

Advancing Bullying Awareness: Help for Families & Youth with Autism

► Bullying is a problem affecting children and teens as well as their families. Youth with autism are often bullied because they seem different from others. Recognizing how different populations of youth experience bullying can help parents and caregivers recognize warning signs and offer effective support.

What Research Says About Bullying and Youth with Autism: Bullying is defined as intentional, repeated, aggressive behavior toward another person.

Key Factors of Bullying Behavior

- **Intentional harm:** hurting, embarrassing, threatening, or leaving someone out on purpose
- **Repetition:** bullying happens again and again
- **Power imbalance:** the bully has more strength, popularity, or social power

Main Types of Bullying

Physical: hitting, pushing, tripping, breaking belongings

Verbal: mocking, name-calling, insults, threats

Social/Relational: leaving someone out, spreading rumors, embarrassing someone, controlling friendships

Cyberbullying: hurtful messages or posts online, in texts, or in online gaming

Studies show that young people with autism are bullied more often than youth without autism. The risk of bullying varies across age groups. As friendships and social rules become more complicated, some youth may not understand them.

Youth with autism may react as follows:

- Miss sarcasm
- Misread subtle social cues
- Follow rules very strictly
- Speak in a direct way
- Become overwhelmed easily

Some behaviors that youth with autism display are not meant to be rude, but other kids may misunderstand them and respond in unkind ways.



Signs for Bullying

Parents may notice changes at home before teachers see anything. Signs can include the following:

- Changes in sleep, appetite, or daily routines
- Not wanting to go to school
- Sudden meltdowns or irritability after school
- Fear of specific people or locations
- Lost or damaged belongings
- Anxiety or distress in certain situations
- Unexplained injuries
- Regression in skills or toileting
- Emotional shutdown or withdrawal
- Increased scripting or stimming
- New or unusual communication patterns
- Sudden or patterned distress around a specific person, time of day, or activity

Youth who are nonverbal may have difficulty reporting bullying. Here are a few nonverbal signs:

- Trouble explaining what happened
- Hiding feelings
- Freezing, flinching, turning away from peers
- Avoiding certain rooms, buses, or activities
- Crying, self-injury, aggression, or shutdowns after school
- Throwing devices, pointing to certain icons repeatedly

Strategies for Parents

Parents who have youth with autism report feeling worried, frustrated, and stressed about bullying because they are responsible for advocating to make sure their child is safe and supported. Since parents often see the problem first, it is important to document everything.

Write down the following:

- Dates and times
- What happened
- Where it happened
- What was involved
- Any witnesses
- Evidence (pictures/screenshots)
- How the school responded

Keep all notes in one folder (digital or paper) and have them available when you meet with school staff.

Parents can also teach their youth important skills to protect themselves.



- Create a safety plan for specific places if they experience bullying. Some areas of the school have less supervision and are at a high risk of bullying. Develop a plan for each setting, such as sitting near the bus driver, choosing a lunch table near staff, or going places with a friend. Have clear steps to reduce anxiety and increase safety.
- Develop simple scripts: Short, clear phrases like “I don’t like that—stop” can help youth respond without losing their cool. Practice builds confidence and makes it easier to use the script in real life.
- Find safe adults at school. Talk with your child to identify specific adults they can go to for help (teacher, counselor, bus driver, coach, etc.). Show them where these adults are located during the school day. Asking for help is important and is not tattling.
- Teach them when and how to tell someone what happened. Practice how to calm down first, then explain what happened using simple details: who, what, where, and when.
- Use communication devices to cope. If your child uses a communication device, add quick buttons for “help” or “someone is bothering me.” Make sure school staff know how your child communicates so they can respond quickly.



Understand Schools Supports

If you think bullying is happening, talk to your child's teacher, counselor, special education coordinator, or principal. Alabama law requires every school district to adopt and enforce policies against bullying, violence, and threats of violence for all students, including on school grounds, at school events, on buses, and online. School policies must define bullying, describe how to report and investigate incidents, require training for staff, and include consequences for violations. Schools are also expected to adopt practices to prevent bullying and promote a positive and respectful school climate.

Federal laws such as Section 504 and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act require schools to address bullying and harassment that is based on a student's disability or that interferes with a student's

ability to learn and benefit from school. Under Alabama law, when a bullying report is made, schools must investigate and respond promptly, and local policies must include procedures for reporting and responding to bullying

Conclusion

You are not overreacting by taking bullying seriously. Patterns of bullying, especially for youth who have autism, can deeply affect mental health, school engagement, and self-esteem. With strong support, clear communication, and a good partnership with the school, bullying can be reduced and stopped. It is important for parents to trust their gut, advocate for their youth, and seek support when needed.



Adrienne Duke-Marks, *Extension Specialist*, Associate Professor, Human Development and Family Studies, and **Synithia Flowers**, *Extension Agent*, Family and Child Development, both with Auburn University

For more information, contact your county Extension office. Visit aces.edu/directory.

Trade and brand names used in this publication are given for information purposes only. No guarantee, endorsement, or discrimination among comparable products is intended or implied by the Alabama Cooperative Extension System.

In accordance with Federal civil rights law and U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) civil rights regulations and policies, the USDA, its Agencies, offices, and employees, and institutions participating in or administering USDA programs are prohibited from discriminating based on race, color, national origin, religion, sex, disability, age, marital status, family/parental status, income derived from a public assistance program, political beliefs, or reprisal or retaliation for prior civil rights activity, in any program or activity conducted or funded by USDA (not all bases apply to all programs). Remedies and complaint filing deadlines vary by program or incident.

Persons with disabilities who require alternative means of communication for program information (e.g., Braille, large print, audiotape, American Sign Language, etc.) should contact one of the Alabama Cooperative Extension System's HR departments which are located on Auburn University's campus at (334) 844-1326 and Alabama A&M University's campus at (256) 372-5710. You may also contact the USDA's TARGET Center at (202) 720-2600 (voice and TTY) or contact USDA through the Federal Relay Service at (800) 877-8339. Additionally, program information may be made available in languages other than English.

To file a program discrimination complaint, complete the USDA Program Discrimination Complaint Form, AD-3027, found online at How to File a Program Discrimination Complaint and at any USDA office or write a letter addressed to USDA and provide in the letter all of the information requested in the form. To request a copy of the complaint form, call (866) 632-9992. Submit your completed form or letter to USDA by: (1) mail: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights, 1400 Independence Avenue, SW, Washington, D.C. 20250-9410; (2) fax: (202) 690-7442; or (3) email: program.intake@usda.gov.

USDA is an equal opportunity provider, employer, and lender.

New September 2026, FCS-2970

© 2026 by the Alabama Cooperative Extension System. All rights reserved.

aces.edu