ACD

Submission: Anti-Bullying Rapid Review

June 2025

Background

ACD is the Victorian advocacy service for children with disability and their families. We are a not-for-profit organisation led by, and for, families of children with disability.

Through our work we reach thousands of Victorian families raising children with disability each year. Their experiences inform our systemic advocacy.

ACD thank the Department of Education and the Co-Chairs for the opportunity to contribute to the Anti-Bullying Rapid Review.

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Executive Summary

Students with disability are more likely to experience bullying in education settings. Families also report significant challenges in getting schools to acknowledge their concerns and take effective action.

Despite these issues, there is no coordinated national approach or consistent strategy to prevent and respond to bullying of students with disability. Universal anti-bullying programs often fail to reflect the specific needs and experiences of students with disability. There is also a clear lack of targeted interventions that address disability-based bullying.

Families highlight the importance of changing attitudes towards disability and promoting respect and inclusion from a young age

To understand the distinct experiences of students with disability and their families and the systemic failures that contribute to bullying and inadequate responses, ACD urges the Co-Chairs to draw on the extensive work and findings of the Disability Royal Commission.

Student and family voice should also be central to developing national consistent national standard to address bullying.

Recommendations

1. The Co-Chairs draw on the extensive work and findings of the Disability Royal Commission to understand and incorporate the needs of students with disability in the review, and address underlying factors contributing of high rates bullying, violence and harassment

2. Include whole-school approaches to changing attitudes towards disability and promoting understanding of difference from a young age, as a key element of a consistent national standard to address bullying

3. Embed student and family voice and draw on existing co-designed work in designing and evaluating anti-bullying interventions to ensure strategies and resources are meaningful and effective

Addressing bullying of students with disability in education

Every student should feel welcome, included, and safe in education settings and among their peers. However, for many students with disability, this is not the reality.

Students with disability experience disproportionately high rates of bullying. Although school data collection remains limited, a recent national education survey[1] by Children and Young People with Disability Australia found that 75% of young respondents with disability reported being bullied at school.

At ACD, we hear regularly from families about the profound emotional, social, and educational toll that bullying takes on students with disability. Families also report significant challenges in getting schools to acknowledge their concerns and take effective action.

"We found [our child] in the corner eating by themselves. Then we found out with some investigation [the school] had not allowed them to eat with their fellow students because they were eating too messily and so they were extracted."[2]

"[Our child] feels lonely because we're putting the burden on the kids to be social with him. They're all neurotypical and don't see why they need to make an effort to be friends with a kid to who has some difficulties."

Despite these issues, there is no coordinated national approach or consistent strategy to prevent and respond to bullying of students with disability. Universal anti-bullying programs often fail to reflect the specific needs and experiences of students with disability. There is also a clear lack of targeted interventions that address disability-based bullying.

For example, the *Bullying. No Way!* website, funded by the Australian Government Department of Education in partnership with state and territory departments, contains minimal reference to disability. It offers few disability-specific resources for students, families, and educators, and lacks accessible materials, such as Easy Read resources.

ACD urges the Anti-Bullying Rapid Review Co-Chairs to consider:

- The extensive work of the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability (Disability Royal Commission) in examining student and family experiences and identifying contributing systemic factors
- The need to change attitudes about disability
- The importance of embedding student and family voice in the design and evaluation of anti-bullying interventions.

[1] Children and Young People with Disability Australia. (2025). 2024-2025 CYDA Youth education survey. Available at CYDA-Education-survey-summary.pdf

[2] Quotes in this submission are from families of children with disability who participated in recent ACD community consultations

Insights from the Disability Royal Commission

Over several years, the Disability Royal Commission conducted in-depth research, public hearings, and consultations with students, families, and educators. Its work represents the most comprehensive national examination of the exclusion and mistreatment of people with disability.

ACD urges the Co-Chairs to draw on this landmark body of work to better understand the experiences of students with disability and their families in education settings, and the systemic failures in effectively responding to incidences of bullying and students' concerns and needs.

Key reports particularly relevant to this review include:

- **Report - Public hearing 7 - Barriers experienced by students with disability in accessing and obtaining a safe, quality and inclusive school education and consequent life course impacts** (2021)
- **Final Report - Volume 7, Inclusive education, employment and housing** (2023)

These reports also highlight several interrelated factors contributing to the high rates of bullying, violence, and harassment experienced by students with disability, including:

- Negative attitudes and poor community awareness about disability
- Inadequate workforce training in disability inclusion
- Lack of full inclusion and participation in school communities, reducing opportunities for peer connection and belonging
- Students and families not feeling heard and being excluded from decision-making processes
- Barriers to lodging complaints, and slow or ineffective responses when they are made
- Inconsistent data collection on bullying incidents and complaints

Education settings have a unique opportunity to foster understanding and respect for difference

ACD supports whole-school initiatives that promote inclusion, diversity and respectful relationships as a proactive way to prevent bullying. Misconceptions, stigma, and negative attitudes about disability are key contributors to exclusion in both school and community contexts.

Families frequently tell us that schools and early learning settings have a unique opportunity to foster understanding and respect for difference from a young age. Changing attitudes towards disability must be a core element of effective bullying prevention.

"The disability inclusion mindset comes right from the top down from the principal and the assistant principal."

This work also aligns with state, territory and federal joint responsibilities and commitments under Australia's Disability Strategy 2021–2031, particularly within the *Education and Learning* and *Community Attitudes* outcome areas.

Meaningful student and family voice

To reflect diverse experiences and need, a consistent national standard for responding to bullying and its underlying causes in school contexts must centre the voices of students with disability and their families.

While more research and work is needed to design and evaluate large-scale anti-bullying interventions that reflect and support the needs of students with disability, a promising recent example is the ***What works to prevent bullying for autistic school students?*** co-design project, funded by the former Australian Government Department of Health and Aged Care.

This project identified key supports that help students feel safe and included, such as:

- Friendships with peers who understand and respect neurodiversity
- Positive relationships with teachers and school staff
- Access to trusted adults who listen and act
- Strategies students can use when situations are challenging
- Access to quiet spaces for learning, support, and regulation

These insights provide a valuable model for how guidance can be shaped with and by students and their families to ensure they are meaningful.