

FREE MATERIAL · FAMILIES, SCHOOLS AND CLINICS

It's not just teasing

*Bullying, cyberbullying and inclusion of neurodivergent children
and adolescents.*

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Na Rota do Afeto
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Why this booklet exists

Because when the target is neurodivergent, bullying tends to be read as a feature of the child.

“He can't stand up for himself.” “She's very sensitive.” “They were only playing — he just doesn't get it.” “That's his social difficulty.”

These are said by well-meaning adults, and every one of them shifts responsibility onto the child for something being done **to** her. While the conversation circles what the target cannot do, nobody is dealing with what the others are doing.

This booklet exists to separate those two things — and to give families, schools and professionals something practical to do.

Not legal advice

It explains rights and routes in general terms. Laws on bullying differ between countries; check what applies where you are.

What bullying is — and what it isn't

The distinction matters, because not every conflict is bullying and not every case of bullying is recognised.

Three elements have to be present at the same time:

- **Intent.** Not an accident, not a misunderstanding.
- **Repetition.** Systematic, not a one-off episode.
- **Power imbalance.** The target genuinely struggles to defend herself — by number, strength, popularity, standing in the group or condition.

Not bullying

A single fight between peers of similar standing. A disagreement. Being turned down for a game. A blunt, unpleasant remark made once. These are part of living together and call for mediation, not a violence protocol.

Bullying, even without physical aggression

Systematic exclusion. Nicknames that repeat. Mocking imitation of speech, movement or sensory reactions. Provoking a meltdown on purpose and then filming it. Spreading rumours. Sabotaging group work. Making a child believe she has friends she does not have.

One specific and frequent form

Deliberately provoking a neurodivergent child until she melts down, then pointing at her as the aggressive one. That is bullying, and it has a double effect — the target is usually the only one who ends up in the disciplinary record.

Why they are targeted more

Not because they are fragile. Because of a set of factors the environment produces.

- **Visible difference.** Stimming, speech, gait, restricted interests, use of support aids — anything that stands out becomes an easy target in settings that never address difference.
- **Literal social reading.** Difficulty telling a joke from an attack, and noticing when she is being manipulated.
- **Difficulty reporting.** Because of language, alexithymia, or simply not being sure that what happened was wrong.
- **Lower credibility.** When she does report, she is often told she exaggerated or misunderstood.
- **A history of compliance training.** Years of reinforced obedience reduce the capacity to refuse and to push back.
- **Wanting to belong.** Adolescents who have never had a group will accept high costs to stay in one — humiliation included.
- **Structural isolation.** A child who spends break alone, or only with her aide, has neither witnesses nor defenders.

Signs it is happening

Many children never tell. In those who struggle to report, the body and the routine speak first.

- **New refusal to go to school**, or physical symptoms on school mornings — stomach ache, headache, nausea.
- **Route changes**: avoiding break, the toilets, the canteen, the school bus.
- **School materials that go missing, break or come back damaged** repeatedly.
- **A drop in performance** with no other explanation.
- **More meltdowns at home**, especially on returning from school.
- **Regression** of established skills.
- **Changes in sleep or eating**.
- **New self-deprecation** — “I’m stupid”, “nobody likes me”, “it would be better if I weren’t here”.
- **Abandoning the phone — or the opposite**: checking it with anxiety.
- **Questions about her own diagnosis** asked with shame rather than curiosity.

Immediate attention

Any talk of disappearing, vanishing or not wanting to be here calls for **an immediate response**: seek a mental health assessment without delay, and inform the school the same day. Do not treat it as dramatic phrasing.

Cyberbullying: what changes

The digital environment removes the one defence the child still had: leaving.

In person, the child leaves school and the day ends. Online there is no closing time. The content stays, is copied, circulates beyond anyone's control and can resurface months later.

How it shows up

- Groups created to exclude, or fake groups the child is added to only to be targeted.

- Screenshots and videos of a meltdown, a fall, a way of speaking — shared as a joke.
- Fake profiles using the child's name or photo.
- Messages inside online games, where almost no adult ever looks.
- Exposure of personal information, including the diagnosis.
- Requests for photos or videos that later become blackmail.

Do this before anything else

Save the evidence. Screenshot with date, time, username and URL visible.
Screen-record video. Do this **before** reporting it to the platform — removed content disappears, and the evidence goes with it.

Then: report inside the platform, block, inform the school in writing, and consider a police report. In serious cases it may be possible to obtain a court order to identify anonymous accounts.

