

Safety at School

For families of students with cognitive disability

Students with cognitive disability experience higher rates of abuse, neglect and exploitation than students without disability. Previously, little has been known about what students, their families and other key supporters such as teachers, disability and child protection workers think about personal safety in and around school, or about their perspectives on what would make things better.

In a research project conducted in 2013-14, students, families and key education and support professionals shared their experiences and perspectives about safety and harm in and around school. We also analysed the laws and policies that affect students who are harmed at school.

Based on this research, this resource reflects the key issues described by interviewees and some suggestions for accessing support if your son or daughter is unsafe at school.

Young people told us they experienced:

- a learning environment that was not tailored to their individual needs
- a climate of fear due to the behaviour of other students
- a lack of protection by adults in and around school
- trouble and lack of safety on the bus
- lack of protection around the behaviour of staff or transport workers

Being unsafe at school can have a profound impact on a young person. It may create:

- low self-esteem and a lack of confidence
- difficulties with learning
- difficulties with social relationships
- isolation and exclusion within the school environment



What families told us they experienced:

- School environments that do not ensure safety for their son or daughter
- Being told that a problem will be fixed but no action is taken
- Feeling that teachers and others are incapable of dealing with the problem
- Concern about the capacity of teachers to value diversity
- Minimisation of the impact of bullying on their son or daughter
- Lack of support services when needed

WHAT HELPS?

In some cases, young people and families felt that schools responded well when they experienced harm. On these occasions:

- Teachers stepped in quickly, they believed students, listened and took action to sort things out.
- Families were treated seriously and courteously, and kept informed about progress.
- School leaders showed strong personal commitment to the safety of students and to resolving breaches of all students' rights to safety and to dealing with harassment, bullying, abuse and violence.

This gave children and young people confidence that they could continue at school, that they could deal with future problems, and that their problems were seen as significant and important.

HOW FAMILIES CAN HELP

Pay attention to the young person's behaviour and look for any changes such as withdrawal, not wanting to attend school or anxiety around school. These behaviours may indicate problems that cannot be communicated verbally. Asking your son or daughter specific questions regularly about their friendships, about how they spend their day and about how they feel about their day will encourage them to let you know if they have a problem. Be aware of signs of bullying, even if the young person doesn't call it that.

Messages you may want to give to a young person in a way they understand:

- You have the right to feel safe at school
- You have the right to be treated with respect
- You have a responsibility to treat others with respect
- If someone is not treating you this way tell me so we can try to fix the problem
- If you are having trouble acting safely yourself tell me so we can work out what to do
- You are not alone
- Together we can do something about it



If you do become aware of a safety issue:

- **Get the facts, support the young person, and encourage him or her to describe what is happening in as much detail as possible**
- **Talk with their teacher immediately to see whether he or she can help to resolve the problem**
- **If the problem is not easily fixed with the support of the teacher contact the school principal**
- **Put your concerns in writing, explaining what happened in detail and ask for a timely response. Keep a written record of all conversations and communications with the school**
- **Work with the school to resolve the issue and encourage them to implement systems to prevent unsafe practices**
- **Be persistent in addressing the problem**
- **Talk regularly with the young person and with significant people at school to make sure the problem is fixed**
- **Sometimes young people who are bullied also bully others. Ask questions to find out if the person is also bullying others**

The links below have some strategies for being safe at school, for identifying signs of bullying, and how you can support a young person to be safe.

USEFUL RESOURCES

Bullying and harassment of children and young people with an intellectual disability: issues and strategies

<http://www.psychdd.com.au/wp-content/uploads/Alison%20Souter%20-%20Bullying%20and%20Harassment%20of%20children%20and%20young%20people%20with%20an%20ID.pdf>

A parent's toolkit: school issues for students with disabilities:

<http://da.org.au/wp-content/uploads/A-Parent%E2%80%99s-Toolkit-School-issues-for-students-with-disabilities-v-1.1.pdf>

napcan - all children being safe: <http://napcan.org.au/our-programs/all-children-being-safe/>

A guide to dealing with bullying for families of disabled children:

http://www.cafamily.org.uk/media/721109/caf_bullying_guide_9_may_2014_web.pdf

kidpower: <http://www.kidpower.org/>

Helping your child stop bullying - a guide for parents:

<https://www3.aifs.gov.au/cfca/publications/helping-your-child-stop-bullying-guide-parents>