Bullying of Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in Missouri (Ages 13-21): Perceptions, Impacts, and Implications - A Mixed-Methods Study

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NOTE: This report is written in 16-point font, in accordance with accessibility guidelines for the neurodiverse.

Abstract:

This study examines the prevalence of bullying among students with autism in Missouri's educational institutions. The primary objective of this research is to investigate the challenges encountered by students with autism during their middle school and high school tenures. This investigation delves into the perspectives of both the affected students and their guardians, assessing the role that educational institutions play in either perpetuating bullying or in the implementation of anti-bullying initiatives and supportive measures.

While lawmakers have good intentions in the laws they pass to protect and support youth with autism, too often there is a gap between the spirit of the laws and the implementation at the district level. This study finds there is a perceived lack of school support for students and their parents.

A mixed-methods design was used in this study. Data was collected through semi-structured discussions with 7 teenage participants with Autism Spectrum Disorder from Missouri, and a structured survey was distributed to students ages 13-21 with Autism Spectrum Disorder and their parents. As of the time of this report, 7 teenagers and 12 parents had responded, though survey collection is ongoing. Participants were

recruited through the Freddie Ford Foundation, and a request for participation through email distribution with the MoDCC Partners in Policymaking Program Distribution List and the St. Louis ARC.

Despite the inherent limitations due to a statistically limited sample size, this study illuminates a pronounced prevalence of perceived bullying among students and an apparent deficiency in support from both peers and school personnel. The research further revealed that students experience a notable lack of peer solidarity, compounded by perceived institutional neglect. These perceptions have dire consequences, including reduced attendance stemming from safety apprehensions and perceived non-compliance with state-mandated anti-bullying guidelines. Given these insights, the research emphasizes the urgent necessity for enhanced procedural and training mechanisms to safeguard Missouri's students with ASD from bullying. The study culminates with actionable recommendations: rigorous oversight, comprehensive training for both students and personnel, increased staff accountability, and fortified strategies to diminish student isolation, thereby fostering inclusion and minimizing opportunities for bullying incidents.

Keywords: Autism; High-Functioning Autism (HF-Autism, HF-ASD); Bullying; School Bullying; Bullying Victimization; Anxiety; Depression; School Refusal; Victimization; Risk factors; Interventions; Missouri

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To the teens and their parents in the Freddie Ford Foundation's Teen Program, thank you for sharing your lived experiences. You are important. Your perspectives are invaluable and by sharing them, you will help others have a better, safer school experience in the future. For that and the work you've put into creating resources to accompany this study, I hope you are proud of what you have accomplished. I certainly am proud of each of you. To Jack, Emma, Elliot, Hayden, Luke, Charles, and Henry - thank you for your participation in providing valuable feedback and co-creating the support resources found in the appendix that, as Elliot shared, is aimed at helping others "in the *now"* and in years to come.

To my family, thank you once again for your patience; allowing me the grace and time to focus on defining this study, to research and create this body of work. Between this, work, and my Masters Dissertation, I know there hasn't been much free time in the last two years. Looking forward to more game nights and more fun times together with you in the near future.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the Research

Bullying remains a deeply entrenched concern in educational settings across the United States. Reported rates of peer victimization vary widely, with averages of 19% for girls and an even higher 28% for boys (Due et al., 2005). Alarmingly, these statistics amplify for children with unique mental health challenges, encompassing those with linguistic issues, chronic illnesses, internalizing problems, learning disabilities, and concurrent psychiatric conditions (Van Cleave & Davis, 2006). Particularly susceptible are children grappling with behavioral, emotional, or developmental concerns. Within this context, students with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) emerge as especially vulnerable. They face peer victimization rates ranging from 30 to 75% due to their distinct social challenges and limited peer interactions (Van Roekel et al., 2010). Furthermore, a startling 26% of children with ASD have been identified as perpetrators of bullying (Van Roekel et al., 2010).

Individuals diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) often exhibit challenges in social communication (Frith, 2008). Some scholars posit that these communication challenges originate from deficits in

social attention, which may be fundamental to the disorder (Mundy & Newell, 2007). Conversely, others posit that these individuals simply find social stimuli less engaging, leading to diminished pursuit of social interactions (Fletcher-Watson, Leekam, & Findlay, 2013). Interestingly, a segment of children with ASD has shown genuine interest in social interactions and a motivation to engage with peers (Wing & Gould, 1979).

1.2 Research Rationale

Recognizing these nuanced distinctions among those with ASD becomes crucial when addressing bullying behavior. This is underscored by evidence suggesting that the cultivation of meaningful peer relationships can significantly deter peer victimization (Rowley et al., 2012). Hence, children with ASD who actively seek and nurture peer relationships might be less susceptible to bullying as they experience more inclusive and supportive environments.

1.3 Research Aims, Objectives, and Research Questions

This thesis aims to explore the prevalence of bullying behavior, along with student and parent perceptions, impacts and implications of bullying behaivor among Missouri students ages 13 - 21 with ASD. Specifically, the research will examine the frequency of bullying behavior faced by students, their perception of the cause(s) of that behavior, the process that is followed when bullying occurs, the support they receive from the school (or lack thereof) and the impact that has on the student and their family. Additionally, this research aims to outline considerations and what has worked with existing employers in an effort to streamline the change process for school districts and lawmakers. As a final objective, this research will serve as both an outline for the existing literature gap and a resource to help bridge that gap by providing perspectives of students with Autism and their lived experiences on bullying and anti-bullying behavior.

To achieve these aims, the following objectives were outlined and focused on throughout the research process:

1. Understand the existing commitments from lawmakers and educators relating to addressing bullying with students with autism.
2. Identify the challenges students with autism ages 13-21 face with social integration and bullying in the education setting.
3. Identify the parents' of students with autism ages 13-21 perceived challenges with social integration and bullying in the education setting.
4. Identify the impact bullying, and perceived bullying, has on the self-actualization, social interaction and psychological safety of students with autism ages 13-21.
5. Identify the role the school district, peers, and lawmakers play in anti-bullying measures to achieve physical and psychological safety and an inclusive social experience for students with autism ages 13-21.

The research questions underpinning this study are:

1. Are Missouri educational institutions proactively committed to educating students with autism (ages 13-21) about their rights pertaining to protection against bullying?

2. Do Missouri educational institutions ensure that students with autism (ages 13-21) are adequately informed about the schools' obligations in preventing, addressing, and rectifying bullying incidents?

3. To what extent does bullying influence academic performance and subsequent social integration for students with autism (ages 13-21)?

4. Do students with autism (ages 13-21) consistently experience and report instances of bullying when they are victimized?

The hypotheses for this research are formulated as follows:

H1: School districts' commitment to Missouri's anti-bullying laws will be examined to determine if they consistently adhere to the stipulated guidelines or if there exists noticeable non-compliance or apathy. It is hypothesized that while compliant guidelines may be in place by districts as it relates to reporting, investigations, and resolution, students with ASD may not perceive that those guidelines are being followed.

H2: It will be assessed whether prevailing negative perceptions regarding social and psychological wellbeing lead students with autism to resist school attendance and social inclusion. Alternatively, the study will explore if the perceived benefits of participation can outweigh these negative experiences for students with autism. It is hypothesized that students with ASD experiencing bullying victimization may report *wanting* to escape school attendance. However, without clear insight as to the level of parental involvement in transportation to and from school, it is unclear whether elopement from school is an actual possibility.

H3: The study seeks to evaluate whether educators display adequate commitment and readiness to implement the necessary accommodations that foster psychological safety and social inclusion for students with autism, or if there is a discernible reluctance to adjust and advocate for the wellbeing and integration of these students. It is hypothesized that students with ASD do not perceive adequate support as it relates to bullying behavior in the victim role.

1.4 Research Structure

This dissertation is structured into five distinct sections to ensure a systematic approach to the research:

1. **Conceptualization of Neurodiversity**: A deep dive into the construct of neurodiversity, with a spotlight on autism.

2. **Impact of Bullying**: An exploration of the ramifications of bullying on students within educational environments.

3. **Lived Experiences**: A review of the actual school experiences of students diagnosed with autism.

4. **Autism and Developmental Challenges**: A comprehensive understanding of autism and the associated developmental hurdles.

5. **Legislative and Practical Discrepancies**: An examination of potential mismatches between state and federal laws, school protocols, and the real-world responses of school personnel to bullying incidents involving autistic students.

Each of these themes will be elaborated upon in the subsequent literature review section.

1.5 Research and Literature Gaps

Several significant gaps exist within the current literature that necessitate deeper exploration in subsequent research. Foremost among these is the enduring impact on students with autism who consistently face bullying and, crucially, do not receive adequate support from recognized authoritative figures. There exists compelling evidence alluding to the possibility of long-term trauma resulting from sustained victimization experiences. The data reveals a staggering 89% of students with autism having encountered victimization at least once in their lifetime. Additionally, a significant 82.1% reported such experiences within the most recent year. Of these students, an overwhelming 92% indicated multiple victimization incidents in the same timeframe, highlighting the pervasive nature of poly-victimization (Pfeffer, R.D. 2016).

Moreover, current literature inadequately addresses the seeming lapses of school personnel in adhering to both district policies and broader state and federal legislations aimed at safeguarding victims of bullying—particularly those with specialized needs like students with

autism. This oversight presents a critical lacuna in the literature and pinpoints a research gap that demands prompt and earnest attention.

The existing literature indicates that, due to initial oversights by educators, bullying victims are often inadvertently placed in situations where continued interactions with their bullies are unavoidable, thereby amplifying the risk of further victimization within the very systems designed to support them. This predicament may be exacerbated by the inherent dynamics of middle and high school structures. As students progress into these stages, they encounter the challenge of navigating varied teachers and peer groups daily, necessitating constant adaptation of their social behaviors (Tobias, 2009). Notably, there is a paucity of research-based interventions in the literature targeting the unique needs of secondary students with ASD in mastering essential social skills—skills that are deemed integral to a holistic secondary education experience (Carter and Draper, 2010). This deficiency is particularly concerning given the rising numbers of students with ASD aged 13-21 (Blumberg et al., 2013). There is an evident need for strategies that secondary educators can seamlessly incorporate into their daily routines to address the social needs of these students.

1.6 Research Significance

The significance of this study is underscored by its emphasis on the often-neglected demographic of students with developmental or "hidden" disabilities, with a primary focus on autism. Extant literature unveils that students with ASD are disproportionately subjected to bullying when compared to the general student population, with prevalence rates ranging from 19% to 94% for the former, in stark contrast to 12% to 41% for the latter (Sterzing et al., 2023). Moreover, these figures exceed the victimization rates experienced by their counterparts with other disabilities (Humphrey and Symes 2010; Twyman et al. 2010, Sreckovic et al., 2017).

It is worth noting that prevailing strategies in addressing bullying grievances in educational institutions frequently overlook the intrinsic challenges posed by ASD, such as conversational aptitude and advanced social skills, and the attendant comorbid conditions, for instance, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder. Current anti-bullying interventions, regrettably, fall short in targeting the pronounced rates of victimization prevalent in general education frameworks. There's an evident need to pioneer strategies promoting enhanced social integration, for instance, through the establishment of protective peer groups (Sterzing et al., 2023).

1.7 Summary

This study unfolds across five meticulously structured chapters, each serving a unique purpose. The initial chapter sets the stage, elucidating the research theme, charting its aims and objectives, and shedding light on the study's rationale, identified gaps, and overarching significance. Subsequently, Chapter two embarks on an exhaustive exploration of relevant literature, navigating the evolution and contemporary perspectives on neurodiversity, autism, and the pertinent issue of bullying within educational contexts. Chapter three delineates the research methodology, offering insights into the data acquisition and its subsequent analytical procedures. The penultimate chapter, Chapter four, dedicates itself to an in-depth analysis of the acquired data, accentuating emergent themes from both qualitative interviews and quantitative survey evaluations. Conclusively, Chapter five amalgamates the discerned insights, juxtaposing them against prevailing hypotheses, contemporaneous literature, and testimonies from the student interviews, culminating in an elucidation of the research's implications and proposing future recommendations.

Chapter 2. Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

In the exploration of engagement trends within research literature, a thorough content analysis was undertaken. The purpose of the literature review is to provide an overview of the prevailing attitudes and depth of existing literature by previous researchers and academics about the given research topic (Paul and Criado, 2020). By conducting a critical analysis of the literature against the research objective, a better framework for research design may be achieved. This analysis encompassed key areas such as autism, bullying behavior and victimization, psychological wellbeing of students with autism, peer social interaction and protective peer groups, and school response to bullying. The aim was to discern both theoretical and practical engagements within these paradigms. This literature review focuses on supporting the research questions outlined in section 1.3.

The research process involved a meticulous collection of articles using targeted keyword searches across various databases (e.g., Springer Link, Emerald Insight, DeepDyve, Google Scholar, Academia, Cambridge Core,), specialized journals (e.g., Journal of Applied Psychology, JAMA Pediatrics, Personality & Social Psychology Review, Sage Journals, Paediatrics and Child Health, Journal of Developmental and Physical Disabilities), and published governmental guidance (e.g., DESE).