What the family should do

- ✓ **Receive before you fix.** A child's first reaction after telling is to measure whether it was worth it. Listen to the end, say you believe her, make clear it is not her fault.
- ✓ **Do not promise secrecy.** Explain that you will need to act, and agree on how.
- ✓ **Record everything.** Dates, times, what happened, who was there, what the child said — in her words. Keep screenshots.
- ✓ **Inform the school in writing.** Email or a signed record. A conversation in the corridor leaves no trace, and the trace is what secures a response.
- ✓ **Ask for the school's protocol** and a deadline for a response.
- ✓ **Follow up in writing again** if nothing changes. A sequence of unanswered emails is itself a document.
- ✓ **Escalate** to the child protection or education authority where you are if the school does not act.
- ✓ **Look after the child's emotional health** in parallel. Institutional resolution is slow; the distress is now.

What not to do

- ✗ **Do not confront the other student or their family directly.** It usually makes things worse and lets the school off the hook.
- ✗ **Do not say “hit back” or “just ignore it”.** Hitting back puts the burden on the target; ignoring does not work and teaches her nobody is coming.
- ✗ **Do not remove the child from things she loves** as a form of protection. It shrinks her network further.
- ✗ **Do not post the case on social media.** It exposes the child and can damage the formal process.
- ✗ **Do not minimise.** “Everyone goes through this” ends the conversation and teaches her not to tell again.

If your child is the one doing it

The part nobody wants to read, and where prevention actually happens.

Finding out that your own child is the aggressor brings shame and a defensive reaction. But denial protects no one — and children who bully are often in distress themselves.

- **Take it seriously the first time.** Not a phase, not “boys being boys”.
- **Separate the act from the person.** “What you did caused harm” is not the same as “you are a bad person”.
- **Look for the function.** Status in the group? Fear of being the next target? Reproducing what he lives at home? His own distress?
- **Require real repair**, not a formulaic apology.
- **Work with the school**, not against it.
- **Seek assessment** if the behaviour persists.

One specific note: neurodivergent children sometimes appear as aggressors without having started anything — because they reacted physically to systematic provocation nobody saw. Before any sanction, **ask what happened before.**

Inclusion is what prevents it

An annual talk does not prevent bullying. Structured everyday participation does.

Being in the same room is not inclusion. Inclusion is taking part in the same things, with the supports needed, and having recognised value inside the group. Where that exists, bullying falls. Where a child is physically present but socially apart, it rises.

What works

- **Real participation in collective activities** — group work, presentations, games, parties. With adaptation, not exemption.
- **Structured break time.** That is where most bullying happens and where supervision is thinnest. Organised playground activity changes the statistics.
- **An aide who brings peers closer, not one who isolates.** Support exists to enable the relationship with classmates — not to replace it.
- **Work with the whole class** on difference, across the year, inside the curriculum. Not once, not as an event.
- **Adults who interrupt on the spot.** Silence after a joke is read as permission.
- **Roles of competence.** A child with something the group recognises — a knowledge, a skill, a job — stops being only the different one.

On telling the class about the diagnosis

It can help, and it can expose. It depends on age, on the class, and above all on what the child or adolescent wants. **Never do it without the family's consent and, where the child is old enough, without her agreement.** The diagnosis is her information, not the school's.

For schools

What has to exist before a case happens.

- **A written protocol** known to staff, families and students — what to do, who acts, within what time.
- **A clear reporting channel**, with a record and a response deadline.
- **Objective records of episodes:** date, time, place, what was observed, who was present. No interpretation.

- **Enquiry that hears everyone separately**, never confronting target and aggressor face to face.
- **Educational measures with repair for the one who harmed** — not only suspension, which is often read as a day off.
- **Follow-up with the target**, and a check afterwards: did it actually stop?
- **Never transfer or remove the target** as a solution. That punishes her twice.
- **Ongoing staff training**, including whoever covers break, transport and the front desk.
- **Report to the child protection authority** in cases involving violence, and in those the school cannot bring to an end.

This booklet offers guidance on care and communication. It is not legal advice and does not describe the laws or services of any particular country. Procedures for reporting and for hearing a child differ between countries — always check what applies where you are.

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Local contacts

Fill this page in with the services available where you are.

Every country organises child protection differently. Before you need them, find out which of these exist near you and write them down here.

Emergency number

Child protection authority

Police / specialised unit

Health service

Free legal assistance

School contact

Other notes
