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Bullying and Autism

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Jocelyn states she is passionate about discovering when our children with autism are being bullied because they are perfect targets, the nature of autism sets them up and so the more adults who are informed and who will take up the cause and spread the word the happier our children with autism can be with their experiences.

Refer to and follow the handout for the presentation “**Bullying and Autism**”

Pg. 1 Bullying Basics – The idea about this piece is that I want all adults to realize that we have been wrong to ignore bullying in this country and it is picking off our kids. When we have adult attitudes that say things like “just let it go, it’s just a stage” or “don’t tattle”, when we have these kinds of attitudes we refuse to acknowledge that bullying, especially bullying kids with autism, when we refuse to acknowledge that we are not doing our kids any favors. This first Bullying Basics piece talks about why and how our kids are targets, their frequent targets, all age groups children through adults in all environments and our nation is going through a double take right now because we are starting to understand the consequences of bullying. (Read through the rest of this section) We need to understand the difference between reporting verses tattling, tattling is kids telling on each other in order to get them in trouble, reporting is giving information to an adult that can help. We need to get that mindset out there to help parents and kids.

The next section on Pg. 1 Bullying vs. friendly teasing or conflict situations, I think this is a critical section for all adults. I see these as red flags so the idea here is we need to distinguish the difference between friendly teasing and bullying or conflict situations so when we are asking questions we need to recognize that kids with autism absolutely don’t recognize when they are being bullied and they don’t know how to respond to it. It is up to us as adults to ask the kinds of questions that might get this information.

The **first red flag** is the activity is repeated and is intentionally negative over time and is targeted to an individual. If your little guy with autism says these guys meet me here and they slam my locker shut every single day, then we know something is repeated and it is targeted. Do they do it to other kids, no only my child. Huge red flag.

The **second red flag** is the imbalance of power. The power that is most significant in children with autism is the social power, because they don’t have any. They absolutely can’t balance that out, they don’t know how to, they don’t know that they can walk away from a situation and join in a group that’s larger

and they are safer in that group, so we look at that power imbalance. The third one is the difference in the aspect of the individuals that are the target of the interaction, in other words the child with autism may react differently to a comment than a typical child and just because a teacher would say “I say that to all my kids, I tease all my kids”, the child reacts to that “friendly teasing” differently so that is another red flag. So I hope those concepts make sense and can serve as a foundation for people when you are talking to them to help them understand when it is a conflict situation.

Pg. 2 Categories of Bullying - It's important for adults to realize that bullying is not just physical, it can be verbal and written and in the case of children with autism relational and social bullying is huge. Also educational, teachers and adults sometimes think we know what is best for the child so we bully them into situations that they are not comfortable with.

Pg. 2 – Common bullying attributes that impact kids with ASD – Carol Grey, who is the originator of social stories, sent out questionnaires to all of her people who were on her list serve, she communicates with people with autism and their families, she asked for their bullying stories, and her information will make you cry, but she took all of those stories and she categorized them into areas. These are typical kinds of bullying interactions that our kids with autism face:

Backhanded bullying offers of friendship with the intention to mislead, for example a young man goes to school and his friend meets him at the door and collects his lunch money. Then the child with autism goes to the lunch line and doesn't have his money. In this particular situation the teacher was paying for his lunches and during parent teacher conference she said there is free and reduced lunch and this is when they found out his lunch money was being collected by a friend. There are several examples where friends visit the child with autism and the parents are so happy but then they find out something was stolen and is being sold back to him. Children with autism do not understand this is not normal interaction and this isn't what friends do.

Absurd Information and requests –is huge. Directions to engage in inappropriate activities. For example there was a young man with autism who was obsessed with good luck. When kids are obsessed they tell everybody everything all the time. This young man was talking about good luck all the time and he had books and all kinds of things that meant good luck, so when his friend said “you know it's good luck to strip off all your clothes and spin around on the bathroom floor”, that seemed perfectly logically to him and so that's what he did.

The Bullying Backdraft is another category this is where the- Child returns to a situation that other children would avoid. Autistic children may not have good problem solving skills and doesn't say to himself, “gee when I walk home from school using this direction there is this group of guys waiting here for me”. Other

kids would select another route home. For example, a young woman made some friends and their agreement was they would meet everyday for recess at a particular place then all of the boys would take one turn slugging her in the stomach, she did not have the social skills to realize that this is not what friends do, finally someone saw this and reported this to a teacher. What happened then, the boys were disciplined and the parents called, the girl was humiliated because they had fooled her because she did not understand that was not an appropriate situation.

