

**TIP SHEET: Bullying and Learning Disabilities and Mental Health (LDMH)**

Bullying can be a serious problem in our schools, playgrounds and wherever children gather. Children with learning disabilities (LD) are more likely than other children to experience bullying. Before deciding how to act, parents need to know when they are dealing with bullying

**What is Bullying?**

Bullying is:

- Aggressive behaviour involving negative actions on the part of one or more children towards another child (the victim)
- An act that involves a power imbalance: the bully or bullies may be bigger, older, more fluent, or two or more individuals may join forces against another
- Usually repeated over time
- Deliberate and involves the intention to hurt the victim and the victim is distressed (hurt, scared, humiliated)

Bullying may be physical, verbal or social. It takes the form of verbal or physical aggression, threats, extortion, humiliation, insults, gossip and exclusion.

**Bullying is usually not:**

- Peer conflict where there is no power imbalance
- Impulsive and unintentional
- A misunderstanding of the hurtful impact on the victim

**Children with learning disabilities are more at risk of experiencing bullying because:**

- They are different from their peers
- Peers may taunt children over their attendance in a special education program
- Children with LD may feel less able and less entitled to stand up for themselves. This may be aggravated by their difficulty expressing thoughts and feelings
- They may be socially awkward
- They may have difficulty managing their own behaviour and feelings. They may be overly loud, hyper, disruptive, talkative etc.
- Some children with LD can be *too honest* and are unable to conceal their weaknesses and mistakes

### **How to stop bullying:**

Bullying interventions must focus beyond the aggressive child and the victim to include peers, school staff, parents and the broader community. Adults responsible for children can do this by:

- Establishing that bullying is unacceptable
- Fostering an attitude of respect for all regardless of differences
- Supporting constructive methods for conflict resolution
- Being vigilant to discover when bullying is happening, not turning a blind eye or dismissing bullying
- Bringing bullying to the attention of appropriate people/staff who are in a position to address it

### **How to help a victim of bullying:**

Although bullying is never acceptable, it can be helpful to look at how a victim can cope and avoid it.

**Report it:** Encourage your child to find an adult who will listen. Help your child to report the bullying to school and report it yourself. Keep reporting the bullying until it is stopped.

**Identify risky situations:** Help your child to figure out in which situations he or she is most likely to be bullied and work with the school to implement a plan of safety that fits these situations.

**Practice responses:** It is difficult for many children to confront bullies. Help them to practice simply saying loudly “Stop that” or “Back off”, and then to walk away.

**Look at who is doing it:** Some bullies are popular children. Discuss with your child whether their desire to be “in” with certain kids is causing them to hang out with kids who bully them.

**Find a buddy:** Help your child to choose at least one peer who is nice to him and could be a friend. Sometimes teachers can help choose. Your child may feel better having a friend, and this will make her less vulnerable.

**Reduce provocative behaviour:** Your child may not pick up signals from peers that his behaviour is annoying. Help your child learn various ways that people signal their annoyance and try to stop what they are doing. For example, when someone says “stop it”, then you should stop.