To ensure comprehensive coverage, specific keyword roots were used, such as "autis*" to include all relevant forms of autism and "neurodiv*" for derivatives of neurodivergence. Similarly, the keyword root "bully*" and "bulli*" was employed to capture all pertinent forms of bully and bullie(d/s), while additional keywords like student perpetrator, student wellbeing, and "student *victimization" and peer socialization were used for other related concepts.

After the initial collection, the research results underwent a manual review to eliminate any irrelevant or erroneous content, ensuring that only the most germane resources were included in the final review. This comprehensive approach allowed for a nuanced understanding of the subject matter, contributing to a richer analysis of engagement trends in the related fields of study.

The subsequent segment of the literature review casts light upon the gaps, discrepancies, and debates in existing research. The academic discourse around student wellbeing within the context of diversity and the magnitude of its impact are central themes discussed herein. Notably, there is a dearth of intervention studies addressing the socio-educational needs of secondary students with ASD, despite the widely accepted belief that imparting these social skills is integral to a holistic secondary education (Carter and Draper, 2010). The literature also presents a conspicuous gap in investigating the prevalence and associated factors of bullying experiences among adolescents diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). This oversight is especially disconcerting given that individuals with ASD, owing to inherent social and relational challenges, might be particularly susceptible to bullying encounters (Sterzing et al., 2012).

Predominantly, research examining bullying victimization of autistic youth adopts a cross-sectional approach, leaving the sequential relationship between bullying victimization and subsequent mental health complications ambiguous. A lone longitudinal study by Tipton-Fisler (Tipton-Fisler et al., 2018) probed this relationship, uncovering that while youth with autism exhibiting pronounced internalizing mental health issues are prone to bullying, such

victimization did not further exacerbate their mental health conditions. However, the study did not venture into externalizing mental health problems, thereby leaving a void in understanding the impact of bullying on these specific mental health dimensions in autistic youth. Such gaps in knowledge inevitably pose challenges in devising effective student interventions, designing apt training modules for educators, and formulating robust district resources and procedures.

2.2 Autism as a Construct

Students with ASD exhibit distinct challenges in social communication and demonstrate patterns of restrictive and repetitive behaviors, interests, or activities (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Their capacity to form, sustain, and comprehend relationships with peers and educators might be compromised (Hart & Whalon, 2011). Furthermore, they often exhibit pronounced responses to even minor alterations in daily school routines (Rai et al., 2018) and may also possess unconventional sensory processing patterns (Ashburner, Ziviani, & Rodger, 2010).

Inherent traits and challenges associated with ASD have the potential to deeply affect an individual's schooling, with implications for their

mental well-being (Mayes et al., 2013), interpersonal relationships (Rowley et al., 2012), and scholastic achievements (Keen, Webster, & Ridley, 2015). Hebron and Humphrey's study (2014) shed light on the heightened vulnerability of students with ASD to mental health disorders, including anxiety, depression, and anger. They also found these students generally possessing lower self-esteem than their non-disabled peers. In terms of social relationships, many of these students reported intensified feelings of loneliness, described poorer quality friendships, and had a reduced social status in comparison to their neurotypical peers (Locke et al., 2010). From an academic standpoint, the outlook is also concerning, as a vast majority - 98% - do not pursue postsecondary education (Chiang, et al., 2013).

Demographically, the incidence of autism is on an upward trajectory. Recent data suggests that 1 in 54 children in the United States falls within the autism spectrum (Maenner et al., 2020).

2.3 Neurodiversity as a Concept

The concept of neurodiversity, though relatively nascent, has been the center of several compelling debates within academic circles. Often

attributed to Australian sociologist Judy Singer, also an autistic individual. The term actually emerged in 1997 as a challenge to the prevailing medical perspective of neurological differences, which were then predominantly viewed as disorders requiring treatment or a “cure.” This perspective resonated with Sinclair's assertion that autism represents an intrinsic aspect of an individual and cannot be dissociated from them (Sinclair, 2012). While Singer's work initially centered around autism, the concept has since been much more widely expanded, aligning more closely with the broader U.K. perspective encompassing a range of neurological diversities (Arnold, 2017).

Central to Singer's viewpoint is the acknowledgment of a vast continuum of neurological functionalities that not only are intrinsic to the human experience but also beneficial for societal evolution. This perspective challenges the conventional dichotomy of 'normal' versus 'abnormal' grounded in neurological evaluations, as argued by Armstrong in various instances (Armstrong, 2012; Armstrong, 2015). Supporting this, Kapp (Kapp et al., 2013) contended against the existence of a "typical" neural benchmark.

It is undeniable that certain neurological variances can modify one's social interactions, but these differences often come with distinct strengths (Clouder et al., 2020). For instance, the unique capacities of

the autistic population, demonstrated through their distinct positions in the Gaussian distribution of IQ, point to their potential contributions, especially in professional settings (Simkin et al., 2014; Schuck et al., 2019).

One of the critical debates within this domain revolves around the categorization of neurodiversity. There's an increasing advocacy for understanding neurodiverse disorders as socially-rooted phenomena, in contrast to the traditional medicalized perspective that sees them as defects or insufficiencies (Barnhart and Dierickx, 2021). This distinction also led to the terminology of "neurodivergent" for those with significant variability in cognitive abilities and "neurotypical" for those with more uniform cognitive profiles (Doyle, 2020).

Given the multifaceted nature of neurodiversity, the term has encountered criticism for its broad application. McLoughlin (McLoughlin, 2021) critiques the term for its vagueness, a sentiment echoed by Stenning and Bertilsdotter Rosqvist who caution against the blanket acceptance of neurodiversity as universally beneficial (Stenning and Rosqvist, 2021). Meanwhile, Bertilsdotter Rosqvist and colleagues express concerns that the neurodiversity discourse is disproportionately centered on autism, limiting its scope (Rosqvist et al, 2020). Kapp et al. (2013) additionally argue that the term, with its sociological emphasis,

risks sidelining critical neurological discussions and potential medical interventions. As a more inclusive and precise alternative, Doyle (2020) proposed "neuro-minorities," drawing from Bottema-Beutel et al.'s advocacy for terminology that's less ableist and more statistically relevant (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2020).

Despite its complexities and challenges, the term "neurodiversity" remains the most widely recognized descriptor in this academic arena, emphasizing the need for continued dialogue and refinement.

2.4 Bullying: A Deep Dive into a Societal Issue

Research on bullying gained significant momentum in the mid-1970s, underscoring its deep societal implications (Stassen Berger, 2007). The consequences of bullying stretch far and wide, impacting not only the immediate scenario but also leaving long-lasting effects on everyone involved. For instance, bullies are prone to adverse outcomes like criminal behaviors (White & Loeber, 2008), substance misuse (Sourander et al., 2007), and behavioral disorders (Pepler & Craig, 2000). Conversely, the victims grapple with a host of challenges including anxiety disorders (Sourander et al., 2007), instances of sexual harassment (Gruber & Fineran, 2008), and academic setbacks (Pepler &

Craig, 2000). Disturbingly, children with special needs are at an elevated risk. They are not only more likely to be targets of bullying but may also engage in such behaviors themselves (Estell et al., 2009a; Estell et al., 2009b). When subjected to bullying, these children commonly display symptoms of loneliness, anxiety, depression, physiological discomfort, and broader mental health challenges (Baumeister, Storch, & Geffken, 2008; Cappadocia, Weiss, & Pepler, 2012).

The manifestation of bullying spans various dimensions: physical, verbal, relational, and online (Berger, 2007). Bullies may employ a combination of these tactics. Wainscot (Wainscot et al., 2008) interviewed 30 ASD students, comparing perceptions of bullying against their typically developing peers. The results were staggering: 90% felt ostracized, citing experiences like exclusion, name-calling (50%), vocal threats (6%), and physical aggression (16.6%). This study accentuated that ASD students face heightened bullying incidents compared to their peers. Cappadocia et al. (2012) further expounded on the various bullying forms that children and adolescents with ASD endure. Remarkably, 68% in their sample faced multiple forms of bullying within a month, primarily verbal (28%) and social (28%), followed by physical (8%) and online bullying (1%).

Often, negative stereotypes exacerbate bullying, particularly among groups unfamiliar with autism (Xiao et al., 2021; Danker et al., 2019). Autistic individuals, under the weight of these misperceptions, grapple with eroded self-confidence (Link & Phelan, 2001), reluctance in disclosing their diagnosis (Sasson et al., 2017), and feelings of detachment from their peers (Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2015). Significantly, a deepened understanding of autism inversely correlates with stigmatization, enhancing acceptance and perspective towards autistic individuals (Jones et al., 2021; Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2021; Sasson et al., 2017). Amplifying autism awareness thus becomes imperative, aiming not only to dispel misconceptions but to uplift the overall welfare of autistic individuals (Golson et al., 2022).

Curiously, scant literature delves into the possibility of autistic middle-school and high-school students embodying both roles - the bully and the bullied. Given the known complexities associated with this group, this absence is puzzling. There are plausible explanations behind why adolescents with ASD might oscillate between these roles. For instance, high-functioning ASD individuals can succumb to environmental stressors (Attwood, 2007). Limited coping mechanisms can exacerbate vulnerability, and in some instances, lead to sporadic aggressive outbursts. The ensuing social alienation these adolescents

face could set the stage for this duality. Crescioni and Baumeister (Crescioni & Baumeister, 2009) allude that social ostracization can induce severe emotional repercussions (e.g., diminished empathy or self-regulation). It can also engender a hostile cognitive bias, making individuals more prone to interpret ambiguity as hostility. Such biases, coupled with emotional turmoil, might spur aggression in the ostracized individual towards the instigator or even new targets. In this context, individuals with ASD have exhibited empathy deficits and emotional regulation challenges (Baron-Cohen & Wheelwright, 2003; Samson, Huber, & Gross, 2012). A few studies broach this topic in elementary and adult demographics, but their inherent limitations hamper their applicability.

2.5 Social Support Perceptions as a Buffer against Bullying

Bullying stands as a stark marker of social ostracization in any given context or community. Youth diagnosed with ASD are particularly susceptible, given their challenges in social interactions and difficulties in understanding perspectives. Their behaviors, which may deviate from societal norms or what peers typically expect, make them prime targets for bullies (Humphrey and Lewis, 2008).

Several factors contribute to the reluctance or inability of students with autism to disclose bullying incidents. In certain instances, they might not even recognize the subtle forms of bullying they are subjected to (National Autistic Society, 2006). Coupled with the social cognition challenges innate to autism, students may presume that bystanders, including school staff, are already aware of the bullying. This mindset often leads to the notion that reporting is superfluous (Moore, 2007). Moreover, due to their struggles in understanding perspectives and occasional paranoid tendencies, these students might deduce that the lack of action against bullies implies the bullying is justified. Consequently, the very idea of school becomes anxiety-inducing, resulting in potential avoidance behaviors, commonly seen in ASD (Tantum, 2000).

While the focus of existing research on social support for youth with ASD has primarily been on familial support, there's a dearth of studies concentrating on contextual support, especially within educational institutions (Bromley et al., 2004; Heinman and Berger, 2008). The limited research that does exist predominantly targets elementary and college demographics.

In 2010, Humphrey and Symes undertook a comprehensive study evaluating the perceptions of social support in neurodiverse students

exposed to bullying. Their sample comprised 40 students with ASD, contrasted against two other groups: 40 students with dyslexia and 40 neurotypical students. To map out the frequency and types of bullying each group encountered, they employed the My Life in School Checklist (MLSC), an instrument that sidesteps the need for a concrete understanding of 'bullying.' The Social Support Scale for Children (SSSC) was then used to measure the students' perceived support from key figures like parents, peers, educators, and friends using a structured four-point Likert scale.

Humphrey and Symes hypothesized that the ASD cohort would report heightened bullying experiences. The data substantiated this hypothesis, as illustrated in Figure 1 below.

