

Key points:

- *Encourage parents to voice concerns as they arise*
- *Don't ignore incidents solely because they fail to meet formal definition of bullying*
- *Consider supports, services to help children with social skills*

Follow these steps to address parents' heightened concerns about bullying

The increasing severity of bullying incidents and disability harassment in recent years has heightened parents' concerns around this issue. This has prompted more requests for services to keep children safe, sources say, such as increased supervision or changes in placement.

However, there may be steps that IEP teams can take before an issue escalates and prompts a parent to make such a request.

"You don't want a parent coming to you and saying, 'My kid has felt bullied for the past year,'" says Julie Fay, a school attorney with Shipman & Goodwin LLP in Hartford, Conn. "When parents let concerns simmer for a long time, they are ready for a dramatic solution."

Also, Fay says, schools should help children engage in positive interactions with their peers. "So even if something happened that doesn't equate to bullying, the IEP team can still meet to discuss the difficulties a student is having with his peers," she says.

Take these steps to stay attuned to and address parents' concerns about bullying before they boil over:

1. Encourage parents to voice concerns as they arise. This shows parents that you take bullying seriously and want to catch any problems before they escalate, Fay says.

The best way to keep track of parents' concerns is to establish a communication system for parents and staff, she says. For example, you can ask parents to e-mail their concerns to a teacher or case manager on a weekly basis. Or, you can assign a staff member to check in with the student once a month to see if there have been any incidents with his peers, she says.

Similarly, staff should let parents know of incidents involving the student, such as a conflict with a peer, Fay says. This reassures parents that the school is keeping an eye out for any potential problems. If a situation escalates, the IEP team can convene to discuss interventions, such as peer mediation.

2. Don't dismiss incidents. You don't have to wait for a bullying investigation or repeated incidents to occur to convene an IEP meeting. If there's been an inappropriate incident, parents will be frustrated if you say, "Well, that's not bullying," Fay says. You can meet to address the issue "before it snowballs into a bigger problem," she says.

Also, just because an incident or behavior doesn't meet the definition of bullying in your district or state doesn't mean it should be dismissed, Fay says. For example, Connecticut's bullying law defines bullying as overt acts by a student or a group of students committed more than once per school year against another student with the intent to ridicule, harass, humiliate, or intimidate the other student while on school grounds, at a school-sponsored activity, or on a school bus. However, if an IEP team learns of one incident on the playground or in the cafeteria, you can still take precautions, Fay notes.

“Early interventions may help avoid repeated acts from occurring in the future,” she says. For example, you may ask teachers who supervise recess or cafeteria workers to remain vigilant to any incidents involving the child, suggests Marla Matthews, a school attorney with New Hampshire-based Gallagher, Callahan & Gartrell PC.

3. Get student’s perspective. If a school psychologist or counselor is not already part of your IEP team, consider inviting one to the meeting. This person should meet with the student before the IEP meeting to get the student’s perspective about what is going on, Matthews says.

“A lot of times, the IEP team gets a bullying complaint from the parent, who gets it from the student,” Fay says. However, the parent does not always have details or understand the context in which the alleged incident took place. Talk to the student about who was involved and where it happened. For example, perhaps the parent thinks the student is being picked on. However, talking to the student may reveal that he also is engaging in bullying behaviors.

“Media coverage tends to vilify one party over the other, but there’s not always one clear victim and one clear bully,” Fay says. Communicate this to parents, and inform them that you will consider interventions to help the student interact appropriately with his peers, Fay says.

4. Consider variety of supports, goals. Parents who believe their child is being bullied often ask the district to discipline the bully and increase supervision of their child, Fay says. However, first consider services and supports that help the student build social skills.

“Whether or not you agree that the student is a target for bullying, you may agree that he has needs in developing social skills and understanding social pragmatics,” she says. Thus, you may consider services to help the student learn appropriate social pragmatics in a natural environment. Such services may include social skills groups, counseling, or lunch bunch to practice socializing with peers, says Alisia St. Florian, a school attorney with Murphy, Hesse, Toomey & Lehane LLP in Quincy, Mass.

Also, if your team determines that a child is vulnerable to bullying because of his disability, consider adding goals to the IEP to help the student attain skills needed to decrease the likelihood of problem incidents, Matthews says. “This may alleviate some of the [parent’s] placement concerns,” she says. Goals to help the child increase self-esteem, initiate conversations with peers, and read social cues may be appropriate in these situations.

5. Document conversations. Each time you discuss a parent’s concerns about bullying, document the conversation in the notes section of the IEP, St. Florian says. “Do that even if you decide not to address bullying in the IEP. Document what the parent’s concerns were, the discussion you had around them, and why you did or did not change the IEP in response to those concerns,” she says. This will prevent parents from claiming that you ignored their bullying concerns, she says.

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