

# insights



## It's time to talk bullying and autism

by Kate Johnson

*What comes to mind when you think about bullying? Is it consistent physical punches to the back when a child walks past a stronger child? Is it the nasty whispers of those who critique everything from hair to the way a girl walks or talks, isolating her? Is it the posting of horrible online rants that mean a person can't escape the taunts they receive, even when at home? Or the teasing about things that a person can't control, such as sensory overload, stimming (repetitive movements) or needing extra assistance to complete their work?*

Bullying is all of these things and more – especially when it comes to children with autism. The likelihood of a child on the autism spectrum experiencing bullying is far greater than it is for a child without autism. And as with any child, the impact of bullying can have devastating, lasting effects. In children with autism, bullying can heighten anxiety, cause school refusal, disturb sleep, damage confidence and mental health and cause extreme regression.

### Educate to empower

Often, children will pick on things that are different and that they don't understand. Autism gives them plenty of ammunition. However, by equipping siblings, friends and classmates of children with autism with knowledge, and having an open forum for discussion, you may find that the hearts of many enlarge. What they found different or confusing they will now find different and cool.

Instead of being scared of the body language of a child with autism, kids may become more aware of what he or she is saying through body language and offer to help. A great way to do this is to watch the 'Amazing Things Happen' YouTube clip <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCZYtA26fbFCYIecm-WsEaeQ>. Watch it together as a family, perhaps including friends of your children.

You can start by introducing the clip and positively framing it so the children understand that they are learning about the amazing ways our bodies process information and how we are all unique in this regard. Afterwards, encourage some discussion amongst the children present. Many will ask great questions or share about someone they know who has autism. In one school where I ran this discussion, a child who had been relentlessly bullying a child on the spectrum raised his hand and asked whether Joshua (not his real name) would be able to forgive a bully, as the bully understood more now and thought Joshua's brain was cool.

When we equip communities of children, we are empowering the bystanders. This can potentially limit the



likelihood of bullying as what was allowed before is no longer tolerated by a broader range of people in that community. This is community and culture building.

## Step up the anti-bullying strategies

If you have a child with autism, what tools do you have within your family to help that child communicate when they feel unsafe? Often, children on the autism spectrum may not be able to articulate that someone is bullying them. However, their behaviour will communicate it for them. All behaviour is communication and we need to ask the question “Why are they behaving this way?” as opposed to punishing the negative behaviour. Here are some great ways to equip children with strategies to communicate:

- Social stories about what bullying can feel like and what it can look like.
- Social stories on what to do if you feel unsafe.
- Picture books on body parts and where people are not allowed to touch.
- Communication about who the safe and trusted people are that a child with autism can go to when they feel uncertain or hurt.
- Encourage those around your child to watch for changes in behaviour, regression, aggression or increased anxiety and to let you know immediately if something arises, not waiting for the ‘right time’ to pick up the phone.
- Access social skills groups that allow for a small group learning approach, explicitly laying out what bullying is, effective communication strategies, and time to practice these in a safe and encouraging environment.

What if we take this as a different way of empowering our children by disempowering a bully through kindness and agreement, instead of anger and reaction, when it comes to verbal bullying? Could we as communities build on this and equip children on the spectrum with key phrases they can use to reject the rubbish a bully is speaking over them, and instead walk away, winning that battle? How could we do that? There is a great clip on YouTube called ‘How to Stop a Bully’ by Brooks Gibbs where he plays a role with a girl who is being feisty and mean to him. You can view it here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7oKjW1Oljuw>.

- You could watch the video as a family and discuss it with your children.
- Encourage your child’s teacher to watch the video with their class, then pull it apart and reflect on the lessons.
- Develop a social script that your child on the autism spectrum could use if they felt like someone was bullying them, including a checklist to help them recognise if they are being bullied.
- Celebrate every attempt to rebuff negativity, highlighting your child’s strengths.

It is time for a rethink on bullying, and especially the bullying of kids who are ‘different’ such as those with autism. We are all a part of this within our communities and schools. When we work as a community to tackle this big issue, we will see amazing things happen in the lives of children with autism and across our communities as compassion, leadership and resilience increase.



### Kate Johnson

*Kate is the Founder and Director of Spectrum Journeys Inc, a not for profit Autism service that equips and empowers families and educators as they support children on the Autism Spectrum to flourish. Kate leads an amazing team in the Outer East of Melbourne and focuses on practical Autism education as well as community projects and supporting carers. Kate is married to Joel and they have 4 beautiful children (their eldest being on the Autism Spectrum).*