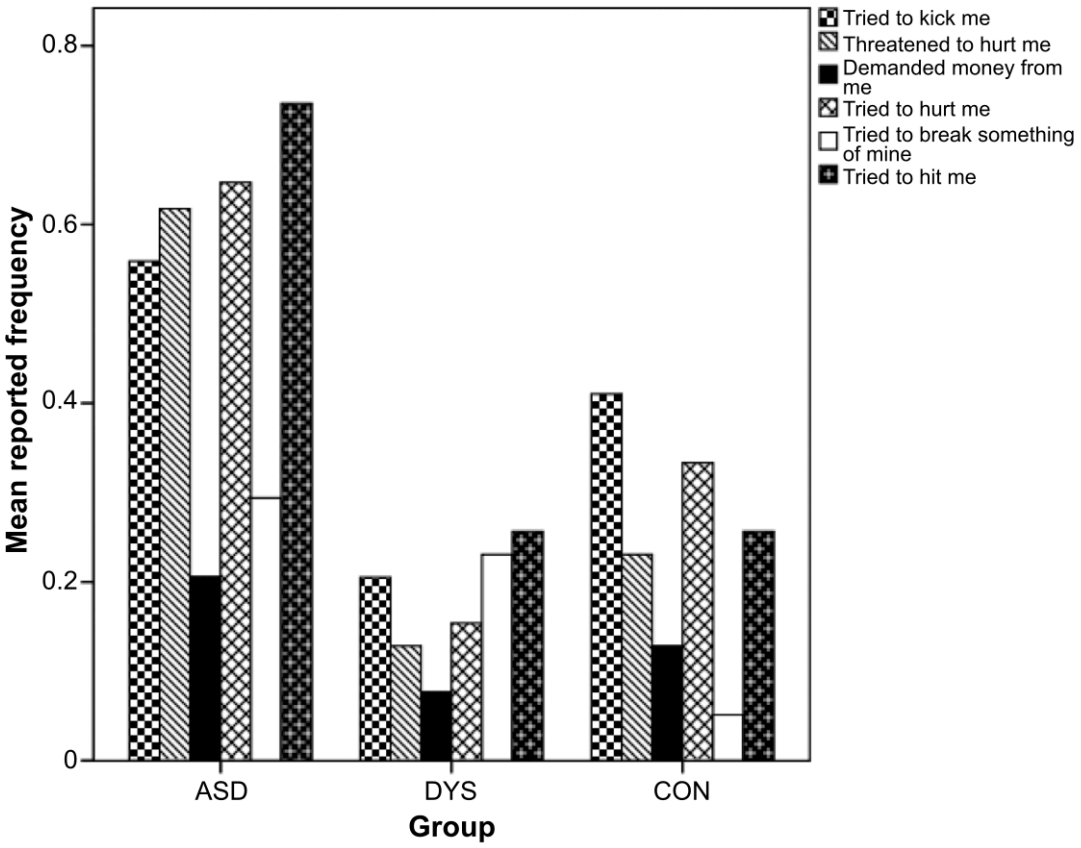

Figure 1: Nature and Extent of bullying reported by pupils in the 2010 Humphrey and Symes study. Notes: ASD, autistic spectrum disorders; DYS, dyslexia; CON, control

Furthermore, the ASD group indicated diminished social support perceptions from parents and peers compared to the other groups. Interestingly, there was no significant disparity in perceived support from teachers. However, it's essential to interpret this with caution. Although one might hastily deduce that this is indicative of enhanced or equal teacher support for ASD students, Humphrey and Symes pointed out a possible misinterpretation. The students might be equating

"support" more with academic assistance than the emotional and social bolstering crucial for resilience against bullying, as underscored by prior research (Andreou et al., 2005; Dumont and Provost, 1999, as referenced in Humphrey and Symes, 2010).

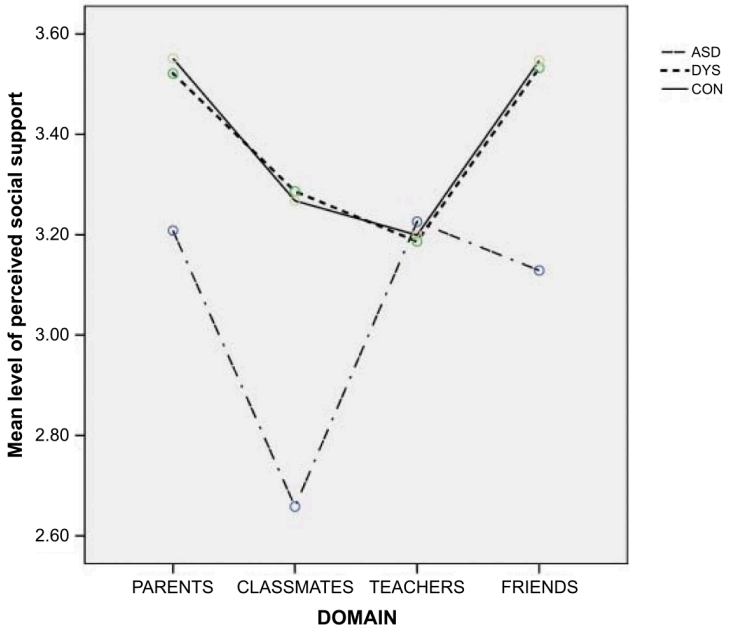

Figure 2: Line chart demonstrating the interaction between special educational needs group status and domain of social support in the 2010 Humphrey and Symes study. Notes: ASD, autistic spectrum disorders; DYS, dyslexia; CON, control

2.6 Missouri Policy Requirements to Schools to Prevent and Respond to Bullying Behavior

Missouri has specific statutes which cover anti-bullying behavior. student rights, and school district responsibilities. They are:

- Missouri Revised Statutes §160.261. Discipline, written policy established by local boards of education — contents — reporting requirements — additional restrictions for certain suspensions — weapons offense, mandatory suspension or expulsion — no civil liability for authorized personnel — spanking not child abuse, when — investigation procedure — officials falsifying reports, penalty
- Missouri Revised Statutes §160.775. Anti-bullying policy required — definition — content, requirements
- Missouri Revised Statutes §167.117. Principal, teachers, school employees to report certain acts, to whom, exceptions — limit on liability — penalty
- Missouri Code of State Regulations 5 CSR 20-100.125. Missouri School Improvement Program 6
- Missouri Code of State Regulations 5 CSR 20-100.255. Missouri School Improvement Program-5 Resource and Process Standards and Indicators

In Missouri, it is mandatory for school districts to implement an anti-bullying policy. Such policies must encompass essential policy and procedural components, among others:

- Declarations against bullying that are, at the very least, as encompassing as the definitions outlined in state legislation;
- Mechanisms for reporting and conducting investigations. This entails designating a specific individual at each school to handle bullying incident reports and nominating one or more staff members to oversee investigations;
- Proclamations that prohibit any form of reprisal or retaliation, along with the delineation of consequences and corrective measures for any such actions;
- Guidelines on the dissemination and publicizing of the policy within the district; and
- Strategies for engaging in discussions with students about the anti-bullying policy, and for educating school staff and volunteers about policy compliance.

2.7 Conclusion

The upcoming methodology section will detail the means through which data was garnered, aiming to cultivate a deep understanding and tackle the prevalent issues in the employment domain.

From a comprehensive exploration of the literature, several conclusions emerge. Not only does the existing literature validate the research questions and hypotheses articulated for this dissertation, but it also underscores the dire need for continued investigation in this realm.

A salient observation from the literature is the inconsistent understanding and definition of the term "neurodiversity" among various stakeholders – medical professionals, governmental agencies, scholars, and individuals diagnosed. While a substantial number in the medical field perceive neurodiversity as a "social justice movement" (Fenton and Khran, 2007), they often assess neurodivergence and conditions like autism from a 'deficit model' (Nicolaidis, 2012). Such a perspective, primarily emphasizing the challenges associated with neurodivergence, inevitably seeps into governmental systems, prominently in education. This fosters an environment wherein marginalized groups, like students with ASD, are viewed through a narrow, "pathologizing" medical lens rather than the broader sociological approach to neurodivergence. The

latter emphasizes accessibility, holistic integration, and inclusion. Consequently, such perspectives might inadvertently heighten the vulnerability of these students, making them prone to bullying and similar adversities. Moreover, a glaring gap in literature exists regarding the potential dual role of middle-school and high-school ASD students as both aggressors and victims of bullying.

In light of this literary analysis, it's clear that there's a need for more in-depth research. Such research should aim to gauge the efficacy and inclusivity of current anti-bullying measures for autistic students. Further, understanding the implications of the evident gaps in these measures and recognizing avenues for schools to refine their methodologies is paramount. The subsequent chapter will delve into the research design and techniques employed to navigate this intricate subject.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Introduction

The current research is one of the few to study, albeit less formally, various dimensions of this complex issue. The study aims to explore the

prevalence and types of bullying behavior among Missouri students with autism ages 13 - 21, potential for dual-role perpetrator and victim status, social supports, as well as student and parent perception of school supports. The current study is among the first to study the level of agreement between student and parent reports of bullying behavior. It is predicted there will be a high level of agreement as to the prevalence of bullying behavior and relative level of school support, but beyond that no further predictions can be made due to the scant amount of existing literature.

3.2 Research Objectives, Questions and Hypotheses

The following objectives were outlined and focused on throughout the research process:

1. Understand the existing commitments from lawmakers and educators relating to addressing bullying with students with autism.
2. Identify the challenges students with autism ages 13-21 face with social integration and bullying in the education setting.

3. Identify the parents' of students with autism ages 13-21 perceived challenges with social integration and bullying in the education setting.
4. Identify the impact bullying, and perceived bullying, has on the self-actualization, social interaction and psychological safety of students with autism ages 13-21.
5. Identify the role the school district, peers, and lawmakers play in anti-bullying measures to achieve physical and psychological safety and an inclusive social experience for students with autism ages 13-21.

The research questions underpinning this study are:

1. Are Missouri educational institutions proactively committed to educating students with autism (ages 13-21) about their rights pertaining to protection against bullying?

2. Do Missouri educational institutions ensure that students with autism (ages 13-21) are adequately informed about the schools'

obligations in preventing, addressing, and rectifying bullying incidents?

3. Are students with autism (ages 13-21) in Missouri sufficiently knowledgeable about their rights and duties concerning bullying?

4. To what extent does bullying influence academic performance and subsequent social integration for students with autism (ages 13-21)?

5. Do students with autism (ages 13-21) consistently experience and report instances of bullying when they are victimized?

The hypotheses for this research are formulated as follows:

H1: School districts' commitment to Missouri's anti-bullying laws will be examined to determine if they consistently adhere to the stipulated guidelines or if there exists noticeable non-compliance

or apathy. It is hypothesized that while compliant guidelines may be in place by districts as it relates to reporting, investigations, and resolution, students with ASD may not perceive that those guidelines are being followed.

H2: It will be assessed whether prevailing negative perceptions regarding social and psychological wellbeing lead students with autism to resist school attendance and social inclusion. Alternatively, the study will explore if the perceived benefits of participation can outweigh these negative experiences for students with autism. It is hypothesized that students with ASD experiencing bullying victimization may report *wanting* to escape school attendance. However, without clear insight as to level of parental involvement in transportation to and from school, it is unclear whether elopement from school is an actual possibility.

H3: The study seeks to evaluate whether educators display adequate commitment and readiness to implement the necessary accommodations that foster psychological safety and social inclusion for students with autism, or if there is a discernible reluctance to adjust and advocate for the wellbeing and integration

of these students. It is hypothesized that students with ASD do not perceive adequate support as it relates to bullying behavior in the victim role.

3.3 Research Methodology & Design

3.3.1 Methodology

In the realm of social and behavioral sciences, mixed methodology research has emerged as a prominent approach. This study adheres to this trend, adopting a balanced blend of quantitative and qualitative techniques. While there's been discourse around the need to specify a "primary" and "secondary" methodology, Maxwell argues against this distinction, suggesting that such labels can hinder effective research. Instead, the value that both qualitative and quantitative methods contribute to a given investigation should be examined and then assigned their respective importance (Weisner, 2005; Milner, 2007).

For the quantitative facet of this research, surveys were employed to gauge values, and ascertain students' and parents' perceptions regarding bullying, its societal ramifications, and the level of support provided by schools. These surveys encompassed closed-ended interview queries

aimed at confirming the frequency and nature of bullying behaviors. These inquiries also sought to provide clarity on roles, impacts, supports, and individual perceptions related to bullying. Conversely, the qualitative component revolved around open-ended interview questions presented during focus group sessions. These discussions aimed to penetrate deeper into the lived experiences of students with ASD, capturing their viewpoints and gauging their satisfaction concerning the support they perceive from their peers and educational institutions.

3.3.2 Survey Structure

The chief aim of the quantitative survey in this study is to accumulate data relevant to the research topics under consideration. To this end, four distinct surveys were administered. Students with ASD aged 13 to 21 were provided with one survey focused on their perceptions and personal encounters regarding bullying and another survey dedicated to their views on the support they receive from schools concerning bullying. Similarly, parents of students with ASD within the same age range were prompted to complete equivalent surveys, with added queries addressing aspects of socialization and the broader social implications.

Opting for a quantitative survey approach for data collection was deemed suitable due to its inherent ability to elicit participant insights,

all the while safeguarding their anonymity—especially crucial given the delicate nature of the subject matter. As underscored by Weigold et al., online surveys offer myriad advantages, including the potential for cost-efficiency in terms of survey distribution, and the eradication of manual data transcription processes (Weigold et al., 2013). The survey was hosted via Typeform and distributed via a Partners in Policymaking Distribution List Email Blast, St Louis ARC Foundation Email Blast, and in two Facebook Groups for Parents of Autistic teens.

