

***From the Field:  
Practical Applications of Research***

## **Practices that Address Bullying of Students with Disabilities**

**By Barry E. McNamara, Ed.D.**

### **One Small Case**

Michael, a student with a learning disability, was excited when he heard about the new program in his middle school to deal with bullies. He'd been a victim of bullies throughout his school years. They laughed at him when he read in class, they excluded him from projects, and they constantly called him hurtful names. In the past, he'd wanted to report these bullies, but he had difficulty explaining exactly what happened to him. Plus, it had to be in writing and that was one of his major weaknesses. He was hopeful that this new program would finally help him find the best way to deal with bullies. Unfortunately, that never happened. The district developed a school-wide program with very specific guidelines that included all the major components necessary for success. The only problem was that Michael's disability interfered with his ability to read and understand the materials. This was just another example of his expectations being defeated.

The nature of bullying and the proliferation of bully-prevention programs for schools is well-documented. Research indicates that the most effective programs are those that are implemented school-wide. Forty-nine states have passed some type of legislation that deals with bully-prevention in schools. Clearly, schools throughout the country are developing and implementing school-wide bullying prevention programs. Yet students like Michael continue to be bullied at an alarming rate, with some studies citing figures in excess of 50% (Rose, Monda-Amaya & Espelage, 2001; McNamara, 2013).

It may well be that school-wide programs cannot address the needs of specific subgroups of students. Swearer & Hymel (2015) note the complexity of the student variables across groups may limit the effectiveness of school-wide programs. They cite a number of things that "matter", including the type of a child's disability. Clearly, students with special needs are more likely to be bullied than their peers (Rose, Simpson, Preat & Green, 2015). Students who engage in bullying select those students who are the most vulnerable, including those with special needs. One issue about school-wide programs is that they are frequently inaccessible to all students. Therefore, students with

disabilities may never be taught how to deal with bullying. This article provides recommendations that enable schools to modify their school-wide programs so that all students can feel safe in school, including those with special needs.

### **Who Are These Students with Disabilities Facing Bullies?**

Students with special needs may have difficulty in the basic psychological processes that underlie learning, such as perception, attention, or memory. They may also have cognitive disabilities or speech and language disorders and may not have adequate social skills. Additionally, they will most likely perform below grade level in academic areas, especially language arts. Understanding how these difficulties impact on their performance, both in and out of the school setting, will enable school staff to be cognizant of their risks for victimization. The specific areas of difficulty and how they may manifest themselves in the classroom are listed in **Table 1**.

### **Ways to Include Students with Disabilities in an Anti-bullying Program**

Prior to implementing any program, it is important to assess the nature of bullying in your school. Typically, students fill out a questionnaire to identify how they feel about bullying in their school. Administrators and teachers can ascertain the frequency, places where it occurs most often, who students seek for help, and the like. It sounds simple. However, for students with disabilities, this very first step in the process can be fraught with difficulties. Some students may not be able to read it, some may not be able to attend that long, while others may require the use of a sign language interpreter, and still others may not have the intellectual ability to comprehend the questions. The task of modifying the entire questionnaire so that all students have access to it may appear insurmountable. However, with a systematic examination of the needs of your students and ways in which they learn best, you can make the necessary modifications in the administration of the questionnaire for most, if not all, students.

