



## Bullying of Children

# Becoming a Teacher Ambassador to Combat Bullying of Students with Special Needs in an Elementary School Setting

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### Abstract

Many students with disabilities are bullied within their schools. This can lead to a negative self-image, depression, and even suicide. A way to combat the bullying of students with special needs, specifically Autism, is to help build a culture of acceptance and awareness within the school environment. This article summarizes the steps taken in one elementary school in Irmo, South Carolina to build acceptance for students with Autism. These steps are offered to give other educators of students with Autism or other special needs ideas of how they might build an inclusive and accepting community within their own schools.

## Becoming a Teacher Ambassador to Combat Bullying of Students with Special Needs in an Elementary School Setting

In July 2015, a 16-year-old boy with Autism named Kennedy LeRoy took his own life after being relentlessly verbally abused by bullies at his school. His last heartbreaking words, left in his suicide note, weigh heavy: "Maybe my death will make people realize that words can hurt as much as, if not more than, physical blows". As a Special Education teacher who teaches a self-contained class of children with Autism, it made me think, what can I do to prevent this from happening to one of my students?

### What does bullying look like today?

Leading researcher on bullying, Dan Olweus, states, "I define bullying or victimization in the following general way: A student is being bullied or victimized when he or she is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other students." (Olweus 1993, p. 9) In looking into Olweus' Bullying

Prevention Program, he promotes four key areas of focus: “warmth, positive interest, and involvement from adults, firm limits on unacceptable behavior, consistent application of nonpunitive, nonphysical sanctions for unacceptable behavior or violations of rules, and adults who act as authorities and positive role models” (Olweus 1993, 1999).

Olweus defines what bullying is and gives guidelines to help stop it, but what does that look like in the reality of a school setting? Here is my interpretation of his points and the steps we should take to make our schools an encouraging place of education and not a place of torture and cruelty.

## **Step One: It all begins with me**

Start by making your classroom a warm and welcoming place for your students. Try to be sensitive to their sensory and educational needs. Be intentional with your classroom set up so that your students know it is created specifically for their benefit. Greet them cheerfully every morning when they come in. Build them up with authentic praise when you witness them make progress in any area: behavioral, academic, social, or communication. Sometimes it takes finding something non-academic to connect with your student to build that academic rapport. Celebrate the things that make them unique and find ways to use those strengths to their academic advantage. Every child has value! Every child needs to be shown their value by how they are greeted and interacted with during the day.

## **Step Two: Get out there! Be an ambassador!**

The next step is to reach the students outside of your classroom. One has to solve the problem of how can I teach the students in other classrooms about my students? I applied and received a grant specifically geared towards helping to build awareness in my school. The committee over the grant gave suggestions of books to help students that had questions about students with disabilities. I thought we could share these books schoolwide to promote awareness and try to stop bullying. I received a list of children’s books whose storyline dealt with characters with special needs or acted differently from the norm. I ordered the books on the list using some of the grant money. The books were placed in the professional library for teachers and I advertised them through school wide emails as well. I created activities that teachers could do with their class for each book and shared them on our communal drive. I started with books because children, like adults, can be weary of what they do not understand. Books can be an easy and engaging way to demystify Autism and provide a conduit that can lead to understanding of my students. I want this book program to foster more understanding and inclusive environment for all children with disabilities or for kids that just march to their own beat.

I encouraged teachers to have discussions about what Autism is and how to interact with their peers with Autism. One teacher inspired her class to create a student led program that came up with ways to positively interact with my students on the playground. Once the students understood why my students do some of the things they do; more students interacted and sought them out for positive interactions.

I also did something simple. Every morning that I did not have morning duty, I would stand out in the hallway and give out “free high fives” to all students as they passed. I felt by making myself visible and approachable; I would in turn be an ambassador for my students. I am determined to try and bridge the gap that can sometimes occur between students with Autism and their general education peers.

## Step Three: Convince the Adults

Now, for the part that can be difficult and a very sensitive subject. I petitioned my principal for some time in our afterschool professional development meeting to give a presentation on what Autism is, behavioral interventions for teaching my students that go in for inclusion, and for students with Autism in the general education population. She ended up allowing me two whole sessions. I had numerous teachers come up to me after the training saying how much they appreciated the training and that they felt better equipped to help all students be more successful in their classrooms.

I try to make myself approachable and helpful to other teachers to again serve in that ambassador role for my students. I printed and laminated a whole stack of different visual cue signs and set them in the workroom. I put a sign “free to good home”. Some of my supportive cohorts that have my students in their class have even taken to learning sign language to communicate with my students for which verbal communication is difficult.

## Step Four: The Administration

Depending on your school this could be an even harder step. I have a great team of supportive administrators. I want my administrators to get to know my students and feel comfortable around them. I facilitate this by coordinating events that allow them to interact and be around my students in positive ways. Last year, I put on a play with my students and held it in the school theater. I sent out official invitations to the administration and several general education classes to attend. I wanted them to see how hard my students had worked on the play. My students were excited about presenting the play and entertaining their general education peers. My students’ performance was non-traditional, but beautiful and the general education students loved it. In addition, my principal and other administrators share work from my students on the school’s morning news show and even announce the medals they accrue when competing at Special Olympics.

## Step Five: Believe You Can Be the Change

Mahatma Gandhi said, “You must be the change you want to see the in world.” It all starts with us. Change does not have to be expensive, but its price is action. If you see a need and you can fill it; do it! You don’t have to start big. Actually, I would suggest starting small so it does not have the opposite effect of what you want. Start with greeting kids in the hall every day with a high five or a fist bump, then build from there. Be the ambassador, your students’ safety and well-being depends on it. I wish that Kennedy LeRoy had an ambassador that could have created a better path for him. I am determined that in my small part of the pond, it will not happen to one of my students while under my care.

## References

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## About the Author

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