3.3.3 Interview Structure

Utilizing a qualitative paradigm, the interview strategy was devised to holistically delve into the lived experiences and viewpoints of participants. This was particularly centered on their grasp of the bullying concept, the potential duality of being seen as both a bully—stemming from behavioral traits linked to ASD—and as victims, as well as their interactions with employers. To ensure an in-depth exploration of the subject matter, open-ended queries were incorporated. These questions were designed to probe into varied facets like the definition of bullying, its common locales, participants' perceived responsibilities when faced with bullying scenarios, institutional reactions and assistance, social

competency, responses from peers, and potential interventions or suggestions.

3.4 Population and Sampling

Salkind defines 'population' as the comprehensive group that a researcher aims to investigate (Salkind, 2012, referencing Litt et al., 2010). Within the context of qualitative research, sampling techniques emphasize the depth and richness of the data over sheer volume. This approach can fortuitously pave the way for unearthing novel insights via detailed examination (Malterud et al., 2021).

This study examined a small sample of eight high school students with medical diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder (HF-ASD) and eighteen parents of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder.

3.5 Limitations

There are certain limitations to the existing research. First, the sample size is a notable consideration. Literature review shows a minimum of 400 N is desirable conducting research that will be used to make decisions about humans (Charter, 1999). “However,” Charter notes, “there may be reasons for using smaller than desired *N*s that are outside the researcher’s control” (Charter, 1999). Such is the case in this research. While the original intent was to study a much larger population, it is better to study a small population than to forgo any introspection on the subject matter at all.

A second notable limitation is the reliance on self-reported data to assess bullying behavior. One of the triad of defining criteria in ASD is social communication deficits. Paired with the known associated cognitive weaknesses of perception and perspective-taking, the question of whether or not these students are reliable reporters of their own experiences is worthy of consideration. However, the literature reveals it is also ill-advised to rely solely on parent reports, as parents are not always aware of their childrens’ experiences (Mishna, Pepler, & Weiner, 2006).

Lastly, access to school staff for perspective on bullying behavior, peer and school support was not available for inclusion in this research. This

would add a richer dimension to the data analysis and it should be considered for future study.

3.6 Ethical Considerations and Disclosures

The investigator's personal investment in the topic and their "insider status," as initially conceptualized by Merton's 'insider/outsider' dichotomy in anthropology and subsequently bolstered by Tillman's paradigm for Culturally-Sensitive Research, warrants consideration (Tillman, 2002; Tillman, 2006; Merton, 1972). The researcher has close family ties to neurodivergence and a child diagnosed with High-Functioning Autism Spectrum Disorder (HF-ASD) who has been both an instigator and recipient of bullying in educational environments, experiencing what is perceived as limited support. These personal connections catalyzed the researcher's keen interest in delving deeper into this domain of study. In a bid to uphold transparency, these affiliations were openly communicated to the study's participants.

Compensation was not provided to participants for their involvement. However, post their engagement in both the quantitative and qualitative phases, student participants were given an optional opportunity to contribute to the formulation of proposed support aids and educational

resources related to the study, designed for the benefit of educational institutions and policy makers. These resources can be referenced in the Appendix. Moreover, each participant's engagement duration was meticulously recorded, and they will be presented with a letter of appreciation for volunteer service hours, in collaboration with the Freddie Ford Family Foundation. This can be used to satisfy volunteer commitments for the National Honors Society, academic service prerequisites, or as an accolade on college applications.

3.8 Conclusion

This chapter has laid the foundation for the main inquiry pursued in this research, providing a concise delineation of epistemology and the realm of social investigation. The discourse on the primary determinants that guide methodological selections was recognized. While a brief exploration of epistemology was undertaken, the pragmatism approach, rooted in American methodology, was embraced as the most congruent guiding principle (Fishman, 1999). This choice was predominantly influenced by pragmatism's inherent focus on discerning and resolving problems, as articulated by Parvaiz, Mufti, and Wahab (Parvaiz et al., 2016).

Pragmatism seamlessly weaves together the tenets of both qualitative and quantitative research methodologies. It upholds the notion that every human inquiry is deeply entrenched in interpretations, intentions, and values, which invariably resonate with empirical and experiential truths. As such, pragmatism champions a holistic methodology, recognizing the essential synergy between subjective interpretation and objective experiences in the journey of knowledge acquisition (Yardley and Bishop, 2017).

At the heart of this research lies the critical question: Are students with ASD aged 13 - 21 experiencing bullying, and if they are, is this being effectively identified and addressed via school and peer support? This question epitomizes the core of social scientific inquiry. Traditionally, such quandaries might have been exclusively probed using a qualitative framework.

Yet, over recent decades, there's been a palpable pivot towards quantitative methodologies when addressing social scientific concerns, as delineated in the earlier methodology discourse. This shift primarily attributes to its ability to encompass a more extensive range of variables. Still, the quantitative paradigm is not devoid of limitations, especially the potential of computational analysis inadvertently skewing subjective sociological insights. As a result, a mixed-method strategy emerged as

the most comprehensive framework to delve into these issues, fostering the derivation of well-rounded, research-backed recommendations.

Building on the methodologies delineated in this chapter, pertinent data has been amassed and is primed for the ensuing examination, the details and findings of which will be elaborated upon in Chapter 4.

Chapter 4. Analysis

This study aimed to investigate if students with ASD aged 13 - 21 are experiencing bullying, and if they are, is this being effectively identified and addressed via school and peer support?

Data collection was undertaken using a multilingual survey distributed via online link, with parental consent. The survey, offered in English and Spanish, was administered through Typeform, an online survey platform. Student participants completed the surveys via desktop (1), mobile (5), and tablet (2). Parent participants completed the surveys via desktop (6) and mobile (12).

Average participant completion time varied by survey:

- Adolescent Autism with Bullying (Student Survey): 3:24
- Adolescent Autism Experience with Bullying (Parent Survey): 9:26
- Bullying of Students with Autism and School Support: 3:49
- Bullying of Students with Autism and School Support (Parents Survey): 5:07

4.1 Population Profile

Survey participants were not required to identify themselves, for the reasons outlined in Chapter 3 relating to sensitive research subjects. However, participants were asked to affirm that they were either a student with autism or a parent of a student with autism on the first question, as shown in figure 3 below.

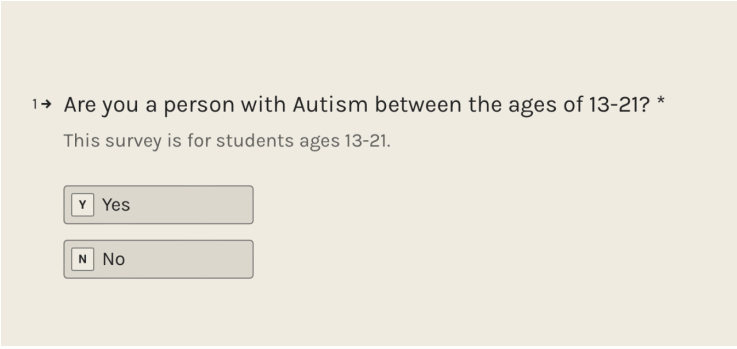

Figure 3: Affirmation of ASD diagnosis and met criteria for student study participation

If they answered no, they were excluded from the survey. This excluded 10 initial participants from inclusion in survey results, as shown in figure 4 below.

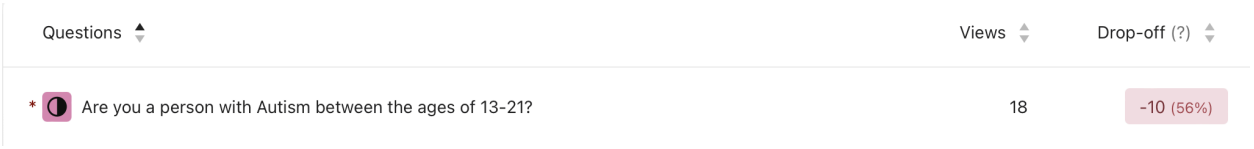

Figure 4: Drop off from Q1 in student study participation due to unmet criteria, Bullying of Students with Autism and School Support

Participants were asked to disclose their age. In the current sample size, all participants were 15-21, as shown in figure 5 below.

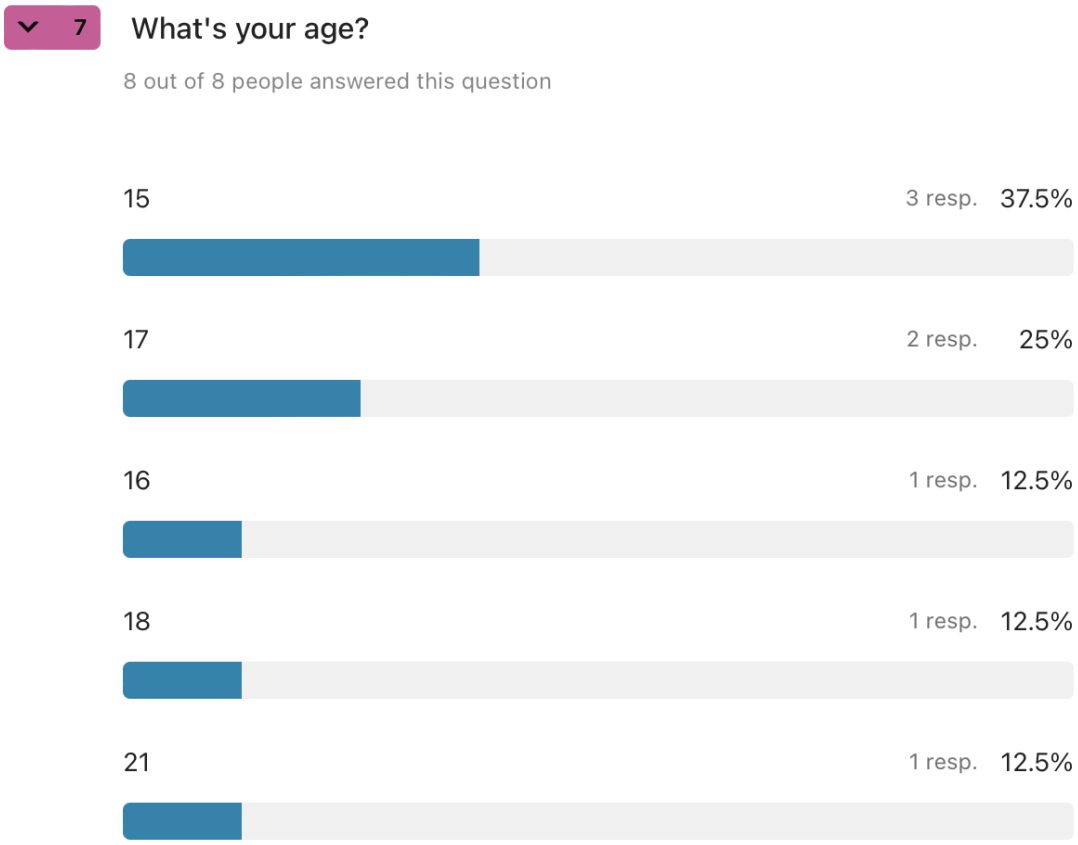

Figure 5: Self-Reported Ages of Student Participants with HF-ASD

Participants were requested to specify the region of Missouri in which they reside. Of note, while the student participant population had residents in Central and Northeast Missouri, the parent participant population fully resided in the St. Louis area, shown in figures 6 and 7.