**Table 1. Areas of difficulties and manifestations are presented below.**

Area of Difficulty	Manifestation
Perception	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Misinterpret visual clues</li> <li>• Misinterpret auditory clues</li> <li>• Misinterpret facial expressions</li> <li>• Misunderstand messages</li> <li>• Misread social situations</li> <li>• Cannot follow rules of a game</li> <li>• Appears confused, perplexed</li> </ul>
Attention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Impulsive</li> <li>• Focuses on irrelevant information</li> <li>• Appears to be ignoring others</li> <li>• Cannot stay on task</li> <li>• Makes comments that appear unrelated to topic</li> <li>• Loses interest in games and activities</li> <li>• Appears to be bored with others</li> <li>• Cannot maintain a conversation</li> </ul>
Memory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cannot remember rules of games</li> <li>• Forgets what to do</li> <li>• Cannot retrieve anti-bullying strategies from memory</li> <li>• Lacks organization</li> <li>• Difficulty with multistep problem solving</li> </ul>
Cognition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May not realize he or she is being bullied</li> <li>• May not understand the nature of bullying</li> <li>• Cannot express him- or herself adequately</li> <li>• Misunderstand others' motives</li> <li>• Difficulty with receptive and expressive language</li> <li>• May appear to be naïve and becomes an easy target</li> </ul>
Speech or Language	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May not comprehend what others are saying</li> <li>• Cannot express him- or herself fluently</li> <li>• May say the "wrong" thing</li> <li>• Gets easily frustrated</li> <li>• May be aggressive because he or she cannot use language adequately</li> <li>• Articulation problems may make him or her the object of ridicule</li> </ul>
Social Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Misinterprets social cues</li> <li>• Does not understand social situations</li> <li>• Does not interact or interacts poorly with classmates</li> <li>• Cannot read facial expressions</li> <li>• Hard time making friends</li> </ul>
Academics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Struggling in school</li> <li>• Poor grades</li> <li>• Frequent pullout</li> <li>• May need significant special education services</li> <li>• Difficulty with basic skills, that is, reading, writing, math</li> <li>• Lacks prerequisite skills in many academic areas, especially content areas</li> <li>• Cannot complete projects or assignments</li> </ul>

The modifications to the needs assessment must be collaborative. Administrators, teachers, and other personnel (reading, occupational therapists, and physical therapists, speech and language pathologists), special education teachers who have expertise in teaching students who are deaf or students who are blind, and school nurses should be included. Anybody who can provide information on what works best for the student should be part of the assessment.

Questions that guide this process may include the following:

- Can the student read the questions?
- Can the student comprehend the questions?
- Does the student have adequate motor skills?
- Is the student's vision adequate? Does he or she need special consideration?
- Does the child need an interpreter for the deaf?
- How long can the student attend for this task?
- Does the student have the intellectual ability to understand the concept of bullying or victimization?

The **chart below** provides some examples of the ways you can modify the administration of the needs assessment.

Area of Difficulty	Modification
Reading	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lower readability</li> <li>• Read to student</li> <li>• Use familiar pictures</li> <li>• Provide specific examples</li> </ul>
Listening	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide a distraction-free environment</li> <li>• Use shorter sentences and single words</li> <li>• Check frequently for understanding</li> <li>• Use pictures with verbal input</li> </ul>
Attention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Administer it over time</li> <li>• Use a variety of people to present it, including parents</li> <li>• Administer it at the time of day the student is most attentive</li> <li>• Provide reinforcement for attending behaviors</li> <li>• Readminister it using a different language, examples, or cues</li> </ul>
Comprehension	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use a video presentation</li> <li>• Use a PowerPoint presentation</li> <li>• Employ concrete examples</li> <li>• Provide specific examples of bullying</li> <li>• Use real-life scenarios</li> </ul>
Hearing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Utilize an interpreter for the Deaf</li> <li>• Use a frequently modulated system</li> <li>• Administer it early in the day in short periods of time</li> <li>• Have a familiar person administer it (including parents)</li> <li>• Consult with an expert in the education of students who are Deaf or hearing impaired</li> </ul>
Vision	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use Braille</li> <li>• Provide large print</li> <li>• Utilize a text reader</li> <li>• Read it to the student</li> <li>• Check frequently for comprehension</li> <li>• Consult with an expert in the education of students who are blind or visually impaired</li> </ul>

