



## **Psst: Follow these tips when parents base bullying concerns on hearsay**

The parent of a child with a disability says she worries her child will be bullied in your district's proposed placement. Her fears, however, are based on hearsay. Do your IEP teams know how to respond?

They should, sources say, because these situations are becoming more common.

In *J.E. v. Boyertown Area School District*, [56 IDELR 38](#) (E.D. Pa. 2011), for example, a mother feared her son with [Asperger syndrome](#) and social skills deficits would face bullying if he were placed in public school. This was not enough to garner her public funding for a private placement.

The District Court held that the Pennsylvania district's offer to place the student in a small autistic support class in a large public high school was reasonably calculated to confer benefit. That the parent had heard students discussing bullying was an insufficient basis for establishing that her son would be bullied.

Moreover, if bullying did occur, the autistic support program was equipped to address it. The student "may face bullying, but a [fair appropriate public education](#) does not require that the District be able to prove that a student will not face future bullying at a placement, as this is impossible," the judge wrote.

Cases like these are on the rise, says Anne H. Littlefield, a school attorney at [Shipman & Goodwin LLP](#) in Hartford, Conn. "I am seeing more parents who are concerned about possible or future bullying, even when there might not be a history of bullying," she says.

The buzz around bullying on the news and in parent communities is fueling these concerns and pushing more parents to seek private placements, sources say.

Here's what your IEP teams can do in these situations:

**1. Dispel myths about placement.** When a parent's concern is based on hearsay, the first thing you need to do is provide information about the placement, says Bondy Shay Gibson, executive director of exceptional education for [Henrico County \(Va.\) Public Schools](#). "Parents sometimes think that a school isn't a good school if they don't like the neighborhood that it's in or they heard a rumor about a fight," she says. If possible, give parents data about the placement, such as achievement data, HQT counts, and the number of reported bullying incidents. Some states already require public schools to track the number of bullying incidents, Littlefield says. In Connecticut, districts are required to maintain a log of verified incidences of bullying, which is available to parents and the public. Parents may be pleasantly surprised to learn that the number is lower than they thought, she says.

Often, parents oppose a placement before visiting it, Gibson says. Offer to take them on a tour of the proposed placement so that they can see it for themselves and form their own opinion, she says. "Tell them that, before they make up their mind, you would like for them to go to the school and take a look around," she says. You can also arrange for them to meet with staff and administrators. "I always encourage parents to ask questions. If they are not comfortable with a placement, they might share that frustration with the child, which can then make the child uncomfortable and hinder their success," Gibson says.

You can also ask the parents if they want to talk to other parents about their experience at the proposed program or school, Gibson says. "If they are open to that, you can ask parents of other students with disabilities if they would give that parent a call. Parents are usually more than happy to do that," she says.



**2. Highlight anti-bullying programs.** While it generally is not an IEP team responsibility to investigate bullying complaints, team members should have an understanding of the district's anti-bullying initiatives, sources say. "Staff should be able to discuss the district's anti-bullying programs when a parent raises concerns about bullying," Littlefield says. While it would be unrealistic to promise that bullying never takes place at school, it is important to share with parents the intervention and prevention measures in place to address bullying should it occur. Inform the parent of programs that exist within the district or school that her child may attend and share any brochures or materials on the programs. Let the parent know which administrator is in charge of investigating bullying complaints and even offer to set up a meeting with that person, Littlefield says. This shows parents that you take their concerns seriously and that district staff members are prepared to address them. "It will also prevent the parent from later claiming that she was never told about how to file a bullying complaint or take her concerns to a particular administrator," Littlefield says.

**3. Address child's social skills deficits.** A student's social skills deficits may add to a parent's fears about bullying, Littlefield says. Let the parent know that you take social skills instruction seriously and will discuss [goals](#) and services to help the student build social skills. You can consider services to help the child learn social pragmatics and understand social cues, she says. Also, explain how the services will help the child. "If you propose having the child participate in a social skills group, break down what that group does," Littlefield says. For example, the child may practice social conversations, read social stories, and role play. Informing parents about social skills instruction can help offset their fears, which may not be based on any particular evidence, Littlefield says.

Also, addressing the child's social skills deficits in the IEP will show a hearing officer that you are taking preventative steps to protect the child from potential bullying by teaching the child appropriate social skills, including responses to negative social interactions, Littlefield says. For example, in the *Boyertown* case, the court acknowledged that the proposed program addressed the student's needs by providing social skills instruction and role-playing activities and was calculated to confer benefit.

**4. Discuss benefits of inclusion.** Parents of students with social skills deficits sometimes reject a public school placement because they want their child to learn alongside children with similar issues, Littlefield says. "They may think that their child will be more protected in a segregated setting. But separating students may actually be doing them an injustice, because children may have little to no opportunities for peer modeling and other important social interactions with general education students," she says.

In these situations, discuss the [LRE requirement](#) with parents and the benefits of having access to nondisabled peers. "It's hard to teach a child proper social skills when there are no nondisabled peers around to demonstrate appropriate social conduct," Littlefield says. This, in turn, may make it more difficult for the child to transition into adulthood. "Society is made up of people with and without disabilities. So you want to give the child opportunities to interact with their disabled and nondisabled peers as much as possible," Littlefield says.

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