

Autism Advocacy: Addressing Bullying in the Workplace

Purpose:

Autistic employees may face bullying or harassment from coworkers, supervisors, or clients. This handout provides strategies to recognize workplace bullying, respond safely, and advocate for inclusive professional environments.

Remember:

Workplace bullying is not “just part of the job.” Advocacy means ensuring autistic employees are respected, supported, and empowered to thrive.

Key takeaway: Bullying isn’t always obvious. It can be subtle, systemic, and disguised as “normal workplace behavior.” Recognizing both overt and hidden forms is the first step to stopping them.

Recognizing Bullying Behaviors in the Workplace

Bullying can be **overt** (easy to spot) or **hidden** (subtle but harmful). Both forms undermine safety, dignity, and inclusion for autistic employees. Here’s what to watch for:

Overt Bullying

- **Repeated teasing or name-calling** — persistent use of hurtful nicknames or mocking language.
- **Mimicking autistic traits** — copying speech patterns, stimming, or movements in a mocking way.
- **Deliberate exclusion** — leaving someone out of meetings, projects, or social events.
- **Threats or intimidation** — verbal aggression, blocking movement, or using physical presence to scare.
- **Denying accommodations** — refusing sensory breaks, communication aids, or flexible schedules.
- **Using autism as a joke or insult** — casual remarks like “You’re so autistic” or stereotypes framed as humor.

Hidden Bullying

- **Gaslighting** — making someone doubt their experiences (“You’re imagining it,” “That didn’t happen”).
- **Microaggressions** — dismissive comments (“Everyone’s a little autistic”) or invalidating identity (“You don’t look autistic”).
- **Passive-aggressive exclusion** — repeatedly “forgetting” to invite someone to events or meetings.
- **Mocking accommodations** — eye-rolling or sighing when supports are requested, framing them as unfair.
- **Withholding information** — not sharing key details, then blaming mistakes on the autistic employee.
- **Non-verbal intimidation** — hostile glares, smirks, or exaggerated sighs meant to unsettle.
- **“Joking” at someone’s expense** — disguising harassment as humor, repeated over time.

Understanding the Impact

- Bullying can cause stress, anxiety, burnout, or withdrawal from workplace participation.
- Autistic employees may struggle to interpret subtle hostility or sarcasm.
- Productivity and career growth are harmed when bullying goes unchecked.

Responding Safely

- **Document everything:** Keep records of incidents (emails, dates, witnesses).
- **Use clear communication:** “That behavior is inappropriate,” “I need this accommodation respected.”
- **Seek allies:** Identify supportive coworkers or managers.
- **Report formally:** Use HR channels, union representatives, or workplace grievance procedures.

- **Know your rights:** Workplace laws protect against harassment and discrimination.

Advocacy Actions

- Encourage autism awareness training for all staff.
- Promote inclusive policies (reasonable accommodations, flexible communication styles).
- Support employee resource groups for neurodiverse staff.
- Push for accountability: clear anti-bullying policies and enforcement.
- Celebrate neurodiversity in workplace culture.

Checklist: If Workplace Bullying Happens

- Write down what happened (time, place, people involved).
- Save evidence (emails, texts, notes).
- Report to HR or supervisor.
- Request accommodations or mediation.
- Follow up to ensure action is taken.
- Seek external support (legal aid, advocacy groups) if necessary.