



"Don't laugh at me, Don't call me names" *

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Ken is an 8th grader who has Asperger syndrome. He is fully integrated and attends a regular middle school in an affluent, urban community. The school is large (about 2,500 students) and ethnically diverse. Ken's strengths are in computers, and he is known to be an "electronic whiz," often carrying the latest version of a cell phone or iPod. Recently, Ken reported that he had his third iPod stolen out of his backpack. Upon questioning, we learned that all three thefts occurred during Physical Education, when his backpack was lying on the grass along with all the others. When Ken discovered that the phone or iPod was missing, he heard whoops of laughter and jeering from the same gang of boys. Ken repeatedly told his parents that he didn't know how his gadgets disappeared.

How prevalent is bullying?

Students with Asperger syndrome (AS) are often victimized, or bullied, by classmates or older children. These negative social experiences have wide-ranging consequences, including a poor self-image and even clinical levels of depression or anxiety. Research conducted by Little and Clark (2006), Shtayermman (2007) and others has identified mental health, social acceptance, and socialization as significant areas of concern for parents of individuals with AS. Liza Little and Robin Clark conducted an Internet survey of parents of 103 children with AS, aged 3 to 21 years. A primary parental concern was the "social survival" of their children. They were worried that their children might never have a best friend—or any close friends at all. They were unsure whether their children would be able to handle different social situations throughout life without becoming pessimistic or depressed. Most notably, they worried that their children would be taken advantage of and fall prey to victimization.

These parents have reason to worry. Psychologists Nishina and Juvonen (2005) studied 95 typically developing children in an urban middle school. The children made daily reports of peer harassment where they were the victim or witness. Fully 46 percent experienced and 42 percent witnessed peer harassment on one or more of the four days measured. Among children experiencing peer harassment, verbal forms (e.g., name calling, taunting) were most common (52 percent). Other forms included physical aggres-

sion (23 percent), property damage or theft (six percent) indirect forms of hostility (e.g. exclusion, spreading rumors: four percent), and unclassified (15 percent).

Asperger syndrome (AS) occurs in about 1 in 200 individuals and is a disorder on the autism spectrum. Individuals with AS have typical language development and are very bright, but they are also characterized by deficits in the area of social interaction. These deficits are specifically in the areas of non-verbal problem solving, age appropriate sensitivity to humor, adapting to new situations, and peer relations generally. Further isolating is that individuals with Asperger syndrome also tend to have restrictive, repetitive, and unusual patterns of behavior and interests (American Psychiatric Association, 2000).

Beyond the playground, what you should know about bullying

Bullying is described as a violent imbalance of power intended to harm and distress a target. It can begin as early as preschool and last through adulthood. According to Tony Attwood, who has written extensively on the topic, bullying typically happens between the ages of 8 and 14 (Attwood, 2004). The most common types of bullying are: 1) verbal and physical confrontation and intimidation; 2) hurting or destroying personal property; and 3) making rude comments or gestures. Victims of bullying may also be the ones excluded from social activities or shunned by peers. Bullying is most likely to occur when the student is alone, in the hallway while changing classes, or on the way to and from school.

Why children with Asperger syndrome are easy targets for the bully

Children with AS can be naïve, trusting, and eager to be included in a group. They will often do things that others tell them to do in order to gain this acceptance.

Brandon is a senior attending a large inner-city high school. Though his diagnosis is Asperger syndrome and he attends a special class for his academic subjects, he is mainstreamed for much of the day. It is not clear whether the kids he hangs out with on campus know that Brandon has special needs. Twice in the last two months, Brandon was cited, along with his "friends," for smoking on campus. A school policeman, looking into the drug problem on campus, demanded that

*FROM THE SONG, "DON'T LAUGH AT ME" BY COUNTRY MUSIC ARTIST, MARK WILLS. TO VIEW THE MARK WILLS VIDEO, "DON'T LAUGH AT ME," VISIT [HTTP://WWW.YOUTUBE.COM/WATCH?V=N3_JVChXL7o](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n3_jvChXL7o).

