



Don't stick it  
**STOP IT!**

## **Bullying wrecks lives:**

the experiences of children and young people  
with a learning disability.

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## Introduction

*"I was bullied when I was younger because of my learning disability. They said I was ugly and they banged my head so badly that I had to go to hospital to have 18 stitches in my forehead.*

*"The bullying made me feel so unhappy and scared I would make myself ill every day. It still affects me now even though it happened years ago. It will always stay with me because of how bad it was."*

Tragically, Ciara's story is not unique. Disablist bullying<sup>1</sup> is rife in our communities. It is damaging the life chances of some of the most vulnerable children and young people in our society.

Mencap has carried out the first extensive research on bullying among children and young people with a learning disability. It reveals the shocking truth about their experiences of bullying. In the UK, an incredible 82% of children with a learning disability are bullied – this is 280,000 children. They are subjected to bullying throughout their lives. And it happens everywhere they go, making them feel unsafe outside their own homes.

Mencap's research findings confirm concerns already raised about disablist bullying and the impact it has on disabled children and young people. The Office of the Children's Commissioner has reported that disabled children are twice as likely as their peers to become targets for bullying<sup>2</sup>, while the National Children's Bureau recently identified disablist bullying as a matter for extreme concern<sup>3</sup>.

Disablist bullying does not only destroy children's capacity to enjoy life, it also devastates their opportunity to achieve at school, and limits their life chances. It is nothing short of a disgrace that 12 years after the introduction of the first Disability Discrimination Act, children and young people with a learning disability are frightened to leave their homes because of bullying.

**Don't stick it, stop it!** is Mencap's anti-bullying campaign. We call on national and local government to confront the gravity of disablist bullying, and challenge them to take the urgent action needed to stop it.

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<sup>1</sup>Disablist bullying is bullying of any disabled child, and includes children with a learning disability.

<sup>2</sup>*Bullying Today: A Report by the Office of the Children's Commissioner*, 2006.

<sup>3</sup>*Spotlight briefing: Bullying and disability*, The National Children's Bureau, 2007.

## How we found out

Time and time again children and young people of all ages report bullying as the single biggest barrier to them living their lives to the full.

In 2007, Mencap carried out workshops with children and young people with a learning disability. The workshops were held in 46 schools across England, Wales and Northern Ireland to find out more about experiences of bullying in and out of school.

507 children and young people with a learning disability aged between eight and 19 years took part in these workshops. 60% of respondents were boys and 6% were from black or minority ethnic backgrounds.

The workshops were carried out in special schools and in special units within mainstream schools. Many of the children we worked with were educated in a mainstream setting for at least some of the time. All were asked about their experiences of bullying in all areas of their lives – including at school, on the street, in the park, on the bus, and at youth clubs and leisure centres. The workshops explored not just the incidence of bullying, but the way that bullying makes children and young people with a learning disability feel, and the impact it has on their lives.

The workshops consisted of activities and discussion, and the children were supported to fill in a survey about their experiences of bullying. The survey was accessible for children with a learning disability, using easy words and symbols. They could draw or write their responses, or communicate them in another way to a supporter (see appendix 1 for an example of the workbook pages).

This is the first time that so many children and young people with a learning disability have been asked about their experiences of bullying in the UK.

## Nearly all children and young people with a learning disability are bullied

### Ashley's story

*"I'm still scared of the bullies and I'm worried walking alone in school, in case I bump into him."*

*I'm Ashley and I'm 12 years-old. I like to play computer games and to go on the internet. I want to design computer games and animations. I need help with reading and writing.*

*On the first day I started my new school, I was told by a bully to get out of his school. He said he did not like the look of me. He had two more bully friends – a boy and girl. I was spat on, swore at and kicked.*

*I came home moody and upset, I did not want to go back to school. I hated the bully and his friends.*

### 8 out of 10 children with a learning disability are bullied

82% of children and young people with a learning disability have experienced bullying. They are twice as likely to be bullied as other children<sup>4</sup>.

Children with a learning disability are more likely to be targeted by bullies because of their disability. They are seen as 'different'. They may be doing different work at school, or they may find it hard to make friends or join in play activities. Other children can see them as 'easy targets' because they can be made to get into trouble, or because they may not understand that what is happening to them is bullying<sup>5</sup>.

Like racist and homophobic bullying, disablist bullying is particularly harmful as it is based on prejudice. Bullying of children with a learning disability discriminates against children who find it hard to understand bullying, to tell people about it, and to be listened to and supported. It damages children's self-esteem and has a huge impact on the way children and young people with a learning disability see themselves.

