

# Disabilities and Vulnerability to Bullying

## FACT SHEET

### 2008 Safe School Social Responsibility Survey for Secondary Students

36% of students feared they would be left out or made fun of because of their physical appearance or disability

Among these students: 41% had been physically bullied at least once (compared to 31% of all students)

71% had been verbally bullied at least once (compared to 58% of all students)

60% had been socially bullied at least once (compared to 47% of all students)

32% believed students were not accepting of all individuals regardless of physical disability



A disability refers to physical or mental impairments that make daily routines and activities more challenging. Children with disabilities may require assistance from a person, animal, or a special device. A physical disability may occur as a result of chronic illness, being overweight, having been in an accident, or being born with certain features. Mental disabilities may result from birth, sustained exposure to stress, drug abuse, or various other causes.

### How common are disabilities?

In 2001, approximately 155,000 children in Canada between the ages of 5-14 had a disability. Among these, more than half had mild to moderate disabilities, while 43% had severe to very severe disabilities. In B.C., of the 21,000 children who had a disability, nearly one quarter of grades 7 to 12 students had health-related problems. This included 9% with chronic illnesses, such as diabetes, epilepsy, scoliosis, arthritis, asthma, hearing impairment, attention deficit disorder, physical handicap, or hypertension. The number of children with disabilities continues to increase as medical advancements increase life expectancy.

### How might having a disability affect students?

A disability may limit the ability to acquire, organize, retain, understand, or use verbal and non-verbal information. This can result in a learning disability because of the way thinking and reasoning is affected. Recognizing the presence of a disability is important so that students can obtain the appropriate level of support. This becomes more challenging for those with disabilities that are less visible.

In preschool, a disability may be recognized during speech development or if a child has trouble learning concepts involving numbers, the alphabet, days of the week, colors, and/or shapes. In elementary school, children struggling to grasp handwriting, reading out loud, or making and maintaining friends may indicate a learning disability. In high school, a disability may be recognized when a student avoids or has difficulty reading, writing, organizing their work, or concentrating.

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## Resources for Teachers and Parents

### BCCPAC Anti-bullying/ Violence

604-687-4433  
1-800-351-9834  
[www.bccpac.bc.ca](http://www.bccpac.bc.ca)

### BC Coalition for People with Disabilities

604-875-0188 or  
1-800-663-1278  
[www.bccpd.bc.ca](http://www.bccpd.bc.ca)

### BC Human Rights Coalition

604-660-6811  
1-800-663-0876  
[www.bchrcoalition.org](http://www.bchrcoalition.org)

### The Learning Disabilities Association of Canada

1-877-238-5322  
[www.ldac-acta.ca](http://www.ldac-acta.ca)

### BC Aboriginal Network on Disability Society

1-888-815-5511  
<http://www.bcands.bc.ca/>

## Centre for Public Safety and Criminal Justice Research

33844 King Road  
Abbotsford, BC  
V2S 7M8  
604 854-4553  
<http://cjr.ufv.ca>

## Are children with disabilities more vulnerable to bullying?

Children and young people who are challenged by a disability are more likely than their peers to become targets of bullying. This may result from a higher likelihood of suffering from low self-esteem, lacking social skills, or not having strong peer networks. They are also more likely to be targets of bullying because of their physical appearance or health-related impairments. The Office of the Children's Commissioner found that disabled children and those with visible medical conditions were twice as likely as their peers to be targets of bullying.

## What can teachers do to support children and youth with disabilities?

Transitional periods during the K-12 education process can bring added challenges for students with disabilities. Transition periods occur as students change grade levels, enter new school settings (with different rules, expectations and schedules), and meet new teachers and peers.

Students with disabilities in more inclusive settings tend to make greater developmental gains. Teachers can increase students' feelings of acceptance and inclusion by creating a supportive social environment within the classroom and by providing support as they:

- Work with families and other staff to bridge the students' previous environment into their new one;
- Assess the needs of the student and design relevant intervention plans;
- Express positive attitudes toward students;
- Recognize successes to acknowledge that they are a contributing member of the classroom; and
- Set similar expectations to the other students in the classroom.

Helping students with disabilities gain a sense of belonging greatly improves their ability to become socially integrated and involved in their schools and promotes positive interaction with other students.