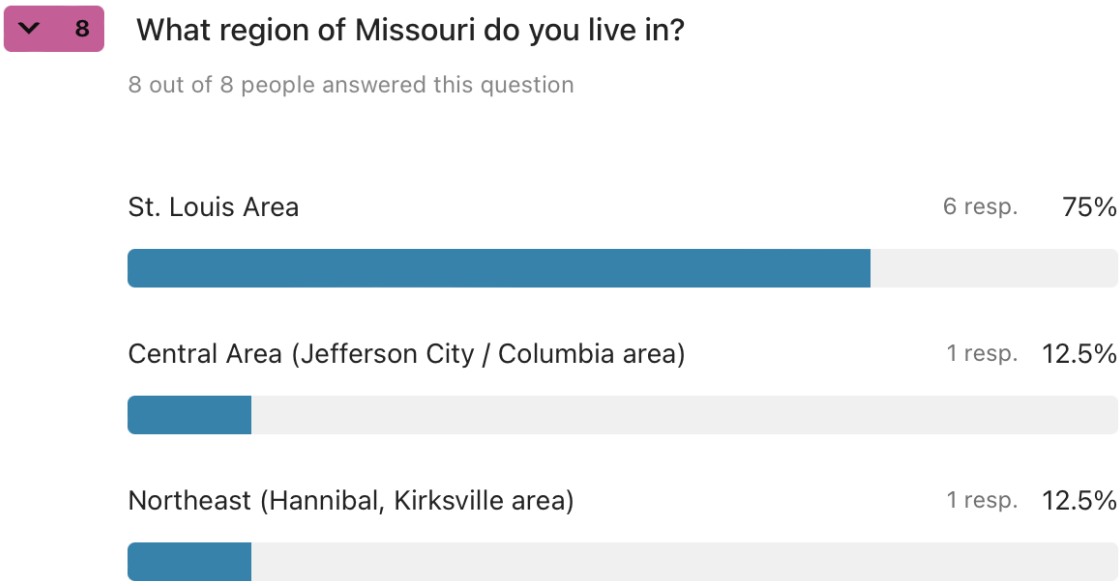

Figure 6: Self-Reported Residences of Student Participants with HF-ASD

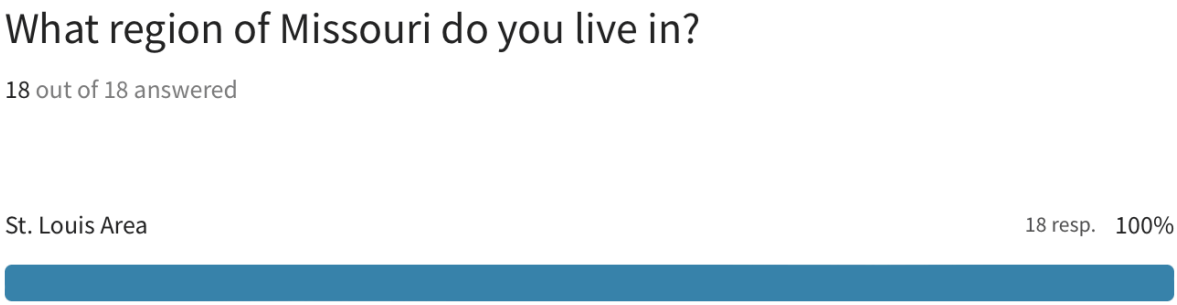

Figure 7: Self-Reported Residences of Participant Parents of Students with HF-ASD

Participants were prompted to provide information regarding the gender identity of students with ASD, encompassing both assigned gender at birth and current gender identification, outlined in figures 8 through 11 below.

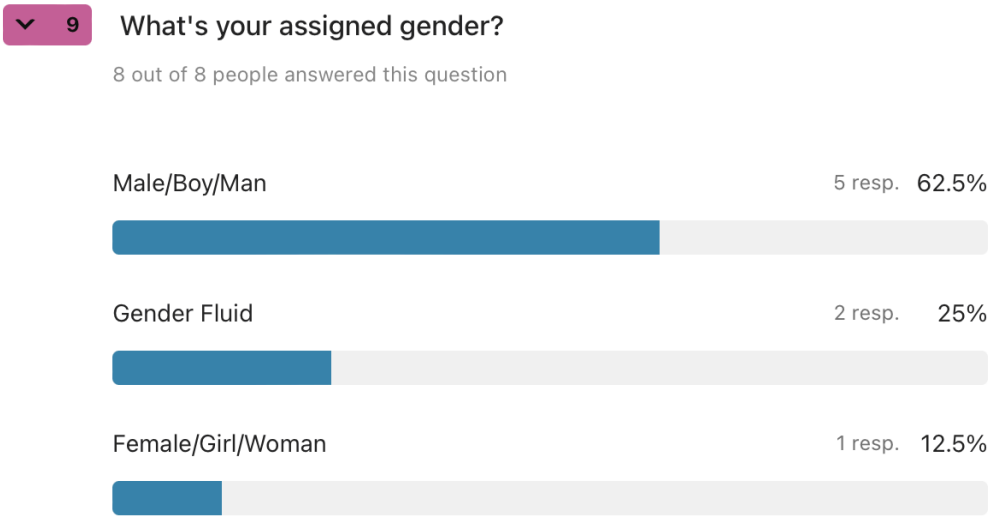

Figure 8: Self-Reported Current Assigned Gender of Students with HF-ASD

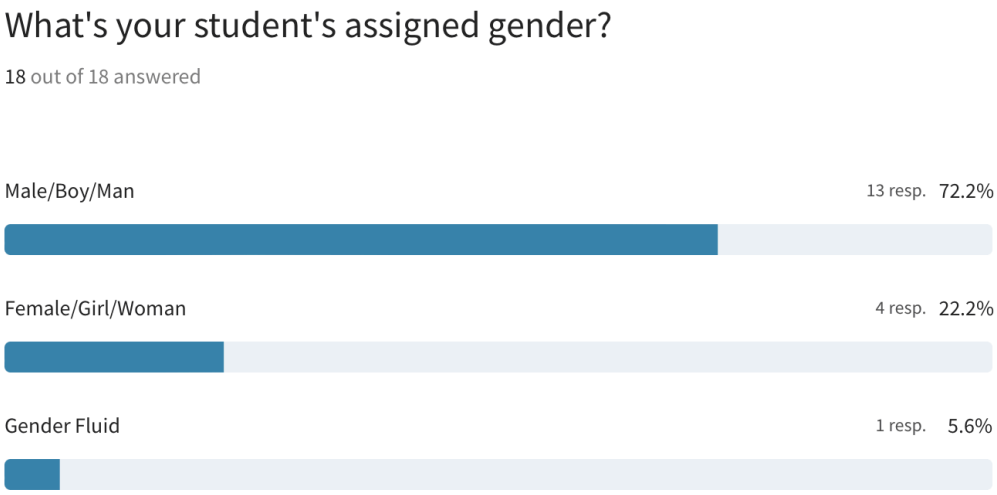

Figure 9: Parent-Reported Current Assigned Gender of Students with HF-ASD

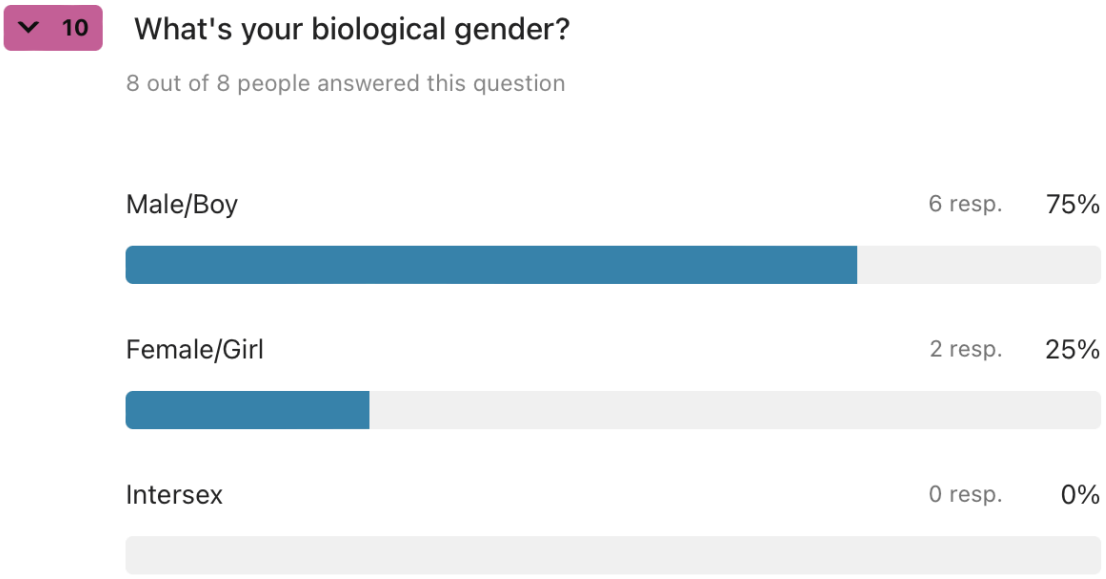

Figure 10: Self-Reported Birth Gender of Students with HF-ASD

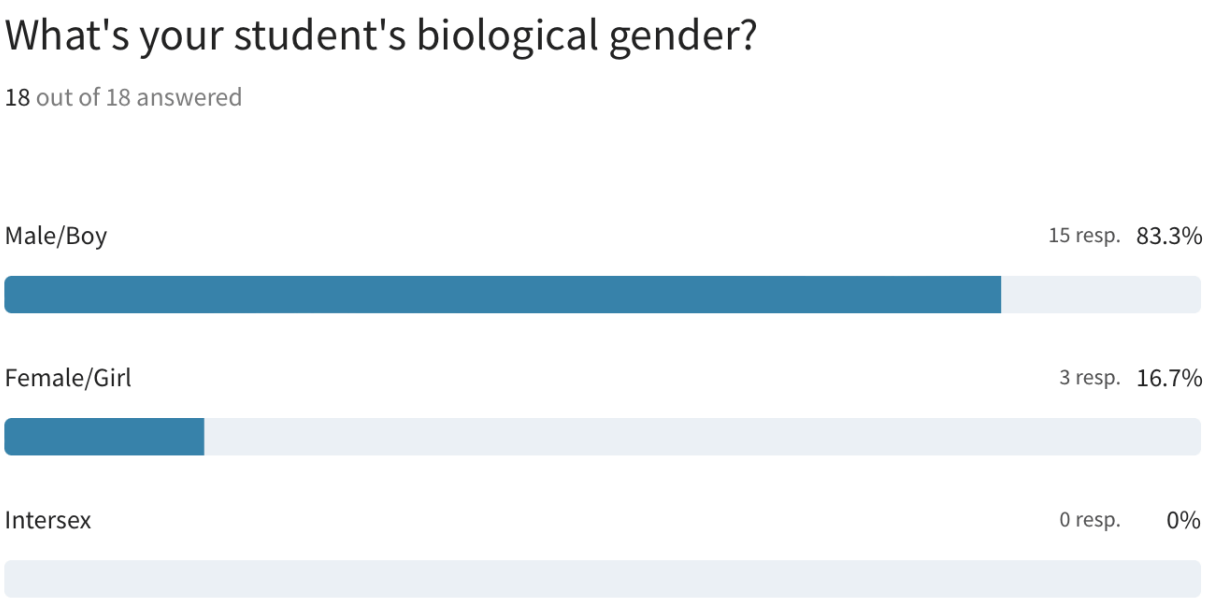

Figure 11: Parent-Reported Birth Gender of Students with HF-ASD

Participants were asked about their current grade level, shown in figure 12 below.

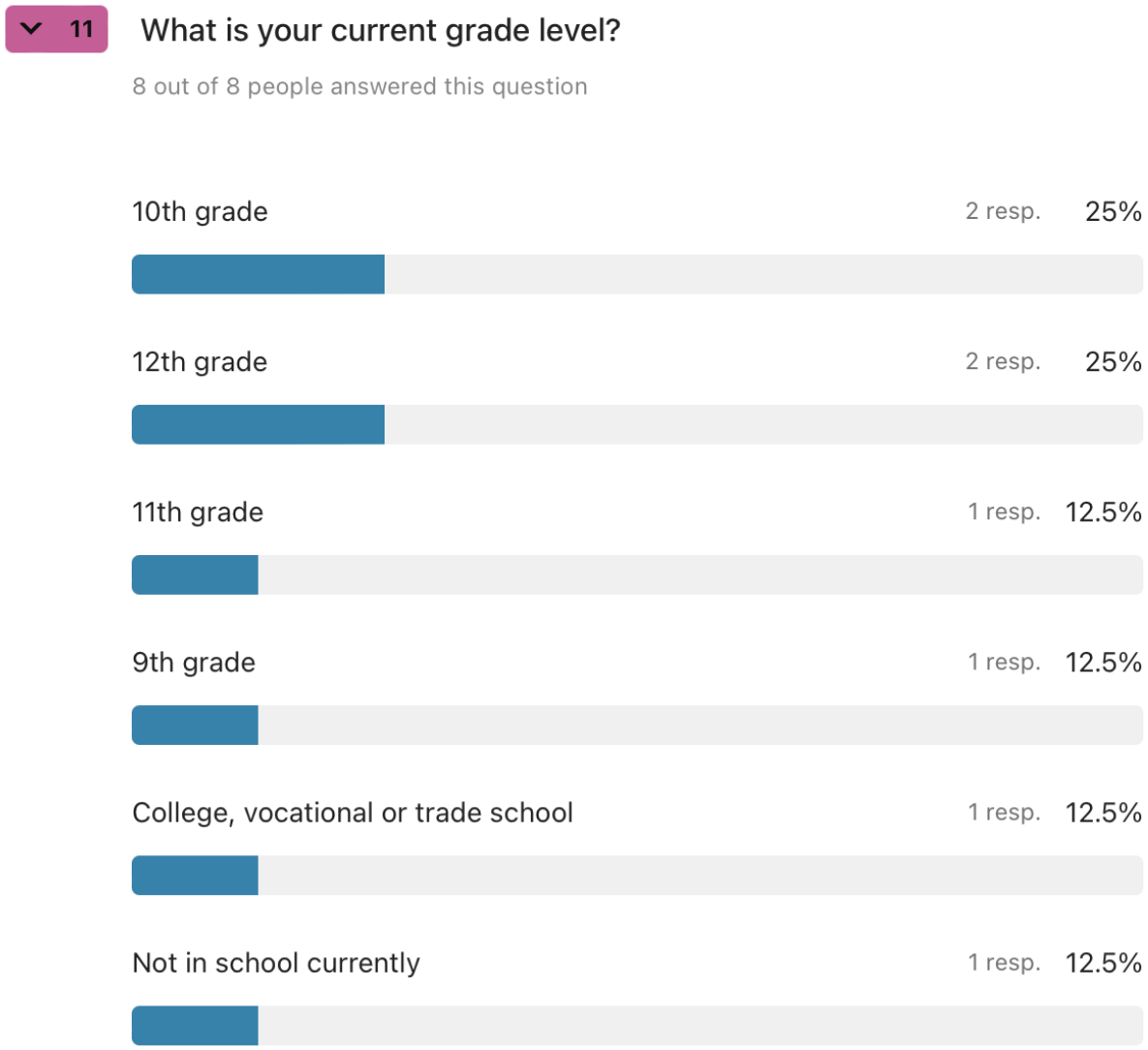

Figure 12: Self-Reported Grade Level of Students with HF-ASD

Finally, participants were asked what Missouri school district, or private school, their student with HF-ASD attends. Participant responses

included: Kirkwood, Affton, Rockwood, Francis Howell, Northwest R-1 School District, Mehlville, Webster Groves, Parkway, Pattonville, Lutheran South, Troy Buchanan in Lincoln County, and Northview.

