

Submission: Anti-Bullying Rapid Review

In June, InSpEd submitted a response to the Australian Government's Anti-Bullying Review as it relates to students with disability and other special education needs. It was noted that students with disability and those with poor academic performance are disproportionately affected by bullying, and this seems to be true in both inclusive and segregated settings (Rose et al., 2012). Some of these students may not recognise bullying and may have difficulty reporting bullying and communicating what has happened to them. They may, also, see others as intending harm or aggression when this is not the case and may respond aggressively to what they perceive as an attack. These same characteristics may limit their ability to form friendships and may make them over-dependent on adults (Rose et al.).

The focus of the submission was the lack of evidence-based anti-bullying interventions and programs for students with disability and the potential role of qualified special educators in developing suitable programs or making adjustments to programs designed for students without disability.

Causes of bullying of students with disability

- Bullying of students with disability may be related not only to their perceived 'difference' but also to their lack of communication and social skills, for example:
 - They may be passive in peer interactions. The lack of skills to be appropriately assertive, may mean that they misinterpret verbal and non-verbal communication and social cues, and may misinterpret more sophisticated language (such as humour and sarcasm).
- The same difficulties and lack of social skills for peer interaction that result in students with disability being victimised may also lead them to be bullies.

Changes needed:

- Limited research suggests that anti-violence and anti-bullying programs may be effective for students with disability but more research is needed (Eldred et al., 2025; Maxfield et al., 2023). What intervention research there is tends to treat all students with disability or special education needs as a group and does not take into account the needs of students with different disabilities.
- More work is needed to establish effective approaches to bullying for students with disability in both mainstream and segregated settings.
- In the absence of research-based interventions, there is a need for local adaptations and adjustments to programs to meet the individual needs of students with disability to be introduced and monitored.
- Existing programs for students with disability need to be researched and programs specifically designed for students with disability to be developed and trialled.
- Students with disability may need more frequent and intense instruction regarding bullying, more opportunities to practise appropriate responses (such as through role-plays and supervised interactions with others), and explicit instruction on how to recognise and report harassment and bullying to teachers or other adults.

The role of the special educator

Qualified special educators are trained to provide adjustments such as simplified language materials, visual supports, and augmentative and alternative communication. They can also coach regular teachers in effective methods of instruction to teach students to recognise and respond to bullying through explicit instruction, and guided practice with modelling. They can help to design school systems that

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make reporting of bullying accessible to students with disability and their families and are able to work collaboratively with families and other professionals.

The provision of at least one qualified special educator in every mainstream school would provide a valuable resource and support for regular educators and school leaders. Every student in a specialist setting should have a fully qualified specialist teacher. Their support roles should be fully acknowledged in any standards for anti-bullying policies and practices.

References

- Eldred, E., Devries, K., Zinke-Allmang, A., Mallick, R., Mughis, W., Banks, L. M., & Bhatia, A. (2025). Are school-based violence prevention interventions inclusive and effective for children with disabilities? A systematic review of global evidence. *EClinicalMedicine*, 80. Available at [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/eclinm/article/PIIS2589-5370\(24\)00639-4/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/eclinm/article/PIIS2589-5370(24)00639-4/fulltext)
- Maxfield, T., Park, E., & Blair, K. C. (2023). Synthesis of bullying interventions for individuals with disabilities: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Behavioral Education*, 32(3), 474-499. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10864-021-09466-x>
- Rose, C. A., Swearer, S. M., & Espelage, D. L. (2012). Bullying and students with disabilities: The untold narrative. *Focus on Exceptional Children*, 45(2), 1-10. <https://d1wqtxts1xzle7.cloudfront.net/32084753/2012>