



# Support for Autistic Children Experiencing Bullying: A Guide for Parents and Carers

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By Lynn McCann for Kidscape

# About Kidscape

Kidscape is an award-winning bullying prevention charity. Founded in 1985, we work with children, families, schools, and communities throughout England and Wales.

Our vision is for all children to grow up in supportive communities safe from bullying and harm.

**Our mission is to provide practical support, training, and advice to challenge bullying and protect young lives.**

## Foreword from the author

I am Lynn McCann from the team of autism specialist teachers at Reachout ASC. We are working with Kidscape to adapt their anti-bullying support programmes and resources so that they are accessible for autistic children and their families, and support schools with an autism-inclusive response to bullying. Kidscape does an amazing job of supporting children who have been bullied, enabling their parents and families to communicate and work with schools to make the bullying stop. We love their approach of providing programmes of support to help children recover from bullying and give them tools to feel confident in bullying situations in the future.

In our work with autistic children, their parents, carers and their schools we have seen a lot of bullying situations. We see how often children are left to deal with the long-term effects. Many studies have discovered that autistic children are more likely to experience bullying, and according to surveys by the National Autistic Society and Ambitious about Autism, between 75-82% of autistic children have experienced bullying.

This booklet is for parents and carers. We wanted to give you additional support when your child is bullied or is accused of bullying, and they are also autistic.



We will outline to particular vulnerabilities of autistic children and some of the difficulties they may have with recognising, reporting and responding to being bullied.

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# Why are autistic children vulnerable to bullying?

Your child may have had an autism diagnosis since they were young, or you may still be trying to access an assessment for them. All parents are on a different point in the journey of realising and identifying that their child is autistic. (I use the term autistic as current research indicates that this is the term preferred by a majority of autistic adults, however, we give all children we work with the choice to use their own preferred term, and some prefer 'with autism').

The autistic spectrum is very wide. Every autistic child I have ever known is different, and that is the joy of getting to know them. We know that autistic children may not have speech, or may be able to discuss advanced factual information with amazing clarity and vocabulary. We know too, that their verbal ability does not indicate how intelligent they are. Many non-speaking autistic people are now communicating how intelligent they are through typing and other alternative communication supports.

There are many myths around autism that means that people misjudge autistic people. Some of those myths are:

## **Autistic people are geniuses in one area, like Rain Man**

No they are not. Autistic people have the same range of ability than the neurotypical population.

## **Autism affects more boys than girls**

In reality, the numbers are so much more even. For so long, girls were just missed, often because they mask and imitate those around them so that they seem to be like them. But when we understand autism, we can see, and they can tell us, that they are struggling with many things and experiencing the world in an autistic way.

## **Autistic people lack empathy**

This is not true. Almost all autistic people feel empathy for others, for animals, for the environment. Some are hyper-aware of the emotion and events around them. Others may take time to process what has been happening and some may miss the clues that mean something has happened to others. However, given time and clear explanations, autistic people are empathetic and understanding.

## **Autistic people are anti-social**

No they are not. But they may communicate in different ways, find too many people overwhelming and be confused by the hidden and expected social rules that they find hard to understand.



There are many reasons why autistic children are vulnerable to bullying. In our experience, the number one reason is that autistic children can seem different to others. In society, differences are picked on, pointed out, ridiculed, and people who are different are left out and marginalised.

Often bullying is ignored in the earliest stages because teachers dismiss the situation as being, 'just children falling out' or 'differences of opinion'. The autistic children we know often find it difficult to communicate with adults. They struggle to give the full details, or too many details, or the expected sequence of events. They may not be able to identify the children bullying them. Adults can't interpret the situation fully because they are not seeing it from the autistic child's perspective. This is what Professor Damian Milton calls the Double Empathy Problem.

If an autistic child doesn't tell the story in a typical way, we could easily dismiss the account as unreliable. It is also true that an autistic child may misinterpret the actions and words of others and feel like they are being bullied. At other times, they may misinterpret people's sarcasm and teasing as friendship, and be vulnerable to being taken advantage of by others.

