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Promoting safety at school for students with cognitive disability: for adults working in the education sector

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Promoting safety at school for students with cognitive disability

For adults working in the education sector

Students with cognitive disability experience higher rates of abuse, neglect and exploitation than students without disability. Previously, little has been known about what students, their families and other key supporters such as teachers, disability and child protection workers think about personal safety in and around school, or about their perspectives on what would make things better.

In a project conducted in 2013-14, research with students, families and key education and support professionals was supplemented by an extensive analysis of law and policy in this area. The experiences of students and reflections of those who support them provide new insights into the strengths, barriers and possibilities for change in the education, legal and policy arenas.

WHAT DID THE RESEARCH FIND?

In the research, a discord emerged between students' experiences of harm, the responses provided by education providers, and the systemic structures they found available to support resolution of their abuse. The rights of students with cognitive disability to be safe at school were in many cases not upheld, or not upheld without vigorous advocacy.

Children and young people and their families told us about many different forms of harm and the ways in which this abuse impaired their school lives:

- **Being harassed and bullied, physically assaulted, threatened and humiliated were ongoing and chronic forms of harm for some children and young people.**
- **Young people described a climate of fear at points in their lives due to the behaviour of other students, a lack of protection by adults, abuse and lack of safety on the bus, and feeling unsafe around the behaviour of staff or transport workers.**
- **Resolving these situations was frequently difficult, and both students and their families talked about many instances where schools were unresponsive to their requests for help, complaints and attempts to resolve interpersonal harm.**

In some cases, young people and families felt that schools responded well when they experienced harm. On these occasions:

- Teachers were proactive, they believed students, listened and took action to sort things out quickly.
- Families were treated seriously and courteously, and kept informed about progress.
- School leaders showed strong personal commitment to the safety of students and to resolving breaches of all students' rights to safety and to dealing with harassment, bullying, abuse and violence.
- This gave children and young people confidence that they could continue at school, that they could deal with future problems, and that their problems were seen as significant and important.

For educators and child and disability support workers, significant tensions were expressed:

- Teachers had strong personal commitment to student's rights, but some also had difficulty in managing increasing complexity in students (particularly in mainstream schools).
- Educators felt that expectations of teachers in mainstream classrooms were increasing, at the same time as support resources were decreasing.
- A lack of systematic support for students was perceived, and consequent harms evolved as their behaviour escalated through frustration or boredom.
- Absent or weak leadership in schools was seen to make it more difficult for students and families to have harm addressed.

WHAT HELPS?

To be safe at school, students with cognitive disability said they need:

A foundation of trust and respect in relationships:

- To have someone at school who knows them and likes them. This really helps in feeling confident that they can tell someone when there are problems at school or home and will be believed.
- To be listened to and taken seriously when they describe feeling unsafe with students, staff or other people.



Protection:

- Responding to harassment quickly, to stop it escalating.
- Meaningful intervention by teachers to bullying and physical assault.
- Some protection around bullying, harassing or abusive behaviour of other students when a teacher is not present.

Practical assistance and education:

- Good advice about how to deal with the problem - not to be told to turn the other cheek.
- Strategies (a 'tool kit') for dealing with problems caused by harm; getting to the bottom of problems; and coping with problems.
- Education in how to respond to unsafe situations.

Families, teachers and child and disability support workers said students need:

To be part of a whole-school approach to safety

- A safe school culture, where diversity is acknowledged and respected, and the capability and contribution of students with cognitive disability is promoted in the school community.
- Policy put into practice - available, understandable and living.

To have adults they can rely on:

- Teachers and other staff in schools who build the confidence, resilience and capability of students in multiple ways, which helps them if they need to report negative experiences or harm.
- Proactive support which pre-empts unsafe situations and promotes a safe culture and environment.
- Willingness to work in the interests of students with cognitive disability, to be 'in their corner' if they feel unsafe or experience harm.

To be able to work openly when harm occurs:

- Responsiveness and openness when problems arise, and a willingness to work with families.



System-level change to promote the safety of students with cognitive disability

Better connecting education, disability and child protection at legal and policy points will improve rights information and access for students with cognitive disability who experience harm in and around school.

FOR FUTURE ACTION:

- Increase awareness of the well-established evidence that children and young people with disability are at significantly increased risk of abuse, and the legal and policy preventions and remedies available to them.
- Bring together policies into a coherent whole, and ensure that everyone working in schools is aware of how to put them into practice.
- Support and guidance for teachers in mainstream classrooms to increase capacity to support a diverse student group.
- Support and guidance for students with cognitive disability in the playground to build relationships and social skills through play and shared activities.
- Access to therapeutic support for students who have experienced harm, particularly those recovering from complex trauma.
- Access to support and training for bus drivers and bus companies to provide skills to bus drivers in supporting students with additional needs, and for bus companies to enforce codes of conduct.

USEFUL RESOURCES

Safe Schools Hub: <http://www.safeschoolshub.edu.au/>

Kidsmatter – Australian Primary Schools Mental Health Initiative: <http://www.kidsmatter.edu.au/primary/resources-schools>

Anti-bullying Alliance (UK): bullying involving children with special educational needs
<http://www.anti-bullyingalliance.org.uk/media/7482/sen-and-disabilities.pdf>

Circle Solutions Network: http://www.circlesolutionsnetwork.com/?page_id=202

Abilitypath – walk a mile in their shoes:

<http://www.abilitypath.org/areas-of-development/learning--schools/bullying/articles/walk-a-mile-in-their-shoes.pdf>