These are examples of situations that happen all the time in our schools.

Educational Bullying - the bullying may be seen as for the victim's own good. Well-meaning people not understanding the child nor understanding the characteristics of autism can make some mistakes and actually be an educational bully.

The next section I will not go over everything and you can review this section on your own

Pg. 2 [Bullying Myths](#) review on your own

Pg. 3 [Research](#) (Social Perspective, Social Skills and As the Bully) This is a bullying interaction chart that I have pulled together looking at the research on children in the social majority, children who are targets, and children who typically bully. Those are our tough kids, the ones who will probably end up in a penitentiary and so I have looked at the social perspective social skills and what do they look like when they are the bullies. I will let you review the information but point out the social skills column. Look at the social skills of the children in the social majority, they can balance out that social power so when a teasing or bullying interaction is attempted they know how to make a joke or they know how to tease back or stand up for themselves or do whatever it takes, go join a group of friends so they can balance that out. But when you have a classroom situation you have a natural imbalance of power with a teacher who is all-powerful. So you have some situations that you have to take a close look at there. Again if we look at that social skills column at the children who are targets or are children with autism they lack the social skills or confidence or the understanding of all that emotion that goes along with bullying. And then if we look at the bullies the kids who have to do this they have that social skill of needing to be in control and they have to win. Briefly on that bottom line as the bully our social majority kids are curious and it's an experiment and they can be called in and talked to and they can say I am sorry I won't do it again. Sometimes our kids with autism end up being the bully but their whole motivation is different and it is important that we keep that difference in mind. Their bullying is a learned behavior or its unintentional or that sense of consequence is going on as opposed to the bully who generally doesn't show remorse.

Pg. 4 General Research –That’s research that I have done looking at typical kids that are bullies, looking at their characteristics and I think this is startling when we look at the general research and we look at those characteristics and we look at those children with autism and their characteristics its no wonder our kids with autism are perfect targets. Because if you look at the anxiety, sensitivity, the lack of humor and the lack of friends, those characteristics in the general research, those describe our kids with autism often. So they are not set up well in the first place.

The second category there Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder, these are characteristics specific to autism that make our kids vulnerable. The Avoidant/Passive and the Engaging bullet are explained on the next page. Often their Language and socialization are such that they are easy to tease.

The inability to predict other’s behavior makes it easy for them to be teased, for example, a young man on the playground was standing next to a puddle because it had rained and we have the playground bully that walks up to him and says “So do you wanna go swimming?” he has the sarcasm and the layers of social language that a child with autism cannot recognize, so the child with autism thinks well, “ya I’d really like to go swimming”. He doesn’t think, we really don’t swim at school and this kid has teased me before and this kid seems to be acting aggressively, he doesn’t go through that thinking so he says “ya, I wanna go swimming”, very innocently, so the bully pushes him in the puddle. This is an example of how an autistic child cannot predict the behavior of the bully.

Pg. 5 General Characteristics of Children with AS, these are characteristics that people look at that may be reasons why or may facilitate being bullied. In that first box we have general characteristics of children with autism. These children frustrate their peers, are rejected by their peers and they are clumsy, and they have all of these characteristics that are easy to target. The more we know about children with autism and the more we know about these characteristics, the better the adults are better to get in and maybe put some training and intervention in place. The Avoidant/Passive kids are the loners and loners get teased. These kids are out on the playground or walking the fence line looking around and are not interested in engaging in the playground. I believe that the playground is a really poor place to try and socialize kids because the ratio of adults to kids is real low. In your discussions with parents talk about recess time as unstructured and not the best place for kids to be.

Engaging Social Presentation, these are the kids that drive everybody nuts with their questions and talking about trains or sharks and these kids are rejected by the peers. Adults that are not aware of this characteristic in children with autism are irritated by it instead of looking at this as something endearing that our children with autism often display because they don’t understand it. Please don’t misunderstand that I am saying that all educators in Utah don’t understand autism because we have put a lot of training in place

Pg. 6 Prevention. Difference between typical peer conflicts and bullying. When you’re talking to adults that are uniformed and that haven’t been converted to the

idea that bullying is real, you often here them say “oh that’s just what boys do, and that’s just how they show they like each other”. What we need to do is differentiate between normal conflicts and bullying conflicts. I have a chart here that might help the thinking process. There is a normal peer conflict column and bullying conflict column and if you look at the normal peer column, normal peer conflicts are equal in power, same size, same age probably with the same cognitive abilities verses a bullying conflict there is a huge power imbalance. With normal conflict these kids are friends and they walk away being friends they have their little conflict but they walk away laughing or whatever they do but then they end up friends where as bullying conflicts there is no real friendship. Typical kids stay together and if it’s a bullying interaction they separate and they are not friends outside of school or other settings.