Area of Difficulty	Modification
Handwriting and Written Expression	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use multiple choice</li> <li>• Have someone record the student's responses</li> <li>• Accept oral responses</li> <li>• Let the student point to responses</li> <li>• Have the student draw a pictorial response</li> <li>• Tell a story about the response</li> </ul>
Attention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Administer over short periods of time</li> <li>• Have multiple adults interview students over time</li> <li>• Provide verbal choices</li> <li>• Provide picture choices</li> </ul>
Hearing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Utilize an interpreter for the Deaf</li> <li>• Provide a frequency modulated system</li> <li>• Administer it early in the day in short periods of time</li> <li>• Have a familiar person administer it (including parents)</li> <li>• Consult with an expert in the education of students who are Deaf or hearing impaired</li> <li>• Use small group "discussion"</li> </ul>
Vision	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use Braille</li> <li>• Provide large print</li> <li>• Utilize a text-reading machine</li> <li>• Read it to the student</li> <li>• Check frequently for comprehension</li> <li>• Consult with an expert in the education of students who are blind or visually impaired</li> </ul>

The student's responses may also need to be modified. The **chart above** addresses those modifications.

### **Modifying Instruction**

#### Vary the Method of Presentation

Not all students learn the same way. You need to provide information to them based on their readiness, preferences, and abilities. Most instruction is multimodal (auditory, visual, kinesthetic, and tactile). For students with disabilities, their preferences may be more pronounced. For example, they may respond favorably if a scenario is on video (visual) and perhaps even more so if it can be acted out in small groups where they can move around the room and manipulate objects (kinesthetic and tactile).

#### Use a Variety of Reading Material

There are so many books on bullying available to teachers. However, you must make sure you have books on various reading levels. For those students who have visual impairments, you can acquire books in Braille, you can get audio books, and you can utilize the expertise of your district's assistive technology coordinator, who can help you acquire useful technology devices like a text reader that can "read" books for students. Many students who are Deaf have difficulty with reading material and may require lower-readability materials. This is certainly true for those students with learning disabilities, as reading disorders are one of the major deficits. Many teachers create their own books on social stories to depict instances of bullying. These are frequently used with students on the autism spectrum and students with intellectual disabilities. These can be enhanced with pictures of students and familiar places and situations. All of the above help reduce the problems associated with not being able to read or comprehend the printed page.

### Teach Attending Skills

Many students with disabilities will have difficulty attending to tasks. In order to capture their attention, use novel presentations. Vary the presentation, be enthusiastic, and keep the lesson short. Other techniques that are useful for increasing students' ability to attend are these:

- Keep the pace of the lesson moving.
- Provide frequent reinforcement for attending behaviors.
- Provide advanced organizers. "Today, we will be discussing bullying. First we will...then we will...and finally..."
- Focus on the most salient information.
- Avoid extraneous distractions.
- Provide opportunities for movement in the classroom.
- Check for comprehension frequently.
- Pair students with those who possess good attending skills.
- Work in pairs or small groups to keep them engaged.

### Suggestions to Teach Memory Skills to Students with Disabilities

Explicit direct instruction in memory strategies will increase the success of the school-wide anti-bullying program for students with disabilities. A well-organized, sequential presentation will help your students retain the content (input organization facilitates recall). The questions and prompts you use to check on understanding should be directly related to the presentation (referred to as cued retrieval). Therefore, if you discuss the six things a victim can do if he or she is being bullied, then your questions should be on the same topic, such as, "What are the things you can do if you are being bullied?" This way, you will be able to ascertain whether they were able to process the information. At a later date, you can introduce higher-level thinking skills.

Other ways to increase memory skills are listed below:

- Use mnemonics.
- Group information into meaningful categories (chunking).
- Employ frequent checks for comprehension.
- Work in small groups or pairs.
- Have students share their strategies for memorizing material.
- Use graphic organizers.
- Role-play bullying situations.

- Use simulations.
- Employ frequent practices.
- Utilize storytelling.
- Present information in game format.

### **Year Round Bullying-Prevention**

Dealing with bullying requires an on-going effort. Mishna (2003) noted that these students with disabilities are in "double jeopardy" in so far as they have to deal with their disability and at times with victimization resulting from that disability. At every school, leaders need to recognize that students with disabilities have a high probability of being victims of bullying. School leaders need a systematic approach to modify the school-wide anti-bullying program so that it is accessible to students with special needs. That is the only way that ALL students can attend school in a safe, kind and caring environment that is conducive for learning.

### References

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