# Things to look out for



## Imitating bullying

imitation is not flattery when it is being done to make fun of a person. The stimming actions of your autistic child and their mannerisms or vocal tone can be a target for others to imitate to make fun of your child. You could ask your child if other people are laughing a lot when they are around and if they see people copying their actions.

## Social bullying

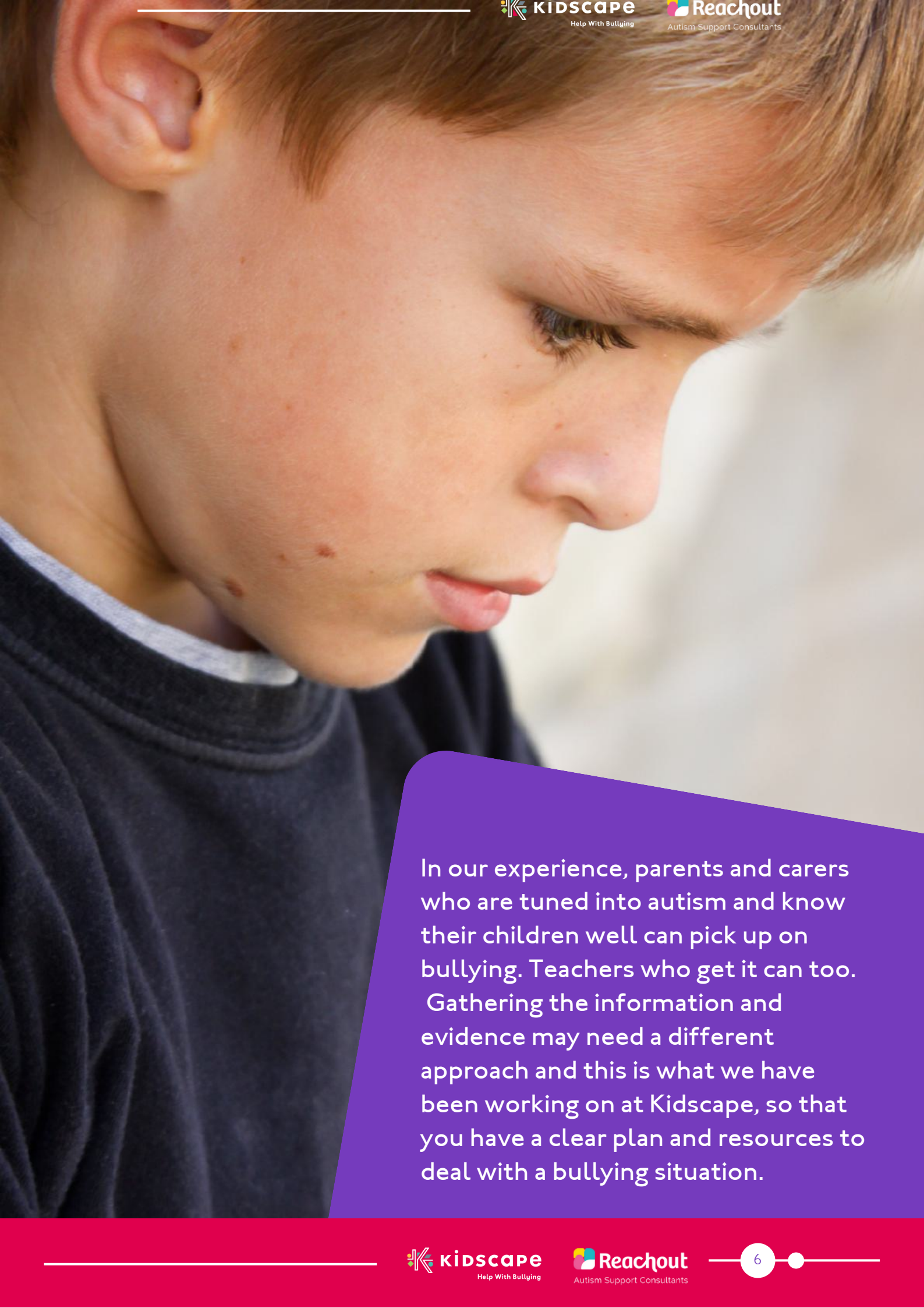
An autistic child can be left out or teased because they want to play the same thing each playtime. They might be bullied by others trying to get them in trouble by always telling the teacher that the autistic child has done something wrong. They can also be vulnerable to being taken advantage of and being forced to do things by others. If they are literal thinkers, they may take what others say literally and this can be picked up by others. Making an autistic child do something so that the other child will be their friend or the autistic child can be part of a group is also bullying.