Pg. 6 Considerations for Students with ASD. Need to look at antecedents to see what’s going on. Need to realize that students with autism are not going to react in a way that other kids act. That may be the reason they are targeted, because they react to this bullying attempt in such an unusual bizarre way, and that bizarre reaction may then become a typical reaction for the child, so other kids think lets go tease so and so because he always gets red in the face and starts flapping and he will run away and the way he runs is so goofy.

Pg. 7 Third bullet May misinterpret. This is huge. We put some bullying intervention in place to start helping the child with autism to cope and recognize the bullying but then they misinterpret that. They may be in line and may have been pushed or shoved inadvertently and sometimes they will have a melt down and claim they are being bullied. The more we find out what exactly is happening the better we are able to help the kid.

May fail to understand the consequences of own behavior. Typical kids know if they react in a typical way, they know if they have a tantrum in the classroom everybody’s going to think they are a big baby; kids with autism do not understand if they have a tantrum in front of everybody that really should be embarrassing and people might think that I’m weird. They don’t go that far into thinking.

May mimic behaviors of more popular students. Read this on your own

Avoid blaming the target. This is a really important point. Sometimes what we say to children with autism is “If you wouldn’t talk so much about your trains then people would like you more”. This is exactly what we want to avoid because if we are telling the child there is something about you that everybody dislikes, we’re basically telling them they are not ok and they need to change, this is not appropriate and this can lead to depression and this is not how we solve the problem.

Pg. 8 Adult Accountability – teachers, adults and parents need to be accountable for helping kids with autism react appropriately to bullying.

Promoting Social Competence – List of strategies. There is help out there and there are things that adults can do.

IEP Goals – that we might want to use to address the child's ability to react to bullying.

Pg. 9 Helping Students Identify Their Roles – Kids are broken up into three groups: Bystanders, Bullies and Targets. Bystanders need help as well; they don't like what they see but they haven't been empowered to report it to someone.

Strategies from Carol Gray is a step by step strategy of what she does to take kids through a social story helping them to identify bullying situations and how to react to it. Carol's theme is you teach a kid how to react, teach them how to say it, teach them how to say it really good.

I have included an

Pg. 10 Excerpt: Relationship Development Questionnaire. Dr. Gutstein has broken down social skills into about 100 discrete skills, and has broken them into levels. I have given you an excerpt from the levels in this piece to show you there is a scientific and logical way we can go about teaching skills to help kids with autism respond to bullying.

Questions:

Is there any help for the person doing the bullying?

We should be targeting the bully because they need counseling and they need some services. All three of the areas need help. What we have to do is identify who the bullies are. There are a lot of anti-bullying programs in public schools. Good results from these and the word is starting to spread and the schools are very open to helping the bully

If a parent has a child with autism or without autism who seems to be a target what should a pediatrician tell the parent to do, who should they access in the school system especially if the teacher doesn't seem to be enlightened and what should they do?

As a general answer they need to report to the principal. They need to have their facts. Often principals will say if we didn't see it we can't do anything about it so the more documentation the better. This is harder to do with children with autism because they don't know how to report it, this handout can be used as a structure for asking the right kinds of questions. When Jocelyn's sees her grandchildren she asks them "Does your teacher love you and is anybody bugging you? She

asks these two questions to see how her grandchildren are doing in school. If something is not right she pursues it. Enable the parents to ask questions and tell them it is not ok for their children to be petrified to go to school and get to the principal and be a squeaky wheel.

Email Jocelyn (address on front of handout) with any further questions.

Next Phone Conference: Tuesday October 24, 2005. Lisa Samson-Fang will present "management of menstruation hygiene for girls with disabilities."

Attendees: Lisa Samson-Fang, Barbara Ward, Jocelyn Taylor, Lisa Lee, Diane Behl, Robert Terashima, Jeff Schmidt, Melissa Higley, Marie Wiscombe, Diane, Evelyn, Fred, Karen Reed, (10 people from Montezuma Creek).