

# The International Journal for Direct Support Professionals

## Disability As It Exists in a Culture of Bullying and Social Violence: What Direct Support Professionals Can Do To Help

By: Wendy Knowlton

“All I remember about middle school is the bullies.”

“Oh yeah, I remember those days!”

This was a conversation I heard one day while working with people who have Intellectual Disabilities. Variations of this theme are heard daily with the people we support. And while most of us leave the bullies back in junior high or high school, this group of people in our community live with fear daily that they will be called out just for being who they are.

Professionals who work with this population think of trauma, and we immediately think of physical and/or sexual abuse. We have images of institutions and the control imposed on those who lived there (and still may live there). But there is another form of trauma that is often overlooked: being harassed for simply being you.

Many of us were bullied in our youth. I was ridiculed for having curly hair and rough skin that they called “chicken skin.” It was traumatic at the time, and I wore long sleeves, long pants, and my hair in pony tails to reduce the evidence. The important difference was that I knew it was temporary. I knew I could work hard, be successful in school, and get out of that small town. I still think about those bullies from time to time and it still stings, but it no longer feels fresh.

I decided to pursue the conversation I had overheard further, and I started asking people I know with Intellectual Disabilities what bullying was – getting them to define it. I had answers that included:

“It’s when someone calls you names.”

“It’s if someone makes fun of you.”

“It’s when someone pushes you or shoves you.”

These are all good answers. Then I asked, “Have you been bullied?” Every single person I talked to (about 20 people) said, without hesitation, “Yes.” Not only had they been bullied, they still lived in fear of being bullied.

The people I support daily are still living in fear of bullies. They walk down the street, and people may call them names simply because of the way they communicate, the way they move, or the way they look.

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They go into stores and are not served because the cashier assumes they cannot pay for something independently. Their voices are lost in the waves of well-meaning advocates who speak for them instead of helping them express their views. They watch a movie and the ‘R’-word comes out of nowhere. They read a book and the supporting character who has a mobility issue, a speech impediment, or an Intellectual Disability is labelled a “moron,” or a “buffoon,” and may be used for comedic relief. Worse, they don’t find characters that look, or act, or sound like them at all! It’s like they don’t exist in popular culture. The general public also uses that horrible ‘R’-word in casual conversation when they mean something is stupid or ridiculous, not realizing the impact it has on people who are living in the community all around them.

As a professional, my job is to foster the confidence of those I am supporting and inspire new self-esteem. Recognizing that this bullying culture exists, I come to work every day trying to keep these things in mind:

### **Words hurt**

In order to keep things moving smoothly, sometimes we may try to smooth over or ignore when someone has their feelings hurt. We may say, “Oh, they didn’t mean it,” or “They were just teasing.” We all have things about which we are more sensitive, and those things are just off limits. As adults, we can express that we don’t like it. That is our right. Ensure those you support have the same ability and rights. The other day, I was trying to tease someone to get them back into a receptive mood. She told me she wasn’t in the mood for teasing. I respected that and backed off, apologizing. Respect boundaries and support people to express those boundaries to others.

### **Words can help**

I try to take every opportunity to boost self-esteem and confidence with the people I support, as well as coworkers. Offer gratitude when it is due and compliments when they are genuine. Be specific in your comments. Instead of saying, “Good job,” try saying, “I really liked your point about... It made a lot of sense to me.” I heard a client say to one of her co-workers, “Good job, Buddy,” and it was like she was praising a child. My first thought was, “Oh, no! Do I sound like that?” Chances are, she heard it from staff and is using our words and tone. That’s a red flag! Keep the compliments and encouragement mature and honest.

### **Discuss it**

You’re at a movie with someone you are supporting and \*bam\* the ‘R’-word is thrown out there. What do you do? Do you hope that the person you are with didn’t hear it or take it in? Of course they heard it and took it in. Ignoring the issue just makes it okay that it happened. After the movie, go out for a coffee and be open to talking about it. If you have been bullied in the past, you know that your embarrassment over what they said is a big part of what gives bullies the power against you. Don’t let the person you are with think you found it okay that it is a normal part of society. It is not okay! Support them to talk about it if they want to.