## Emotional bullying

Finding out what upsets an autistic child and 'pushing the buttons' is another way they can be vulnerable. Pushing a child into meltdown and seeing them get into trouble for their behaviour can be subtle and cleverly hidden. It can be additionally difficult when an autistic child has difficulty processing their emotions and the bullying builds up over time, small digs at a time until they lose it and have a meltdown over what seems to the adults, something quite insignificant.

## Frenemies

This is a toxic type of friendship. Your autistic child will probably think that the person is their friend, but you may notice that your child is giving this friend a lot of things and getting upset if they cannot have something, like money. Your child might be copying undesirable behaviour and seeming to be over-protective of their 'friend'. Often the friend will make your child feel loyal to them and accuse them of being in the wrong if they don't do what they say. The friend will often say hurtful or derogatory things to your child about them and make them feel they owe something to them.



In our experience, parents and carers who are tuned into autism and know their children well can pick up on bullying. Teachers who get it can too. Gathering the information and evidence may need a different approach and this is what we have been working on at Kidscape, so that you have a clear plan and resources to deal with a bullying situation.

# Supportive communication

We know that autistic children can struggle to communicate when they are anxious or scared. If they are experiencing bullying, then the emotion and stress may make any kind of communication difficult for them. This is why we have devised our communication mat that can be presented to the child and used at their own pace to try and help us gather the information we need to investigate what is happening.

## Being clear on what we mean by bullying

Kidscape defines bullying as “when one person or a group of people, deliberately hurt another person, more than once, and it’s hard for the person on the receiving end to defend themselves.” Although no definition will be perfect, having one gives us something definite to work from. For autistic children having a clear, defined parameter can help us work out what is happening in the situation they are telling us about.

## Helping autistic children understand bullying

Some autistic children may label behaviour they don’t like or decisions that adults have made that negatively impacts them as bullying. When other children don’t want to play what the autistic child wants, it can be interpreted by the child that the other children are bullying them. Children may vocalise the fact they don’t want to play with somebody. For the autistic child, this can have the same emotional impact as being bullied. This shows us that we must take time to understand the context and invest time in working out what is happening. At the very least there is a need to get children together to understand how best to work through the issues that are happening and not dismiss them, whether they are bullying or not.

On the other hand, the targeted name-calling, isolation, teasing, physical, online, and verbal bullying that some autistic children may experience, can be relentless and far too common in our experience. In some circumstances, this could even constitute a hate crime, and we are concerned that schools do not always take this aspect of bullying seriously. These incidents are often dismissed as the autistic child’s misunderstanding when it can be more socially aware children using this to manipulate the adults into dismissing it as ‘just banter’ or the autistic child’s imagination.



## A visual communication mat

We wanted to start at the beginning and have created a communication mat. We have partnered with [www.widgitonline.com](http://www.widgitonline.com) who have given us permission to use their visual symbols. Visual communication can provide significant support for autistic children to help with vocabulary and word memory. We know that autistic young people can find it difficult to find the words to communicate about bullying to adults. Stress and fear can cause the inability to communicate verbally.



Other autistic young people can find it difficult to sort out what are the bullying incidents from the general things that happen in a stressful school day. So, this first resource, the [bullying communication mat](#), can help parents and teachers work through the facts and important details to present the information to the school and develop an action plan to make the bullying stop.

We have created it as a visual structure, to organise the conversation into smaller chunks with an action plan so that the child knows who is going to do what and when you will speak to them again. There can be so much anxiety about what might happen if they tell someone, that making the action plan clear to the child will go some way to reassure them.

The communication mat and two social stories which help autistic children understand and share experiences of bullying are [available for download](#).