*"Alice has been taunted with 'Alice's brother is a spac, Alice's brother goes uh, uh, uh'."*

<sup>4</sup>Compared to research findings in 'Tackling Bullying: Listening to the views of children and young people in schools', Department for Education and Skills 2003.

<sup>5</sup>*They won't believe me*, Mencap, 2005  
([www.mencap.org.uk/html/campaigns/anti\\_bullying/more\\_info.asp](http://www.mencap.org.uk/html/campaigns/anti_bullying/more_info.asp))

## ***Children with a learning disability are bullied wherever they go***

So far, the focus of most research on bullying has been on schools. 8 out of 10 children and young people with a learning disability who have been bullied had experienced bullying at school. But Mencap's research reveals that children with a learning disability are being bullied everywhere they go.

3 out of 10 children and young people with a learning disability who have been bullied were bullied out on the street, with the same number experiencing bullying at the park and on the bus. Children also reported being bullied at youth clubs and in leisure centres.

5 out of 10 children with a learning disability had been bullied in more than one place. Children with a learning disability already face barriers in accessing education and leisure opportunities – bullying compounds this, preventing them from living full and happy lives.

*"People call me names on the street."*

## ***6 out of 10 children with a learning disability are physically hurt by bullies***

It is shocking that so many children with a learning disability are being subjected to physical forms of bullying in their neighbourhoods. This includes children being punched and slapped, spat on, knocked over, and, in some cases, attacked with such violence that hospital treatment is needed.

In many cases the physical bullying that children and young people with a learning disability experience should be classified and treated as assault or abuse. Yet these attacks are rarely subject to police investigation, and also not afforded the protection of safeguarding procedures<sup>6</sup>.

Physical attacks on children and young people with a learning disability are never acceptable, and must be treated extremely seriously.

*"I had to be taken to hospital to have 18 stitches in my forehead."*

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<sup>6</sup>The School Standards and Framework Act (1999) and the Education Act (2002) both place a legal obligation on schools to promote and safeguard the welfare of children and to prevent bullying.

## ***Intimidation and other abuse hurts too***

77% of children and young people with a learning disability are verbally abused. Calling a child with a learning disability hurtful and insulting names related to their disability is discriminatory behaviour, and a particularly insidious form of bullying.

Bullies also target children with a learning disability by taking their things or leaving them out of activities – 4 out of 10 children with a learning disability said this had happened to them.

Bullying in all its forms needs to be recognised, prevented and dealt with seriously.

*“When I was being bullied I was very upset. I tried to hide how I felt. It was hard.”*

## Bullying wrecks the lives of children and young people with a learning disability

### Ben's story

*"We had to move. The bullying had become so severe that Ben would no longer leave the house."*

Ben, who has Down's syndrome, was just 15 when his life was ruined by bullies.

*"When we moved house, Ben was desperate to make friends with the local children,"* explains his mum, Charlotte. *"But he often returned home with spit on him or the tyres of his bike deflated. On some days he was chased by a group of children until he reached the safety of home."*

Ben couldn't understand why the other children didn't want to be his friend. His mum found it very hard to tell him that they saw him as different because of his Down's syndrome. She was afraid that this would make him feel frustrated about his learning disability.

Charlotte says: *"Ben was bullied wherever he went. He would return from the park with bruises and torn clothes. As far as the local kids were concerned, Ben was there for their entertainment. He was the butt of their jokes, an object to ridicule."*

The ongoing bullying left Ben terrified to go outside. Having previously been an independent young man, he began to have recurring nightmares, and refused to leave the house. Whenever he heard children's voices outside he would cower and beg his mum not to let them near him.

Last year Ben and his mum moved to a new home in a different area. Ben, now 19, is receiving counselling to help him deal with the ongoing distress that the bullying has caused. He is much happier. Nonetheless, he is still very upset about what happened to him and refuses to go anywhere near his old home.



## ***8 out of 10 children with a learning disability are scared to go out***

Children with a learning disability are scared to leave their homes because of bullying. They are most afraid to go to school, the park and out on the street.

Over half of children with a learning disability who have been bullied stopped going to the places where the bullying happened. These children already face significant barriers in our society. It is far harder for them to access opportunities to learn and achieve. Bullying is another barrier that prevents them from taking part in their communities and doing the things others might take for granted.

Some children with a learning disability have been forced to change schools to escape bullying. This is extremely disruptive to their education. The solution to bullying should not be to force the child who has been bullied to leave.

All children have the right to feel safe in their communities. Disabled children also have the right to live their lives free from discrimination and harassment<sup>7</sup>. But this right is simply not the reality for thousands of children and young people with a learning disability.

