

Bullying and Children & Youth with Special Healthcare Needs

The U.S. government defines bullying as, “An unwanted, aggressive behavior among school aged children that involves a real or perceived power imbalance. The behavior is repeated, or has the potential to be repeated, over time. Bulling includes actions such as making threats, spreading rumors, attacking someone physically or verbally, and excluding someone from a group on purpose.” ([What Is Bullying, 2023](#))

Bullying is something that concerns all parents, but even more so parents of children and youth with special healthcare needs (CYSHCN). Since bullying involves a real or perceived imbalance in power, CYSHCN are often targeted for bullying due to their disabilities. A growing body of research shows that children with special healthcare needs, such as: ADHD, autism, brain injury, cerebral palsy, diabetes, epilepsy, hemiplegia, learning disabilities, muscular dystrophy, physical disabilities, spina bifida, and stuttering are significantly more likely to be bullied and excluded by their peers ([Bullying and Children and Youth with Special Healthcare Needs, 2017](#)).

Experts agree that bullying often leaves a lasting impact on children. CYSHCN who have been bullied may become stressed, anxious, sad, or even develop comorbid mental health conditions, such as anxiety or depression. The stress of being bullied may impact their ability to sleep or their desire to eat. Knowing that your child is being bullied can also lead to additional stress and mental health issues in parents.

Supporting Your Child

The PACER National Bully Prevention Center encourages parents to help recognize the signs of bullying by educating their child on what bullying looks like, listening to their child, believing what their child says, being supportive of their child’s feelings, being patient with their child’s processing of the events and emotions, asking open-ended questions about the bullying their child has experienced, and discussing intervention options with your child to help protect them ([PACER: Help Your Child Recognize the Signs Of Bullying, 2022](#)).

If your child is being bullied at school, it is important to notify the school in writing that the bullying is occurring, while including as many details as possible. If needed, parents can utilize template letters to help them organize the information that needs presented. The PACER National Bully Prevention Center has a template letter available for parents to notify schools of bullying incidences, including specialized templates for students with both IEPs and 504 plans: [Notifying the School About a Bullying Incident Using a Template Letter](#) (2016).

Self-Advocacy

An important step in keeping CYSHCN safe from bullying is empowering them to become self-advocates. CYSHCN may not instinctively know how to stand up for themselves, so it's important to help encourage them, build self-confidence in them, and teach them how to speak up for their needs.

[Student Action Plan Against Bullying](#) (PACER National Bully Prevention Center, 2020)

[Parent and Educator Guide to Using the Student Action Plan Against Bullying](#) (PACER National Bully Prevention Center, 2020)

[Teens and Young Adults with Disabilities: Be Your Own Best Advocate](#) (PACER National Bully Prevention Center, 2020).

Peer Support and Advocacy

One important way to prevent bullying in schools is the use of peer support and advocacy. StopBullying.Gov suggests that peer support should include: “peer education, team-building, and leadership activities that foster friendships, build empathy, and prevent bullying to make schools safer and inclusive for all students, including children with special healthcare needs.” ([Bullying and Youth with Disabilities and Special Health Needs](#), 2020). Additionally, PACER National Bully Prevention Center has a [Peer Advocacy Guide](#) available to provide education and resources for addressing bullying of CYSHCN by using peer support and advocacy.

Legal Rights

CYSHCN are protected by Federal Anti-Bullying Laws, including Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. These federal laws protect CYSHCN who are the target of bullying and/or harassment, and who are subsequently being denied equal access or opportunity to a free and appropriate public education ([PACER: Students with Disabilities and Bullying Rights and Policies](#), 2020)

[Parent Fact Sheet: What Are Public Schools Required to Do When Students with Disabilities Are Bullied](#) (United States Department of Education, 2022)

In addition to Federal Anti-Bullying Laws, the State of Indiana also has laws that address bullying, including bullying in schools and cyberbullying. At this time, however, Indiana laws do not afford any special protections for specific groups of people, such as CYSHCN.

[Indiana’s Anti-Bullying Laws and Policies](#) (2023)

Programs and systems change often. It is important to ensure that you are using the most current information. This fact sheet was revised November 2023. Please check <https://www.inf2f.org/fact-sheets.html> for the most recent edition.

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