# Accessing Kidscape ZAP workshops with your autistic child

Kidscape ZAP workshops are held online each month for children and families impacted by bullying. The workshops are free of charge and can be booked through the Kidscape website. We have worked with Kidscape to make adaptations for autistic young people. There is a booklet to help them go through the sessions with clear explanations and Social Stories to support each session. We have given alternatives to 'giving eye contact' in case your autistic child finds this too intense or if they have face-blindness and cannot recognise people easily. We have written Social Stories to explain some of the concepts covered in the sessions. Here are some tips to help your child get the most out of the ZAP workshop

Before the session, explain clearly what will be covered. Clearly state the timings, and what they will be doing afterwards. Write this down and cross off as the session progresses.

Look at the booklet together before the session so your child will be as familiar as possible with the session to come. Some children will want to look at the whole booklet, and some may only cope with one session at a time so do what is best for your child.

Too many choices can overwhelm autistic young people. When the presenter asks your child to make a choice present them visually where possible. This gives your child time to think and not become too overwhelmed when questioned. Let them know they can write things down or not have to answer at all.

Turn taking in conversation and listening skills can be tricky too when working in groups. It may be that you suggest just having one person to work with in a pair or that there is a comfortable way for your child to join in, discussed with the presenter beforehand.

Often people with autism are over-empathetic. Allow your child to have short breaks, a fiddle object or comfort toy if they are likely to become overwhelmed with the emotion of the session.

During the session make notes of what is discussed and know what you may need to explain afterwards. Don't assume your child has picked up the reason for something that may seem obvious to you.

Where you can, compare wrong behaviour to an alternative good/right behaviour so that an idea is clearer.

Role play is another great visual – use this where suitable, but if they struggle to join in this part of the session, then let them watch others and comment on what they notice they are doing. You may be able to do this after the session when they are not online.

Always give them time to process what they hear and think about during the sessions. They may need time doing something they find calming afterwards and may not be ready to talk about the session until days later when they have processed it all. You know your child, go with their leading on this.

# Recovery from the emotional trauma of bullying

Autistic children can suffer emotional trauma from experiencing bullying. It can be difficult for them to process emotions, especially if they have alexithymia (a difficulty with connecting with the internal emotional signals and thoughts) or alternatively, they can be hypersensitive to emotions which leaves their sensory and nervous systems on high alert. There is the loss of trust in people which can take a long time to overcome. They may have experienced being blamed or gaslighting (when they are accused of inviting bullying by being different) and that too has caused trauma.



# Other ways to support your child

Having counselling by an autism aware counsellor can be very helpful, but finding the right support is not easy. Here are some tips to help you work a way through the trauma with your child either alongside some counselling or when you cannot find anything suitable.



Give your child permission to be angry about what has happened to them and name the feelings. A scale can help you work through the intensity of the feelings and if you have a baseline of 'okay' (rather than happy) then it can provide a structure to manage the emotions. For more information about supporting through anxiety, [see here](#).

Work with the school to build up the trust your child has in going to school again. Tell them that your child has had a trauma that makes going to school seem unsafe for them and that is triggering a lot of anxiety and loss of functioning in school. This should include working with all the children involved, aiming to repair relationships and may also include autism awareness training for staff and children. Ask the school for a plan and regular monitoring and updates. This may need to include a change of class (or even school) if managing to be in the same room as those who have bullied your child is too much for them.

Find sensory activities that help them feel better. Often physical, exercise, swinging, bouncing or deep pressure activities can be calming. To find out more, [see here](#).

Your child may be affected by the trauma long after the bullying has stopped. It will be important to recognise when they are feeling anxious but make a point of reminding them and praising them for what they have learned since then. For example, "You are now much better at recognising when someone is being kind or unkind to you." Or "You have such kindness for other people who are left out and are being so friendly to them." The book by Dr Emily Lovegrove "Autism, Bullying and Me" has further support ideas.

Speak to your doctor about mental health support. A referral to CAMHS can sometimes help but it may be best not to rely on this being able to make everything okay again.