Brandon tell where he obtained the cigarettes and who else was smoking. After that, this group of boys began to intimidate Brandon, blaming him for the citation. Soon they escalated the intimidation to verbal abuse and actual threats.

A child's response to bullying may, in fact, increase the number of bullying incidents. For example, some students with AS will react by impulsively yelling, becoming agitated, or even violent. Often this is all that the supervising adult witnesses, which is of course what the bully wants to happen. This is referred to as covert bullying. In the case of Brandon, there was covert bullying by other students on campus as well as by the school administrator.

Simply put, children with AS usually do not have age-appropriate social awareness. They may not be able to differentiate sarcasm from sincerity, manipulation from collaboration, or meanness from kindness. Their inability to read subtle social cues can result in them offering an incorrect, or "odd" response to another child's verbal or social interaction, inviting ridicule or worse. They have considerably heightened likelihood of being bullied.

Signs that your child might be the target of bullying

There are signs you can look for that may indicate whether or not your child is the object of bullying. Your child with Asperger syndrome is not likely to tell you if and when he is being bullied by a peer (or peers.) He may not even recognize bullying, assuming that it is just part of going to school or having friends. Middle or high school children may be embarrassed and not want anyone to know. Some of the signs to look for include:

- Frequently lost or damaged personal items or clothes
- Cuts or bruising
- Headaches or stomach aches
- Difficulty sleeping
- Change in willingness to go to school—avoidant, fearful, and anxious about school
- Sudden violent retaliation towards others
- Change in interests
- Acting like a bully towards younger friends or siblings

Of course, these signs are also indicative of other concerns. Nevertheless, Shtayermman (2007) notes their importance because, in the extreme case, bullying can lead to generalized anxiety disorder, major depression, or thoughts of suicide. These are among the most serious effects of bullying.

Heading off the bully with intervention targets and strategies

The first intervention – and so obvious that it can be overlooked – is to talk with your child. When you notice any of the above signs that could suggest bullying, ask your child about this. For some children, a direct question will suffice ("A lot of kids get bullied at schools. Have any kids at school been bothering you?"). For others, the topic may be better approached indirectly. You know best how to talk with your child. In his book, *The Complete Guide to Asperger's Syndrome*, Tony Attwood suggests strategies that can be used to decrease bullying, some of which appear below.

Strategies and interventions for teachers or other adults

- Educate teachers and staff members on what bullying is, where it will most likely occur, and how to respond.
- Develop a team response to bullying, where the "team" is made up of teachers, parents, psychologists, administrators, other students, the victims of bullying, and if appropriate, the bully as well.
- Investigate acts of bullying fully, including those where the child with AS might have acted out physically. It is important to know if aggression on the part of the child with AS was a consequence, or a cause, of the bullying. This facilitates a sense of "social justice" for all the children involved.

Interventions for typically developing children to assist the child with AS

- Provide social skills lessons in all classes to address bullying. These lessons should also cover what to do when children see someone being bullied, since children are more likely to witness acts of bullying than the supervising adult.
- Institute a buddy system in younger grades whereby students look out for each other and report acts of bullying to an adult.
- Have students read fictional books that contain characters who are bullies and discuss how they might handle the situations.

Interventions for children with Asperger syndrome

- Realize that students who are being bullied should not just ignore it and hope that it stops. An adult can help the bullied child practice a response that he or she can use when bullied. It can be something very simple, such as learning to say, "Stop! I don't like that!"
- Identify places that have extra supervision so that a child with AS will have a safe place to go if frightened or if feeling victimized. This can be done using a map or by walking the child to these places, in advance of an incident.
- Teach the child with AS how to identify the bully, and what to say in response to him (or her), as these children may not understand their own vulnerability.

Remember: Bullying is something that many children experience. It should not be taken lightly. To reduce the likelihood that any child will be ridiculed or taken advantage of, parents, teachers, administrators, and children themselves need to be educated about the negative effects of bullying and what can be done to prevent it. •

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