

'Square peg' students more often targets of bullies

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Published on Mar 22, 2009

In a school system designed for round holes, "square pegs" often get bullied. Sometimes that "squareness" is simply red hair or glasses, or being a goth or geek. Other times, it's more complicated.

Studies show students with learning disorders or attention problems are especially vulnerable to bullying. Author and educator Richard Lavoie says that's because these students may have a hard time negotiating the maze of social interactions and "hidden curriculum" in the schools.

When we think about learning disabilities we think about kids who have trouble reading or doing math. But there are a myriad of less obvious learning differences - like ADHD, Aspergers, Non-verbal Learning Disorder (NLD), Central Auditory Processing Disorder, and Sensory Processing Disorder - that also cause difficulties outside the classroom - in the halls, recess, bus and lunchrooms.

Their "differently wired brains" may make these kids too honest, socially awkward or have difficulties managing their own reactions and emotions.

These are the students who, when bullies "shop around" for their targets, provide that satisfying reaction to make the aggressors keep coming back for more, experts say. And while their more street-wise aggressors may be adept at flying under the school staff's radar, those with learning differences never quite figure it out.

If you've got a disorder that impairs your social skills, it's hard to understand what you're doing wrong, and to figure out how to avoid it, says Dr. Maggie Mamen, family psychologist and author of *The Pampered Child Syndrome*, and *Understanding Non-Verbal Disabilities*.

Obviously, bullies don't walk around saying "I'm going to bully you," Dr. Mamen says.

"But if you can read social signals, you know they hang out in certain places, use certain intimidating gestures and voices, and you pick that up and take appropriate action, whether it's evasive or challenging."

Some kids with learning disorders like NLD don't pick up those first signs and danger signals.

"It's not that they're more targeted, but they don't put up the expected defences, they don't give that signal 'don't mess with me'. So it may go a little further."

There's no easy answer, says Dr. Mamen, because many students with these complicated learning problems don't generalize or learn from experience. Telling such a student how to respond to a bully doesn't work unless the adult is there each time it's happening to coach the child through it.

At the same time, if a student with NLD is continually protected or bailed out, he never learns self-protective behaviours, she says.

Another problem Dr. Mamen points out: often teachers don't know the student has learning disabilities or an IEP.

"I'm not blaming teachers," she says. "Some teachers have more kids in class with an IEP than without. It's completely impossible to teach every child in the world differently."

But it may be what leads some teachers to tell targeted students that their own behaviour has led to the bullying.

"I don't care how flippy or different a kid is at school, he should still be safe," says Michael Gresko, whose child, currently being tested for ADHD, was blamed by his Grade 1 teacher for causing himself to be bullied in his Richmond Hill school.

"It sounds extreme, I know, but it's like when a woman is raped and they say she asked for it. There's no right - whatever your religion or skin colour or personality - to make someone feel like that."

Janis Jaffe-White, co-ordinator of the Toronto Family Network, says bullying of kids with "additional needs" is a huge problem, and not limited to schools in York Region. "It's enormous around this province. There are systemic problems that are not isolated ... and it's getting worse."

Private schools are not immune. One Unionville family, whose son attended a private school in Richmond Hill and was diagnosed with ADHD and non-verbal learning disorder, was shocked to learn that despite the school's superior reputation, their son was ostracized by the other students until Grade 8. He's now in a public high school in Markham and hoping that new surroundings will mean a fresh start.

Increasing peer support and tolerance for differences in schools might help, suggests Canada's National Crime Prevention Strategy. In its report "Bullying Prevention in Schools," the group also recommends interventions to improve social and behavioural skills of children with learning disabilities.

Lynn Ziraldo, head of the Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario and member of Ontario's Safe Schools Action Team, makes these suggestions:

- Teach students healthy ways to deal with bullying: walk away, write it down, talk with someone
- Give them scripts - this is what may happen, here's what to do, how to express how you feel
- Offer "peer coaches"
- Provide opportunities to build up self esteem - catch them being good
- Find a "champion" - someone the child can go to for leadership and guidance - a teacher, coach or students.

At the same time, she says society can erase the stigma by talking more about learning differences.

"We as adults are uncomfortable talking about it. We talk more about health than we do about learning and cognitive conditions. If someone's got cancer and is having a bad day and acting inappropriately we understand that."

Not so when it's a more hidden challenge, like a learning disability, autism, or mental

health issue. Ms Ziraldo says society needs to "create a culture of respect and empathy."

That may be a great long-term approach, but families in the thick of bullying problems want something more immediate; they want schools to work harder at protecting its most vulnerable students - now.

Students with learning disabilities have enough on their plates, without the additional burden of being bullied, says Karen Sebben, whose son also has special ed identification and was bullied for years. Mrs. Sebben believes these children should be offered extra protection.

"Had my son's identification been visible, if he'd been in a wheelchair, it would have stopped immediately," she says. "Do you think the principal would have allowed a wheelchair-bound person to be harassed like that?"

"At the end of the day," says Mrs. Sebben, "unless you fit into a box, unless you're an average student, school may just not be a safe place to be."