# Why might autistic children be accused of bullying?



It is not impossible for an autistic child to be accused of bullying. There are many reasons why they might engage in bullying behaviour. Some of the most common reasons can take some investigating, but looking at it through an autism lens will help. Even when we might establish that the autistic child is in the wrong, they often have a logical reason for what they are doing. Working carefully with them, unpicking their perception of the situation, we can usually sort it out and enable them to manage the situation in a different way. When I work with autistic children I would always map out on a big piece of paper all the things they tell me so that we can build up a full picture of all that they want to tell us. Mapping it out can help them process and 'see' what has been said about the situation. This reduces stress and the pressure on them to remember what they told you, because it is there in front of you both.



## What should I do if my autistic child has been accused of bullying?

Always start with the child's perspective first. Ask them to draw, tell or use any communication they feel confident with to tell you what has been happening. This will often bring out the reasons why they have been hurting or trying to control others and may be a long list of complaints against others. Try to tease out any sensory triggers, social misunderstandings and anxieties the child has around the other children. Sometimes there was an incident in the children's history that is still distressing the autistic child.

## What else should I do if my autistic child has been accused of bullying?

A teacher will need to speak to the other children to get their perspective. And in the same way, write down what they tell you objectively.

It can be difficult to admit your child may have acted in a bullying way, but taking time to understand their perspective will help you reassure them, but also explain that there is a different way to manage what is at the root of this.

**Explaining rules.** This is not about blame, but working with your autistic child to help them see that there are rules about how they treat others and why those rules are there. This is not easy because other children break these rules, so you will have to explain that they are something we are working towards to enable everyone to be safe. You may need to talk about emotional safety, physical safety, and social safety. As a parent, you can only work with your own child but do share what you are talking about with the child's teacher. Ask the teacher if they will also talk about how we can all respect one another and maybe do some work about respecting difference.

**Repairing relationships.** We have to be very careful about jumping to applying consequences such as grounding our children or depriving them of their gaming equipment. It is much more effective to talk to them about repairing relationships, and to work with the school to try and make that happen. Often bullying from an autistic child stems from their attempts to make friends, or difficulties with navigating the social situations in school. If we apply The Double Empathy Problem to this, then the repairing has to involve all the children learning to understand each other better.

When the school does not work with you and insists on punishing your autistic child for bullying behaviour, it is easier said than done not to become angry and defensive. If you can refer to their bullying policy, insist they reassess your child's SEND needs (there are four areas of need that includes sensory and social needs; [see here](#)). It is often an opportunity to identify areas where your child may need additional support. Please also refer to [www.ipsea.org.uk](http://www.ipsea.org.uk) for information about how to apply for an EHCP and navigating the SEND system.



Autism can be a reason, but it's not helpful as an excuse. We are doing our autistic children no favours if we excuse wrong behaviour – but often there is a logical reason that isn't as malicious as others might assume. For example, one child I worked with was copying a violent character's behaviour in response to his parent's splitting up. Through counselling, the child was able to understand his feelings about his dad leaving and learned to manage the anger better rather than hitting out at his classmates. I have known autistic children take a particular dislike to another child, which turned out to be the tone of the other's child's voice that was triggering a sensory reaction. The behaviour to the other child was not acceptable, but once we understood the reason, the repairing and support for the children could be put in place.



One final way to help your autistic child when they may have hurt others, for whatever reason, is to use a third person approach when explaining what has happened and what actions are not appropriate. This takes blame away from the child and allows them to see a wider perspective. After this, give them ideas for a way out, how to avoid a situation, or how alternatives actions can be more effective. A good Social Story can do this if used correctly (please seek out training in how to write Social Stories if you can).

Examples are: “Sometimes people find other people annoying. This is okay. People can’t like everyone all of the time. When people hit other people it can make the person sore and upset. If someone is annoying I can try to be kind to them by speaking in a normal voice. I could try to move away so I am not near to them.” If you want to know more about Social Stories, see [here](#).



# Further help

To find out more about Kidscape ZAP workshops, visit [ZAP workshops for children impacted by bullying](#).

To access Kidscape tools to support autistic children, visit [Autistic children and bullying](#).

For more information on talking to schools about bullying, visit [Talking to schools about bullying](#).

For further advice and guidance, contact the Kidscape Parent Advice Line [Parent Advice Line](#).



