

## **Helping a Child Who is Bullied**

**By Lisa Harp**

Students who suffer from learning differences truly do suffer. Not just in the classroom, where they often feel less than adequate, but on the playground as well. Almost every student who has a learning difference such as dyslexia, ADD, autism, or a special education label has been the target of bullying.

I hear reports of this on a regular basis, and it is heartbreaking to say the least. And, I have witnessed it first hand during my many years of teaching. Bus rides...torture. Name calling....prevalent. And even worse, there are moments of actual physical violence.

No student should be at the mercy of peers, but especially a student who is struggling in some capacity anyway. The bullies target victims; that's how it has always been. But, do special education students and students who struggle to learn need to be victims?

Our education system has set them up to be just that...special classes where they are pulled out. Modifications. Accommodations. Yes, these are all tools that can be helpful, but if you were to ask the student what he/she wants, the answer would be time and again - just to be a regular kid.

I can't change the education system in America, even though it vastly needs it. I do know that I wouldn't allow one of my children to be in special education or have an IEP (individualized education plan) in America right now. The payoffs are just not great enough. The students are pigeon holed, labeled, and yes, abused by their peers. Teachers often expect less from these kids as well. Rarely does a student who has an IEP actually exit special education and return to the regular classroom at grade level. The label persists, and so does the abuse.

So, what should you do if your child is struggling with a learning difference and may be the target of bullying or aggressive, mean behavior from peers? Following is a list of suggestions that might help you.

1. Empower the student with words and escape routines. If the student feels powerless, he/she will be more of a victim. Role play. Write out a scenario of possible solutions to the problem.
2. Give the student a safe place to be. For instance, if it's the playground and a certain person continues to be aggressive toward your child, talk to the teachers and principal and find someone that can watch over your child, such as an older student, yard duty teacher, etc.
3. Enroll your child in martial arts or another empowering sport, such as boxing or kick boxing.
4. Accentuate what your child is good at. Find a sport or activity that will give your child confidence. Confidence is not appealing to bullies.
5. Make sure your child is clean, presentable, and in fashion. In other words, don't give any kid a reason to pick on your kid just by looking at him/her. Name brand clothing can be purchased at thrift stores or on sale racks. It may not mean much to some parents, but if their children look different than other children, it is a first step toward getting picked on.
6. If your child is suffering from social problems, then find social classes that can teach these important skills. Or, you can work on these skills through play dates or other organized activities.
7. Listen to your child. Take heed of what he/she is telling you. Don't just tell the child that things will get better and do nothing. Doing nothing can endanger your child. Take your child's viewpoint and take it seriously.

Nothing is more heartbreaking than watching your child suffer. It's difficult enough to navigate the world without a learning difference, but to be the victim of bullying makes life unbearable for these wonderful students. There is so much that can be done to make their world brighter and easier. It's up to us to do just that.