4.2 Presence of Bullying, Adolescent Autism 1st Person Experience with Bullying

The questions began with asking student participants if they had been bullied as outlined in figure 13 below, based on the following definition:

"Definition: Bullying is when a person or group sets out to repeatedly hurt, intimidate, humiliate, or scare someone who they see as different or vulnerable. Bullying can take many different forms, including being called names, being insulted, being teased, being ridiculed, being purposely embarrassed, put down, being encouraged to self-harm.

Bullying can also include having rumors spread about you or make things up to get you in trouble.

Bullying can also be when you have your belongings taken, interfered with or destroyed, being threatened, being pushed, hit, kicked, pinched, slapped,, physically hurt or unwanted touch/physical contact. "

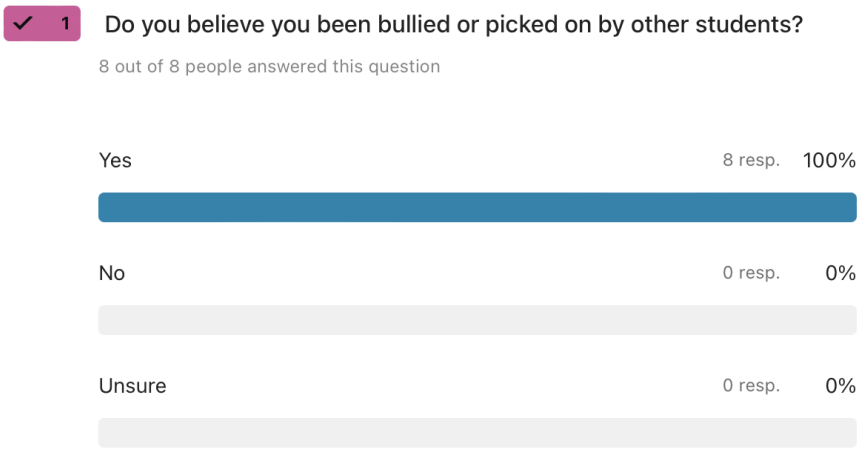

Figure 13: HF–ASD Students were asked about bullying victimization experience

A parental adaptation of this query was formulated for implementation in the present research, as depicted in Figure 14.

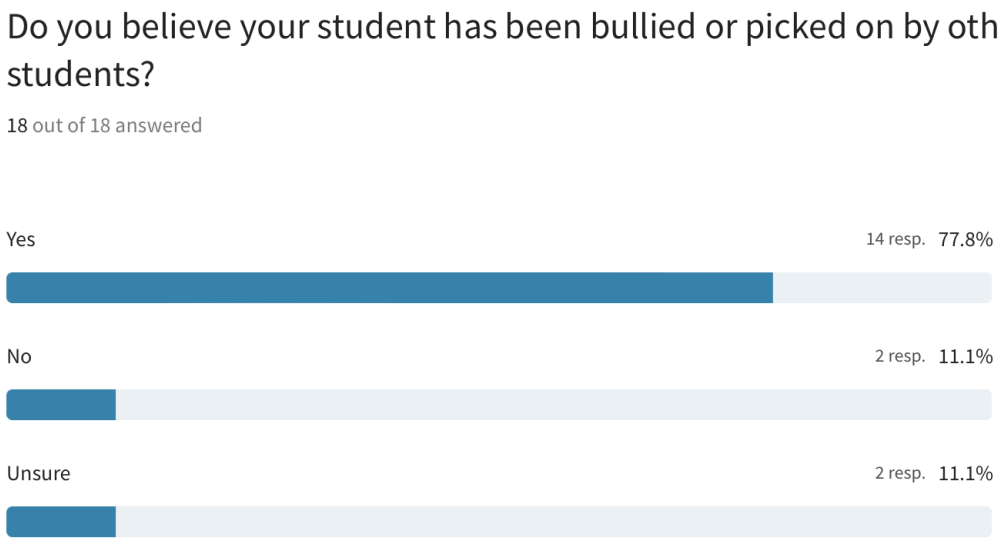

Figure 14: Parent Response about bullying victimization experience

Subsequently, participants were queried regarding the age at which they first encountered bullying, as illustrated in Figure 15.

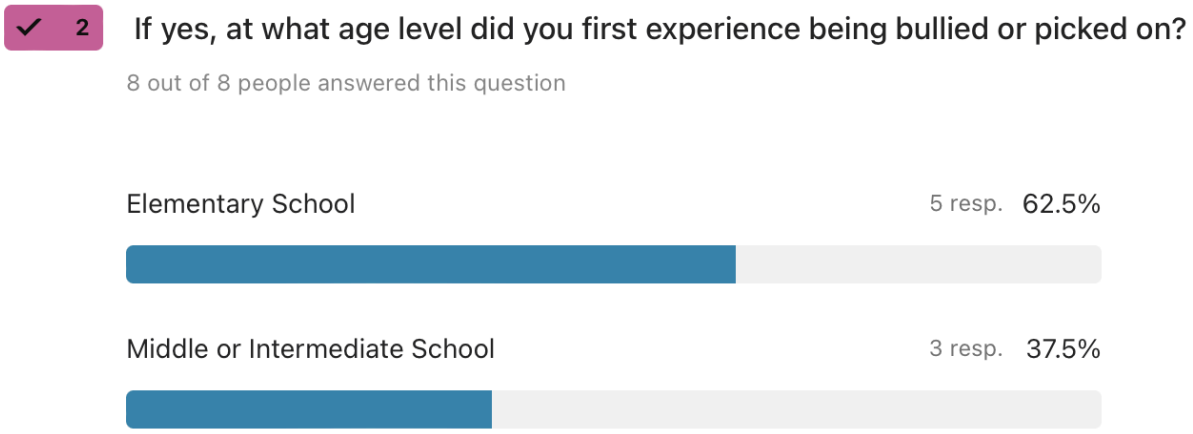

Figure 15: HF–ASD Students were asked about age level of first bullying victimization

A parental adaptation of this query was formulated for implementation in the present research, as depicted in Figure 16.

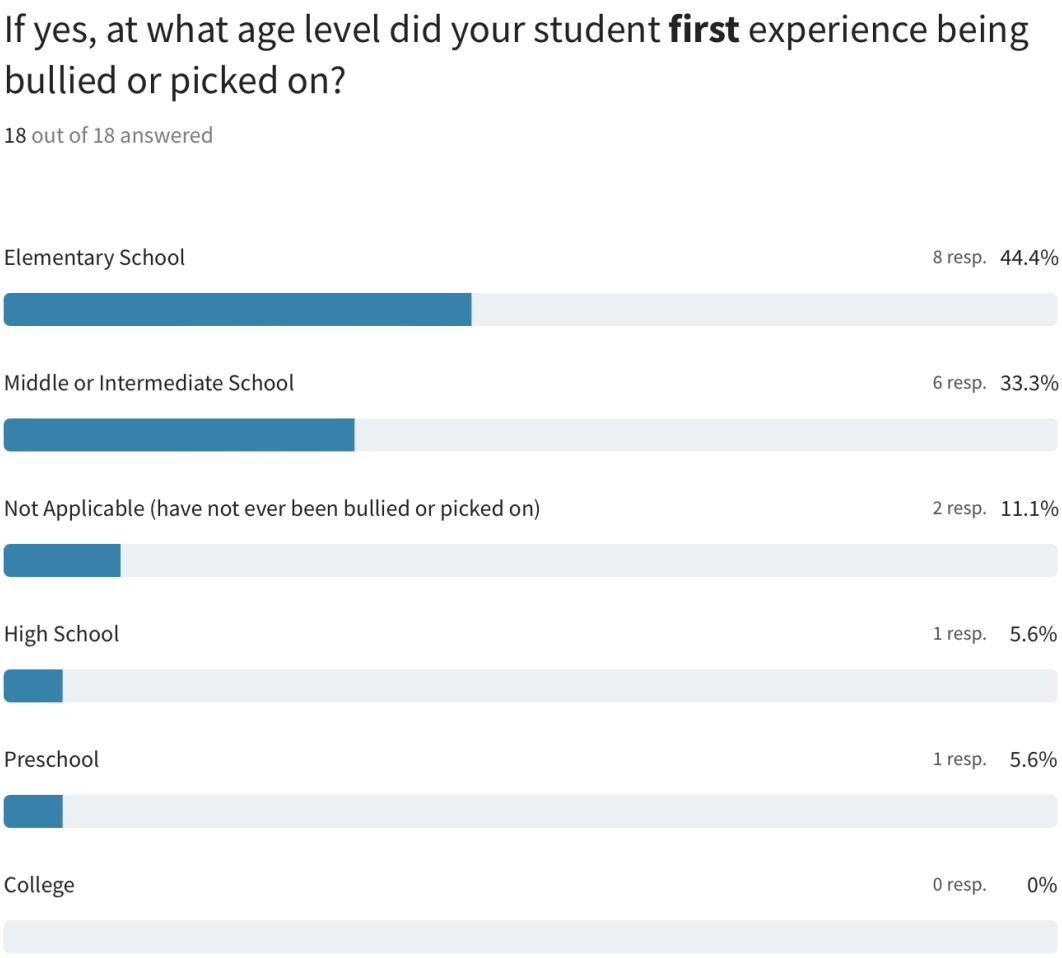

Figure 16: Parent response about student's age level of first bullying victimization

Subsequently, participants were inquired about the timing of their most recent encounter with bullying, as noted by figure 17 below.

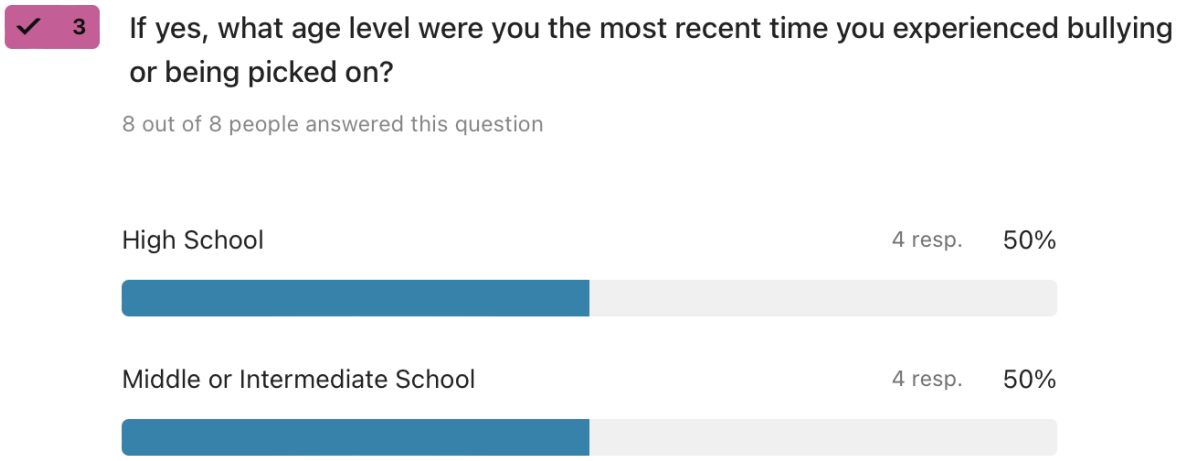

Figure 17: HF–ASD Students were asked about their most recent bullying experience

A parental adaptation of this query was formulated for implementation in the present research, as depicted in Figure 18.

