

Pupils with autism are victims of bullying in primary schools

According to the NHS, there are about 100,000 children in the UK with autism and 70% are educated in mainstream schools. They can find it hard to read facial expressions and body language and misunderstand what other pupils say and do. Girls with autism are especially vulnerable because of:

- great sympathy or emotional empathy
- social naivety
- misinterpreting other people's intentions
- being less able to read facial expressions and body language
- not understanding the unwritten social rules
- being overly idealistic about relationships
- social immaturity

Some of the key challenges for pupils with autism in school are:

- understanding the social world
- understanding instructions
- being misunderstood and misunderstanding others
- being bullied for being different (because they are 'odd', 'out of the box thinkers', or 'weird' as described by neurotypical pupils)

Tania Marshall, Autism Ambassador at Education Placement Group, suggests how children with autism can be supported. 'It is important to educate all pupils about autism and tolerance of difference. Students with autism could also be assigned a 'neurotypical buddy' who makes sure they are safe and supported. Friendship skill acquisition, from as young as possible, is crucial for pupils with autism to learn. The best basis for this is through commonly held interests with peers. '



Watch out for some of the key signs that a child is being bullied- refusing to join in, staying physically close to a member of staff, hiding. If left undetected these small signs may escalate into more serious behaviour such as selective mutism and school refusal. The less structured parts of the day such as breaks and mealtimes can be a source of anxiety so give them alternatives such as supervised lunchtime clubs, library activities.

Teachers must instil values of acceptance, inclusion and tolerance among all pupils says Marshall: 'The type of teacher a pupil with autism has can make or break their school experience – teachers who are patient, creative, accepting and intuitive can help children with autism thrive in the school environment.'

Tania Marshall, M.Sc. is AspienGirl Project lead for girls with Autism or Asperger's Syndrome and Autism Ambassador for Education Placement Group, specialists in education recruitment