



# THE ANTI BULLYING RESEARCH PROJECT

FINAL REPORT SUBMITTED TO THE NATIONAL DISABILITY  
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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

This report outlines a research project undertaken at the National Institute of Intellectual Disability, Trinity College Dublin which aimed to document the nature and extent of bullying of people with intellectual disability, and to explore the experiences of those who are bullied.

The research comprised three core elements:

(1) A review of literature to document the nature and extent of bullying of people with intellectual disability.

(2) A series of three focus groups with people with intellectual disability and key stakeholders to explore the experiences of those who are bullied.

(3) The development of an easy to read guide on bullying for people with intellectual disability. This report documents the first two elements of the research. The easy to read guide is a separate document which can be obtained from the National Institute for Intellectual Disability or the National Disability Authority.

The literature review was conducted via a search of peer-reviewed research databases available at Trinity College Dublin library. Of the 90 results which were returned, 20 were deemed relevant to the specific area of bullying and intellectual disability. These sources were then snowballed for additional references. The search is thus confined to peer-reviewed research and does not claim to be comprehensive of the broader literature. Findings from this search revealed a dearth of research examining the issue of bullying for people with intellectual disabilities. What literature does exist is fragmented but can be broadly classified as comprising large scale prevalence studies, typically undertaken in the UK; smaller scale inclusive projects, typically undertaken in Ireland; and a variety of educational studies conducted internationally which cover the experiences of children with a broad range of disabilities. The literature reveals that bullying for people with intellectual disabilities is a pervasive problem. Most people with intellectual disabilities report that they have experienced bullying, in a variety of locations, and with regularity. Bullying is variously defined, either as a self-report by study participants or by more objective methods. Verbal bullying is most prevalent, but incidents of physical assault and more indirect forms of bullying, such as ostracism and

exploitation are also common. Bullying of children with intellectual disability is highly prevalent in schools and extends to community based locations for both children and adults. Bullying of adults with intellectual disability in public places is a significant issue.

The reasons for bullying are complex and under-researched, however, the specific bullying of people because they have a disability and places the issue within a discriminatory framework. The impact of bullying on individuals with intellectual disabilities is cumulative and devastating. Victims become socially withdrawn and may be forced out of their own neighborhoods.

Despite this impact, the evidence base on prevention is extremely limited. What is apparent, however, is that the implementation of prevention policies is weak. This lack of implementation raises a deeper question as to the credibility those in authority give to individuals accounts of being bullied.

To explore these issues, focus groups and interviews were conducted with a small sample of people with intellectual disabilities and other stakeholders nationwide. Mindful of the limitations in generalising from this small sample, six key issues were raised;

**(1) Choice and Control:** People with intellectual disabilities referred not only to traditional verbal and physical types of bullying, but also referred to imposed restrictions on their lifestyle which they perceived as a form of bullying. Activities that their age-related peers engaged in routinely were not so easily undertaken by those with a disability who may rely on the support or authorisation of others.

**(2) Confrontation versus Avoidance:** People with intellectual disabilities presented mixed views on how to tackle the issue of bullying. Some victim advocated that individuals withdraw from the situation, while others recommended that people speak up for themselves. Responses from participants who did not have an intellectual disability focused on the importance of victims having someone they can go to if they are being bullied.

**(3) Defining Bullying:** People with intellectual disabilities tended to identify a wider range of behaviours as comprising bullying when compared to participants who did not have intellectual disability. Physical bullying, feelings

of being controlled, and of being disrespected, were higher on the agenda of those with intellectual disability.

**(4) Prevention:** Participants made few suggestions regarding prevention strategies. Accessible information was advocated to inform people with intellectual disabilities what they should, and could, do if they are being bullied. While those who did not have intellectual disability emphasised the need for victims to inform others if they are being bullied, participants with intellectual disability reported that where complaints are made, they are not always followed up appropriately.

**(5) Perpetrators of Bullying:** Participants with intellectual disabilities tended to describe attributes of perpetrators (e.g. nasty) rather than specific groups of perpetrators per se. Bullying among people with disabilities, teenagers, strangers and family members were various cited as perpetrators of bullying.

**(6) Disablist Bullying:** Participant's discussions of the types of bullying they had experienced made reference to being targeted because of their disability. Participants noted how a joking atmosphere could, either intentionally or not, become a bullying issue. Disablist bullying was identified as being perpetrated by both those with and without intellectual disability.

A number of recommendations based on these findings are presented to address these issues:

This study has found that bullying is an important priority for people with intellectual disabilities; albeit that this priority may not be shared by others.

**RECOMMENDATION** - greater awareness is needed that bullying is an important priority for people with intellectual disability - it is a topic which needs to be aired among those who provide support.

#### Choice & Control

This study has found that people with intellectual disability can live and work in more restrictive environments than their age-related peers; these environments, including day centres and residential settings, may promote a bullying culture.

**RECOMMENDATION** - those who support people with intellectual

disabilities should be made aware that restrictions placed on people with intellectual disabilities to exercise their right to choose and control are deemed a form of bullying.

**RECOMMENDATION** - training for those who support people with intellectual disabilities should emphasise a right based approach to exercising self-determination.

### Confrontation and Avoidance/Prevention

This study has found that people with intellectual disability would welcome strategies to deal with bullies. The study also found that people with intellectual disabilities are concerned that their complaints of being bullied are not acted upon.

**RECOMMENDATION** - people with intellectual disabilities should have access to training sessions to improve confidence and self-esteem, and teach them strategies to tackle bullies. Role play should be used within these training sessions.

**RECOMMENDATION** - anti-bullying policies must be provided in an accessible format to ensure people are supported to make a complaint.

**RECOMMENDATION** - where an individual confides in someone that they are being bullied, their complaint must be listened to and given credibility.

**RECOMMENDATION** - anti-bullying policies must be implemented in cases where a complaint is initiated.

### Defining Bullying

This study has found that bullying may be defined differently by different stakeholders; these different perspectives should not undermine the credibility of victims.

**RECOMMENDATION** - greater awareness is needed that what constitutes bullying by people with intellectual disabilities may not be universally agreed; this does not diminish the impact of the bullying.

## Perpetrators/Disablist Bullying

This study has found that adults with intellectual disabilities experience bullying by strangers in their communities.

**RECOMMENDATION** - public attitudes toward people with intellectual disabilities need to be regularly assessed.

**RECOMMENDATION** - positive perceptions of the abilities and contribution of people with intellectual disabilities need to be promoted.

**RECOMMENDATION** - bullying of people with intellectual disabilities needs to be classified as disablist and within a discriminatory framework.