



Key points:

- **Determine antecedents to behavior, function of bullying**
- **Increase supervision of student**
- **Examine environment for needed changes**

What to do when a student with a disability bullies

While students with disabilities often find themselves on the receiving end of bullying behavior, they can also be the perpetrators. OSERS and OSEP address this situation in the *Dear Colleague Letter* reported at [61 IDELR 263](#) by stating, "If the student who engaged in the bullying behavior is a student with a disability, the IEP Team should review the student's IEP to determine if additional supports and services are needed to address the inappropriate behavior."

"The most important thing when there's a bullying [or] harassment issue related to a student with a disability is to immediately have a meeting of the IEP team or 504 team," said Helen S. Carroll, a school attorney at [Roetzel & Andress](#) in Akron, Ohio.

In the meeting, you might consider whether to:

Conduct a functional behavioral assessment. Even if you aren't going through a formal [FBA](#) or developing a [behavioral intervention plan](#), ask the same types of questions to determine what the antecedents to the bullying behavior are and what the function of the bullying is for the student, said Timothy M. Mahoney, a school attorney at [Frazer & Feldman LLP](#) in New York.

Once you know these, then you can teach replacement behaviors and develop goals to teach the student to interact appropriately with peers. You may also recommend counseling to address self-esteem; self-awareness for confidence; and improved social skills in sharing, taking turns, thinking before acting, and appropriate assertiveness, if needed. "A lot of this depends on the age of the student and the severity of their disability," Mahoney said.

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❑ **Assign a shadow aide and a safe harbor.** Increase supervision of the student to ensure that the conduct is not ongoing, Carroll said.

Assign a shadow aide to the bullying student, Mahoney said. This person is an extra set of eyes to make sure that the recommendations of the IEP team are implemented and can intervene if the bullying behavior continues to happen.

"I think the value of having that shadow aide is [that the aide is] also someone who, when not intervening, can watch the student's interactions with his peers and make sure they seem to be working out well," Mahoney said.

Additionally, victims of bullying are often given a safe harbor, a point person who checks in on them. "I think the same function would be beneficial to the aggressor," Mahoney said. That person would also take the lead in explaining to the student everything that will be happening in relation to the incident.

❑ **Provide more structure in routines and supervision.** "The IEP Team and other school personnel should consider examining the environment in which the bullying occurred to determine if changes to the environment are warranted," said OSERS and OSEP in the *Dear Colleague Letter*.

Identify certain places that are less supervised, such as the locker room or bathroom, and make recommendations about how to change the student's schedule to remove opportunities for bullying to occur, Mahoney said.

Additionally, look at less structured periods during the school day, such as lunch or recess; or extracurricular activities, such as sports or clubs. In the management section of the student's IEP, make recommendations to provide for structured routines during those periods, Mahoney said.

❑ **Involve the student's parents.** Speak with the student's family to get them to reinforce the school's efforts to address the student's behaviors, Mahoney said. Document it on the IEP as a behavioral consultation or school/parent consultation. Establish biweekly or monthly 15-minute phone calls where you focus on this specific issue. "Don't talk about other special ed concerns," he said. Depending on the age of the student, it might be valuable for him to be involved in the conversation.

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□ **Separate students only as a last resort.** Try a behavioral approach first, Mahoney said. Add or increase counseling, amend goals, and add management support or other program modifications to address the bullying, he suggested.

"If you've shown there's no other option available and gone through less restrictive steps, then maybe a change is warranted," Mahoney said. Change the aggressor's program instead of the victim's, if it seems to doubly victimize the victim at that point, he said.

[Florence Simmons](#) covers Section 504, paraprofessionals, and transportation for LRP Publications.

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