

# Autism and bullying

**Josh Muggleton**, a student at St Andrews University, has Asperger's syndrome. He leads talks and workshops on autism and has published a book for parents. Here he offers ten top tips for schools

## Read up!

The first step towards helping someone with autism who is being bullied is to understand what autism means. Yes, every individual is different. However, it helps if you are familiar with our difficulties and strengths.

There are loads of great, free resources for this: have a look at the National Autistic Society website [www.autism.org.uk](http://www.autism.org.uk). If you want a short cut out 'n' keep checklist, visit my website [www.mugsy.org/josh](http://www.mugsy.org/josh)

## Keep an eye out

People with autism are born targets: over 40 per cent of children with autism have been bullied at school. It destroys their self-confidence and self-esteem, especially when they don't recognise bullying for what it is. When someone says they are stupid, they may believe it. When someone says they should hand over money, they may believe that too, because they think the person is a friend.

## Listen every time

I am aware of the huge pressures teachers face. However, it is important that bullying doesn't get sidelined. The first few times my parents or I reported bullying to the school, something was done about it. Then, as time went by, action decreased. It may be the 100th time you have heard the story, but it's also the 100th time the child has experienced it.

## Talk to parents

School is very stressful for people with autism and we will often be unable to report bullying when it happens. Sometimes talking to a teacher is too hard when we're just trying to scrape through the day. So we pretend we're OK, then let our feelings out at home, either as anger, fear or depression. Once you know bullying is taking place, keep in regular contact with parents, as they are the first to know if something is wrong.

## Be patient

We often have trouble communicating, particularly when we're under stress.

Talking to a teacher about bullying can be very intimidating and we may take a while to explain. We also find it hard to make eye contact, which makes it hard for us to identify the bullies by their faces. Try asking about other features to pinpoint the culprits – age, height, what their bag is like, what classes they are in.

## Keep a log

Because we are easy targets and often respond to bullying in the same way, we are prone to repeated bullying. Ask the child and parent to keep a log of where and when bullying happened, and what was said and done.

Keep a log yourself. This can help identify particular times, places and people who are causing trouble.

## Have a safe zone

Kids in the playground have groups of friends which afford them some protection from bullying. People with autism often don't have that. To compensate, create a safe zone where bullying can't happen.

I used to hide in the library, but when the bullies found me, staff weren't alert to the problem, so nobody noticed. Making all library staff aware of individual targets and bullies and asking them to look out for them can quickly create a safe haven.

## Educate

I believe that education is the silver bullet to so many of the difficulties people with autism face. It would be wonderful if all children learned about autistic spectrum disorders in PSHE. While some children would love to label themselves as autistic and have the chance to talk to the class or school about it, most do not.

However, a lesson on autism for every class, regardless of whether or not it contains someone with the condition, can be effective.

It is particularly important to emphasise the positive aspects of autism, give examples of famous people who have it and explain that everyone has some autistic traits.



## See the whole picture

Sadly, I often hear about children with autism who have been excluded for lashing out during a bullying incident. Bullies push and push until they provoke a reaction.

The advice I always got was to ignore it. However, when we follow that advice, unlike most people, we often show absolutely no reaction, which leads the bullies to assume that it's safe to push some more, when it isn't. Unable to take any more, we suddenly and unexpectedly lash out, and we get the blame.

Clearly, lashing out should be punished. However, you also need to consider what may have gone before.

## Help us adapt

Our actions often seem socially odd, yet we may be unaware of it. A typical example would be telling the teacher whenever someone breaks a rule, even a minor one. You may need to explain that behaving differently might help reduce bullying.

There are limits to this. You can't, for example, tell us to try and make more friends – it isn't that simple for us. Equally, there are some behaviours we may not be able to change. However, there are others that can be changed and these should be explored if they are causing problems.

## MORE INFORMATION

Raising Martians: from Crash-landing to Leaving Home by Josh Muggleton (Jessica Kingsley)  
[www.mugsy.org/josh](http://www.mugsy.org/josh)