### **Be an advocate for action**

Explore how the individual being bullied would like to advocate for themselves and assist them in making it happen. I once assisted a group of women to write a letter to their local politician, stating how government policies around disability make their lives as women more complicated and difficult. It was empowering for them and an amazing moment where they felt they were fighting back. Did it make huge changes? Not really on a policy level, but it made the women feel they were doing something to make a change and that is huge. It gave them back a feeling of power.

### **Make a safe place**

Ensure that the environment where you work is a safe place. Remember that bullying is not just name calling. It can also include laughing at someone when they are learning a skill, continuing to tease when someone asks you to stop, and talking about others behind their backs. Keep the work place professional and don't allow gossip. The ultimate goal is to have places where people feel they belong, and they are safe from hurtful actions and words.

### **Support people can also be bullies**

Bullying is all about power. People bully when they feel they have the authority and backing to hurt someone. If you think back to the bullies in school, they tended to be the “cool kids” who felt superior in their social standing. So what happens when someone's support person/caregiver/staff feels they are one of the “cool kids” and bully those they are supporting? The acceptance and feeling of belonging can extend to staff that did not experience that growing up and it can be a heady experience. Suddenly, they have people's attention, and they have some authority. Let's face it – it's nice to have people like you, to look to you for your approval. It is all too easy to abuse that power.

A staff who bullies might include talking about the person with an Intellectual Disability in front of them. “Betty should know better than to do that, shouldn't you, Betty.” It might include embarrassing someone in front of their peers by making an example out of their mistakes. “Oh, Betty, you really messed up that job, didn't she everyone?” It might be excluding or threatening to exclude certain individuals because the support person has favourites. “I'm having a dinner party this weekend with some of the clients. Sorry, Betty, I already planned it.” This tactic is especially troubling because support people are supposed to be, well, supportive. If someone is being bullied by their support people, where can they turn for help? If you see this kind of behaviour, call it what it is: bullying. Follow your organization's policies on workplace violence and bullying and make sure a supervisor is aware of it.

### **Trauma is serious**

One of my instructors in college once said, “You are support people. You are not licensed therapists. Don't open a topic box if you can't put the lid back on.” This was good advice. People train for many years to specialize in trauma. As direct support professionals, we empathize, we validate and, when necessary, we refer to specialists. Don't open a trauma box if you can't help put the lid back on.

## **Share the good stuff**

If you come across a movie or book with an engaging character that has a disability, share that with others! We know it's important to identify with characters we see in movies, on television, and in books so celebrate the good stuff! Talk about it and share it around!

## **Dance until others join in**

I realized in a dramatic way that self-confidence sets people apart as several young women started attending the vocational centre where I work. They come dancing (literally) into the work place, intent on taking the world by storm. They wear t-shirts that showcase the pride they take in who they are, and the diagnosis they carry with them. They have confidence and spirit and are not afraid to try and fail, and then try again. They know what they want, and they want it now! It was so refreshing – and that is sad.

In conclusion, I think that we have all had moments in our lives when we have been bullied. It is horrible and can be traumatic. Even comments that were made when we were in middle school can stay with us and affect our lives as we age. People with Intellectual Disabilities can continue to experience bullying simply for being who they are. It can happen through peers, the public, the media, popular culture, and even by support people. As a direct support professional, I am aware that a large part of my job is to promote confidence in people and inspire a feeling of belonging for everyone. So I keep encouraging the dancers to dance. I believe that, if you join in the dance, others will also join. At least in that space, in that moment, it is a safe place to express your true self with no bullying!

## **About the author**

Wendy Knowlton is a Direct Support Professional in Nova Scotia. She has worked in the field for seven years after a long career in non-profits. She has a Bachelor of Arts degree in Sociology and a Human Services diploma.

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