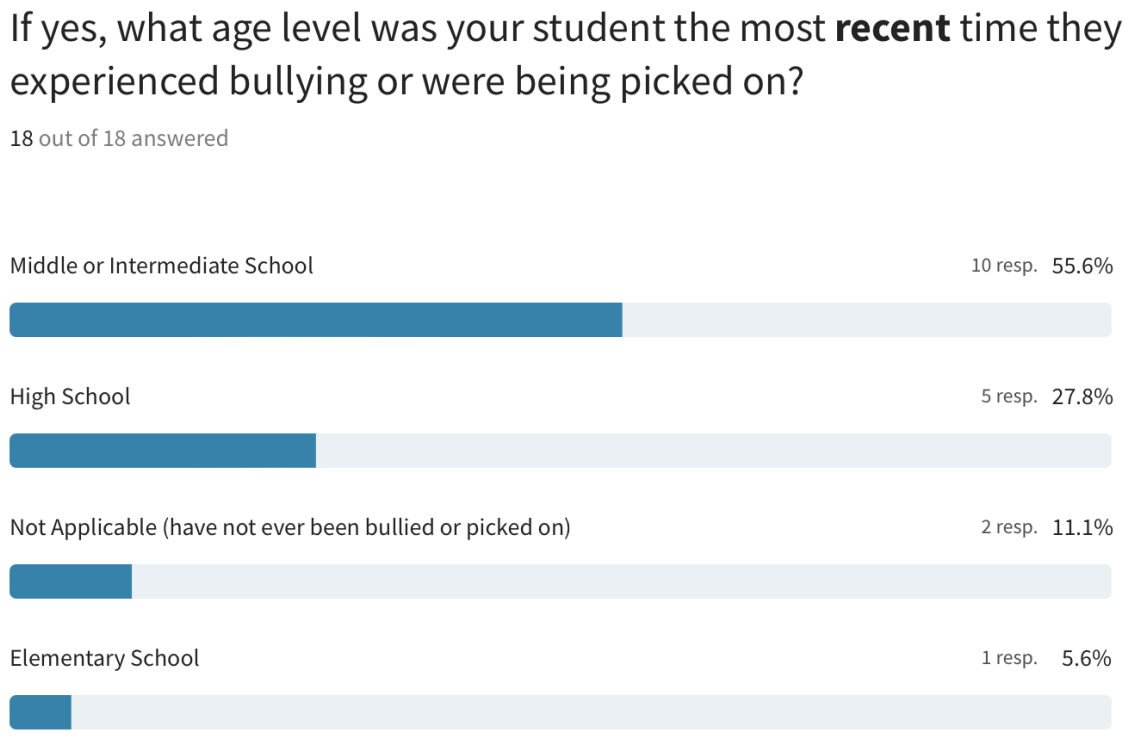

Figure 18: Parent response about student's most recent bullying experience

4.3 Diversities in Bullying Manifestations, 1st Person Victimizations

To investigate the nuances in bullying manifestations, both students and their parents were presented with a sequence of inquiries regarding their personal encounters with bullying dynamics. First, students and parents were asked to share their experiences and perceptions of forced behavior as part of bullying victimization, as seen in figures 19 and 20 below.

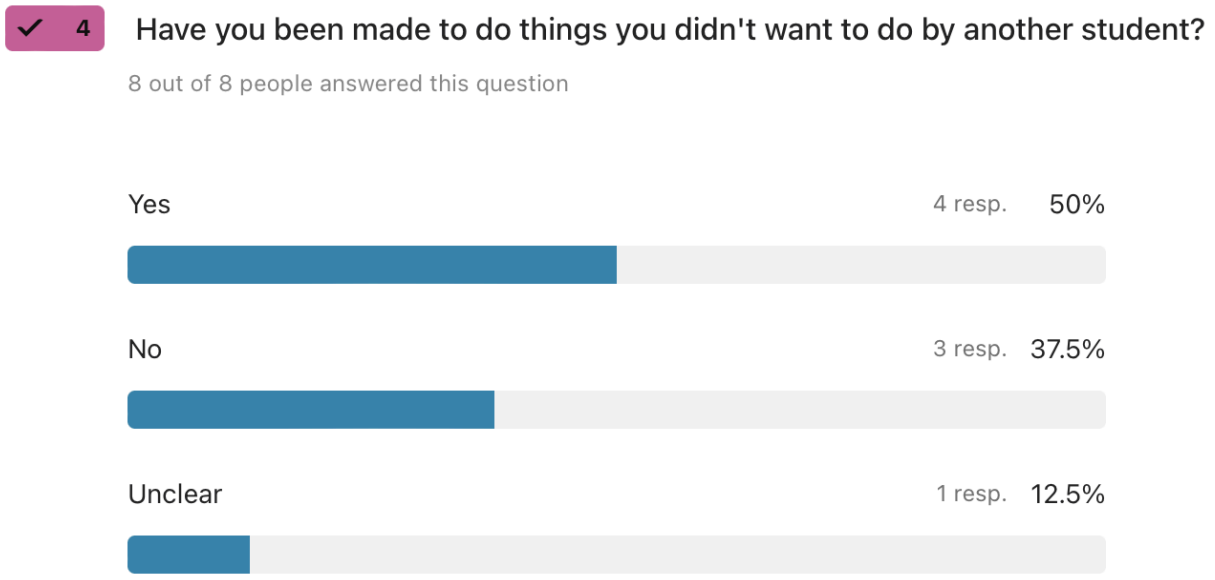

Figure 19: HF-ASD Students were asked about forced behavior - bullying victimization

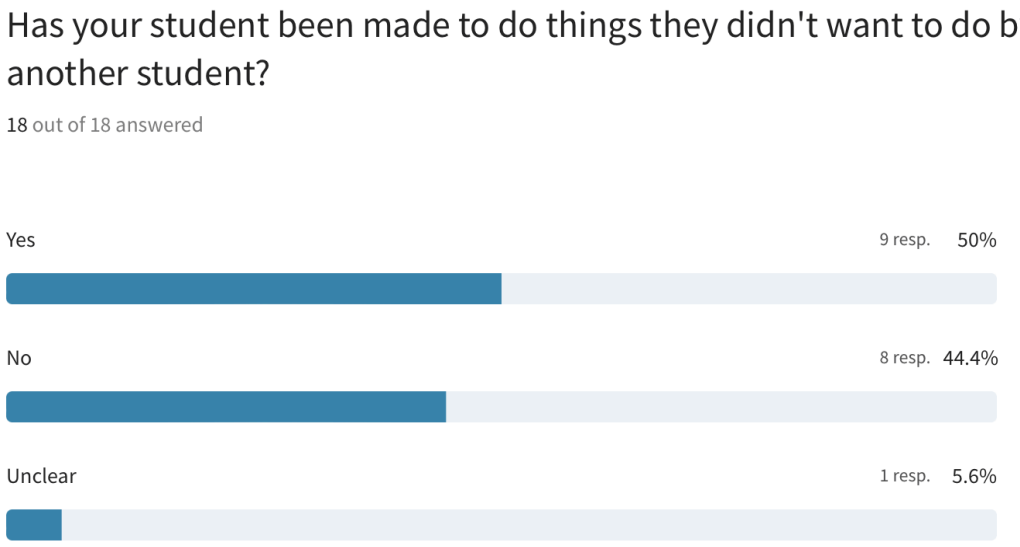

Figure 20: Parent Response regarding forced behavior - bullying victimization

Subsequently, acknowledging that one of the triadic diagnostic criteria pertains to challenges in social communication, participants were queried regarding instances of verbal bullying, as delineated in Figures 21 and 22.

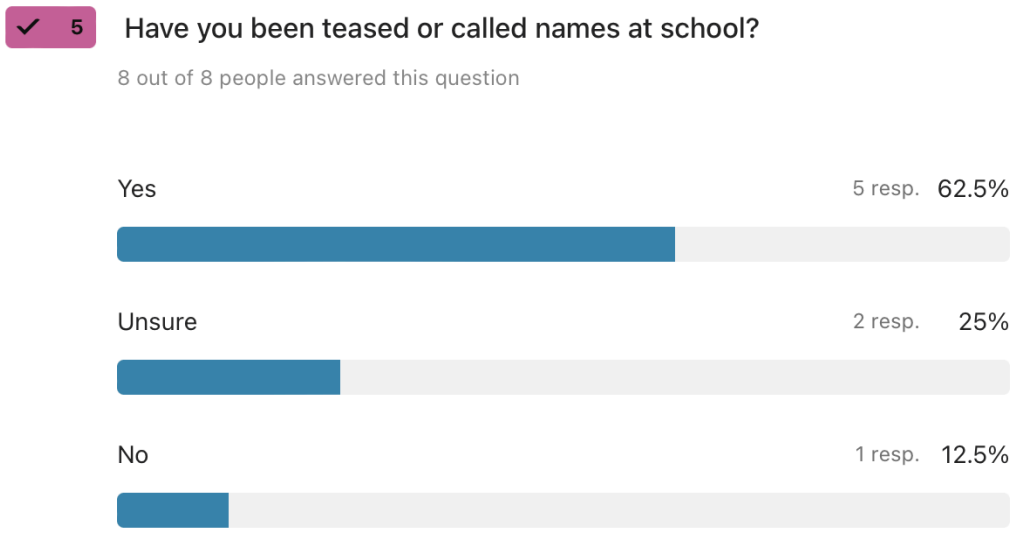

Figure 21: HF-ASD Students were asked about verbal bullying victimization

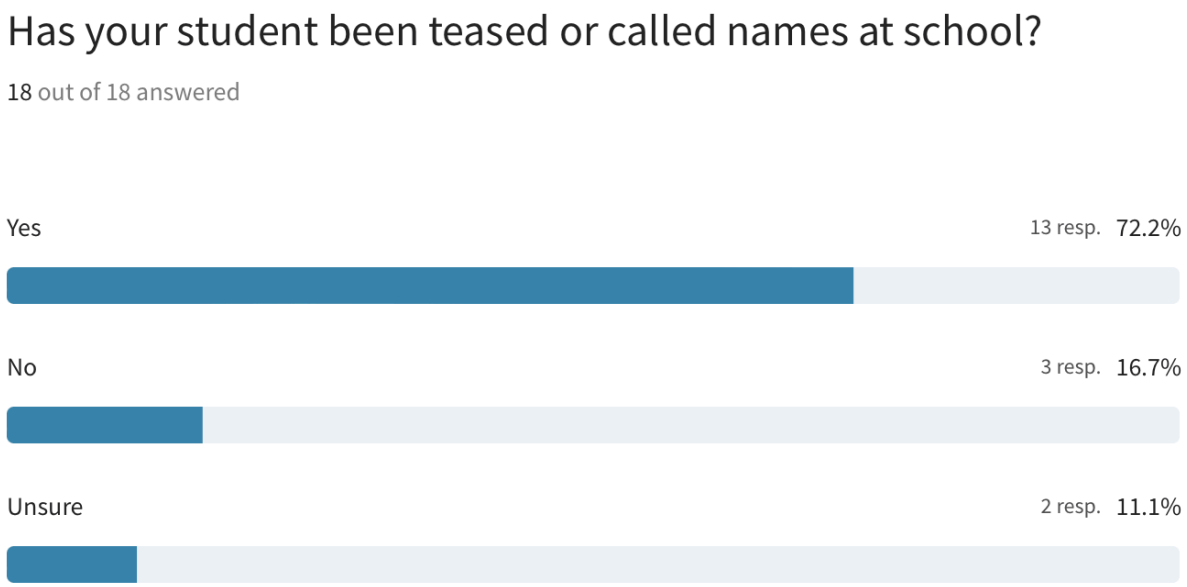

Figure 22: Parent Response regarding verbal bullying victimization

4.4 Socialization and Conversation Skills

Considering the established linkage between socialization and bullying, alongside the potential mitigating effects of conversational skills and social support on bullying occurrences, both students and parents of students with HF-ASD were asked Likert-scale questions pertaining to socialization, as well as communication proficiencies and preferences.

First, participants were asked a question about student interest in socializing with other students, as noted in figures 23 and 24 below. This response to this question was set up on a six-point Likert scale, with a higher score indicating an increased interest in social interaction.

