specific strategies they are to use.
- To the extent your child is receiving Applied Behavioral Analysis (ABA) services, consider having your child’s behaviors addressed by these services.
- Instruct your child on how to use techniques to maintain self-control.
- Allow extra time/consideration when your child works on communication-based assignments that encourage self-expression.



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