*"I don't like the street, I don't like the park, I don't like the swimming pool because of bullies."*

## ***Bullying damages self-esteem***

Many children and young people with a learning disability have low self-esteem. Being taunted, intimidated and abused because of their disability damages their sense of self-worth.

Children with a learning disability often find it harder to make friends than other children, so being bullied leaves them feeling lonely and depressed. 56% of children with a learning disability said they cried because of bullying, and 33% hid away in their bedroom.

*"Bullying makes me feel sad."*

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<sup>7</sup>Disability Discrimination Acts, 1995 and 2005.

## Bullying does not stop

### Peter's story\*

*"I told my teachers at school and they said that I had special needs so I should get used to it as I would be bullied all my life."*

*I'm Peter and I'm 17 years-old. In my spare time I like horse riding and playing on my computer.*

*When I went to my old school I got bullied really badly. I got bullied at break times by other children at school. They would call me names, spit at me and throw stones and bottles at me.*

*The bullying made me feel very angry and sad. The bullying stopped me going out at home, so I lost all my mates. I don't have any mates any more, so I don't play out any more.*

*I told my teachers at school and they said that I had special needs so I should get used to it as I would be bullied all my life. They also told me to stop playing out at break times then I would not get bullied.*

*The bullying carried on until my mum and dad found out and then I moved schools.*

*I want adults to stop the bullies. And I want people to listen to us when we tell them what's happening.*

*\*Not his real name.*

### ***Bullying did not stop for 4 out of 10 children when they told someone***

Children and young people with a learning disability most commonly told a teacher or a parent that they were being bullied. However, for 4 out of 10 children who told someone, the bullying did not stop. This confirms the conclusions of the National Autistic Society's 'B is for Bullying' report (2006), which found that in 44% of cases, no action was taken by the school after it was reported that a child with autism was being bullied.

Adults do not always believe children with a learning disability when they report bullying, or they don't treat it as a serious matter. If an adult dismisses a child's reports or tells them that bullying is just part of life, they are condoning disablist bullying. All adults who work with children need to know how to deal with disablist bullying appropriately. And they must ensure that it is always treated seriously.

*"The girls were nasty, they told lies. No-one believed me."*

## ***Children with a learning disability find it hard to report bullying***

Sometimes when a child with a learning disability is being bullied they do not understand what is happening. They think that being treated badly is just a part of their everyday life. Others find it hard to give a clear account of what has happened to them, which can lead to their reports of bullying not being acted upon.

Signs that a child with a learning disability is being bullied can often be missed. For example, a child with a learning disability could show a change in behaviour because they are distressed about being bullied. Adults could simply attribute the change to the child's disability and therefore dismiss it<sup>8</sup>.

Adults should be aware of children and young people with a learning disability who are at risk of being bullied. They should take preventative steps, followed by firm action if they see or suspect bullying.

*"I don't like being bullied. It does not stop when I tell someone."*

## ***Many children with a learning disability are bullied throughout their lives***

Nearly half of children with a learning disability had been bullied for over a year, and many were bullied for even longer. Children with a learning disability are being bullied for a significant period of their childhood, which has a hugely negative impact on their development and life chances.

The effects of bullying in childhood can still be felt by people with a learning disability when they become adults. When children with a learning disability are denied opportunities to learn, develop and achieve because of bullying, they find it harder to develop their skills and confidence in adult life. This then makes it more likely that they will also be targets for abuse as adults.

Many adults with a learning disability are bullied in their communities, as Mencap's Living in Fear report<sup>9</sup> revealed. Disablist bullying can escalate into the abuse, hate crime, and even murder of adults with a learning disability<sup>10</sup>.

*"It is horrible being bullied. It needs to stop."*

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<sup>8</sup>*They won't believe me*, Mencap, 2005.

<sup>9</sup>*Living in Fear*, Mencap, 1999.

<sup>10</sup>In one case, three people were jailed for the murder of a man with a learning disability who the judge said was literally 'bullied to death' in 2007.

## What needs to happen

Children and young people with a learning disability are among the most vulnerable people in our society. Most of them do not feel safe in their communities because of disablist bullying.

Far more must be done to tackle disablist bullying in our communities. It simply cannot be allowed to continue to destroy lives.

## Don't stick it, stop it! recommendations

### *The Government should provide leadership on disablist bullying by:*

1. Taking disablist bullying as seriously as other forms of prejudice-driven bullying.
2. Requiring schools and services used by children to record all incidents of disablist bullying.
3. Ensuring that public bodies fulfil the public sector duty to promote disability equality and eliminate harassment.
4. Commissioning Ofsted to review progress on eliminating disablist bullying.

