

Survey: Bullies prey on autistic kids

By Laura Crimaldi | Friday, November 13, 2009 | <http://www.bostonherald.com> | [Local Coverage](#)

A shocking new online survey has found that nearly 90 percent of autistic children in the Bay State have been targeted by bullying so violent and ruthless that a state lawmaker says teachers and school systems must be held accountable.

The survey conducted by the Massachusetts Advocates for Children includes painful testimony from parents of autistic children who felt so tortured they stayed home from school for extended periods and even considered suicide.

"We were frankly shocked by the magnitude of the problem," said attorney Julia Landau, director of the Autism Special Education Legal Support Center at MAC. "It took our breath away."

About 400 Massachusetts parents responded to the online survey between Sept. 23 and Oct. 12. The survey was prepared as part of an effort to pass legislation requiring that autistic children be taught bullying coping tactics as part of their individual educational plans.

State Rep. Barbara A. L'Italien (D-Andover), who is sponsoring a bill to make teachers responsible for intervening when autistic children are bullied, said school systems have to be held accountable.

"The school systems are oftentimes not seeing it as part of their job," L'Italien said. "But if it were a kid who was blind and stumbling, they'd immediately address it."

A whopping 88 percent of parents who responded to the survey said their child was bullied. More than half of parents surveyed said their children were hit, kicked or chased. Nearly 40 percent of the children were bullied for more than a year, the survey results said.

On a more positive note, 68 percent of parents said the school district provided an "adequate" response to the problem. The survey, however, did not elaborate on the solutions offered.

Marie Nazzaro of Woburn said public school officials offered her son, Sean, 14, an out-of-district placement after the tormenting got so bad during his fourth-grade year that he confided an elaborate suicide plan to a school psychologist. The boy spent 10 days in outpatient treatment after that episode, his mother said.

"It was very heartbreaking," said Nazzaro, whose son has Asperger's syndrome.

On top of the bullying, Nazzaro said her son got caught in bad situations because his autism makes it hard for him to read social cues. In one incident, Sean hit his head on cement and vomited after charging a group of boys he thought were hurting some girls. It turned out the children were having a friendly shoving match, but Nazzaro said her son didn't realize that.

Dr. Elizabeth Caronna, who directs an autism center at Boston Medical Center, said social skills should be addressed because so many autistic children don't even know they're being bullied.

"The first thing is teaching a lot of these kids to identify when it's happening before it spins out of control," Caronna said. "It's such a big problem. It's so prevalent."

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