### *Local authorities and children's trusts should support schools and children's services to prevent disablist bullying by:*

1. Taking a leading role by providing policies, funding and training to prevent disablist bullying.
2. Supporting all children's services, youth services and schools to develop robust disability equality schemes linked to their anti-bullying strategies to tackle bullying.
3. Providing information and support to disabled children, young people and parents.
4. Ensuring that their children and young people's plan includes actions to prevent and tackle disablist bullying.

See appendices for more information on these recommendations.

### *Further information*




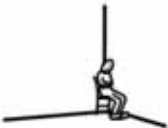

For further information on Mencap's **Don't stick it, stop it!** campaign:

- visit [www.dontstickit.org.uk](http://www.dontstickit.org.uk)
- email [campaigns@mencap.org.uk](mailto:campaigns@mencap.org.uk)
- telephone 020 7696 6952

# Appendix 1: examples of worksheets used to capture children's experiences of bullying

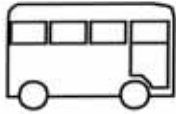






### How were you bullied?

(You can choose more than 1 or draw your own picture)

 hurt my body	 by phone or text	 called me names
 left out of things	 took my things	

### Where are you scared that bullying might happen?

(You can choose more than 1 or draw your own picture)

 bus	 school	 park	 leisure centre
 street	 out shopping	 youth club	

## Appendix 2: recommendations for Government

The Government should provide leadership on disablist bullying by:

### **1. Taking disablist bullying as seriously as other forms of prejudice-driven bullying.**

Disablist bullying must be recognised and treated as seriously as other forms of bullying – including racist and homophobic bullying. This should include producing and promoting robust guidance on how best to prevent and tackle disablist bullying, in line with guidance already produced on tackling other forms of bullying. The Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families should report regularly to Parliament on progress in tackling disablist bullying, as part of his duty to report on his department's progress in promoting disability equality.

### **2. Requiring schools and services used by children to record all incidents of disablist bullying.**

The Government should issue a circular requiring schools and children's services to record all incidents of disablist bullying. This circular should include a reminder of the legal duty to promote disability equality and to eliminate disability-related harassment under the Disability Discrimination Act 2005.

### **3. Ensuring that public bodies fulfil the public sector duty to promote disability equality and eliminate harassment.**

The Government should require the Commission for Equalities and Human Rights (CEHR) to issue compliance notices to all public bodies that have failed to promote disability equality and eliminate disability-related harassment, as required by the Disability Discrimination Act 2005.

### **4. Commissioning Ofsted to review progress on eliminating disablist bullying.**

Ofsted should provide leadership in eliminating harassment through its own Disability Equality Scheme. It should also inspect local authorities' and schools' Disability Equality Schemes rigorously. The Government should commission Ofsted to carry out a thematic review of schools and children's services, focusing on progress made in preventing and tackling disablist bullying.

## Appendix 3: recommendations for local action

Local authorities and children's trusts should support children's services and schools to prevent disablist bullying by:

### **1. Taking a leading role by providing policies, funding and training to prevent disablist bullying.**

Staff in all children's services and schools should receive training so that they understand learning disability, the impact of disablist bullying upon children who use their services and how to take action to address it. Local authorities should promote a culture of 'zero tolerance' of disablist bullying. They should also incorporate their policies on tackling disablist bullying in all service agreements and contracts with private and voluntary providers.

### **2. Supporting all children's services, youth services and schools to develop robust disability equality schemes linked to their anti-bullying strategies to tackle bullying.**

All public bodies are required under the Disability Discrimination Act 2005 to produce a disability equality scheme. The scheme must show how they will promote disability equality and eliminate harassment. Local authorities should support public bodies and contracted services to produce schemes that include strong measures to prevent and deal with disablist bullying. Anti-bullying strategies should also specifically address disablist bullying and harassment.

### **3. Providing information and support to disabled children, young people and parents.**

Disabled children and young people, and their parents, need good information about disablist bullying, and about the support they can expect from their local authority. Children with a learning disability should be told that they have a right to be safe from bullying. Where a child has experienced disablist bullying, they should also have access to support and counselling to help them to deal with its effects.

### **4. Ensuring that their children and young people's plan includes actions to prevent and tackle disablist bullying.**

The lead member for children's services and director of children's services should consider Mencap's report and review the incidence of bullying of disabled children in their local area. They should then ensure that appropriate actions to prevent and tackle disablist bullying are included in their children and young people's plan.

[www.dontstickit.org.uk](http://www.dontstickit.org.uk)

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