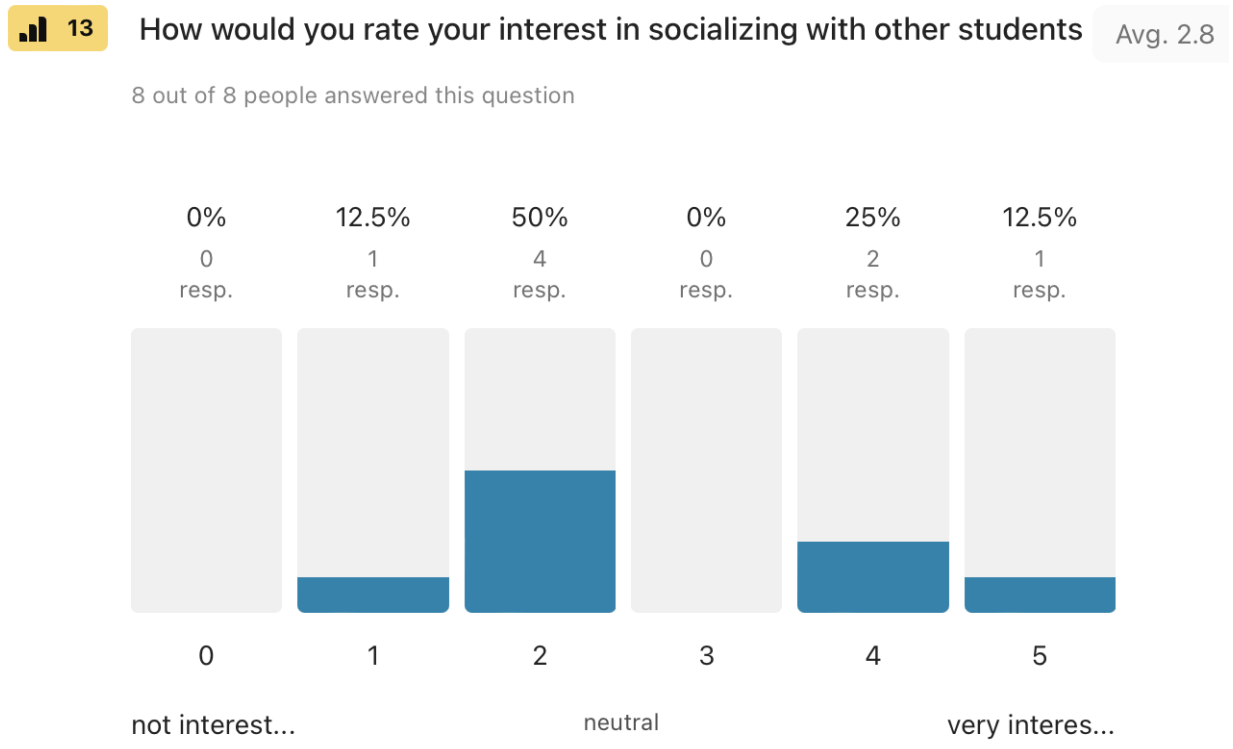

Figure 23: HF-ASD Student Response regarding interest in socialization

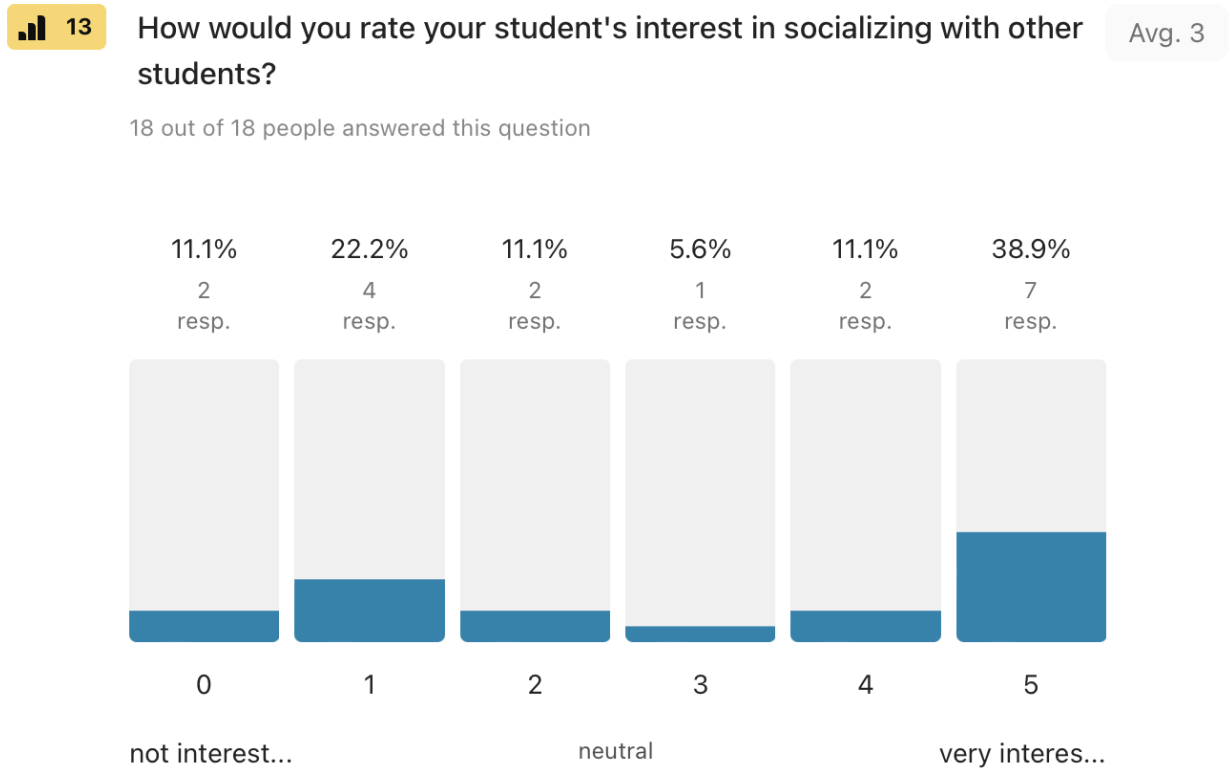

Figure 24: Parent Response regarding interest in socialization

Next, participants were asked to assess conversational proficiency of the student, as seen in figures 25 and 26 below. This response to this question was set up on a six-point Likert scale, with a higher score indicating an increased proficiency in social interaction.

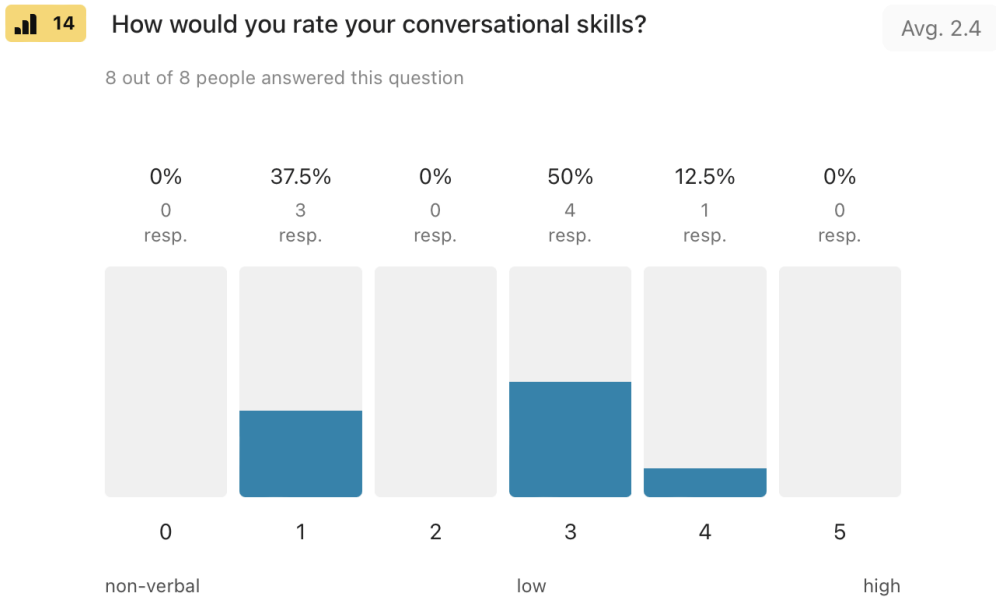

Figure 25: HF-ASD Student assessment score of their conversational skills

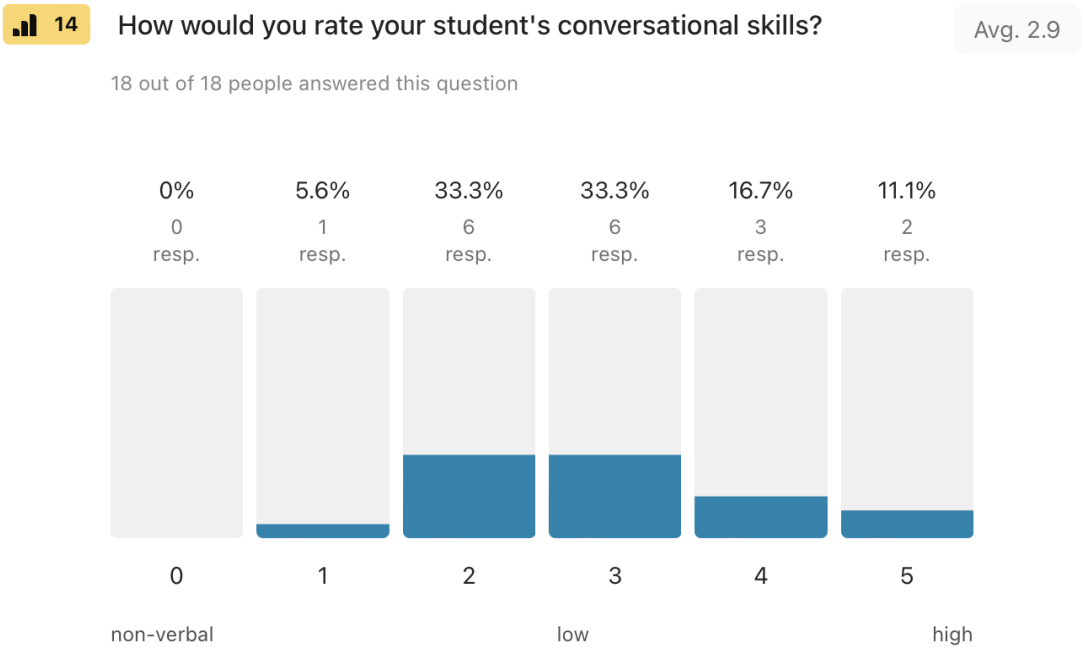

Figure 26: Parent Response assessment score of student conversational skills

The final question in this category was around the frequency of social or friendship interaction, the data for which is outlined in figures 27 and 28 below. The response for this question was set up on a seven-point Likert scale to correlate with the days of the week.

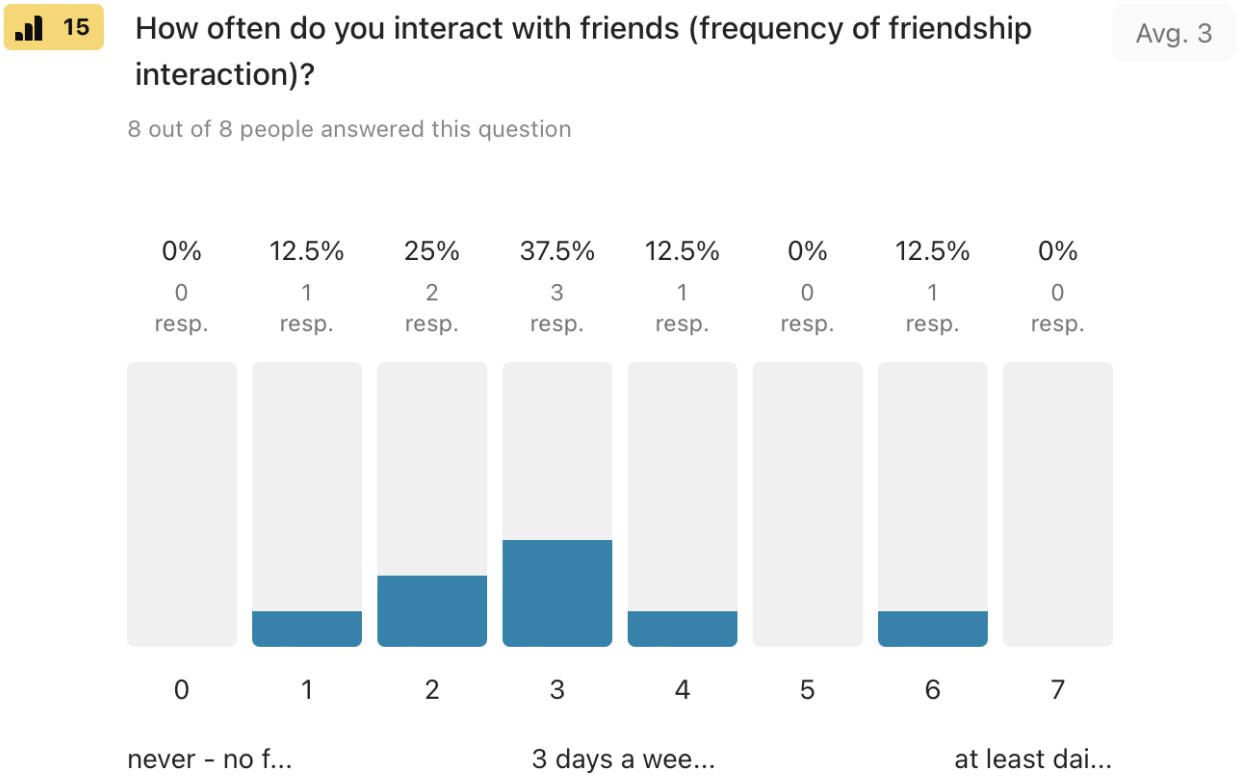

Figure 27: Student Response to frequency of friendship interaction

The highest response from students was three days a week, with outliers at one day and six days a week. With parents, as noted in figure 28

below, the highest returned response was one day a week, followed by six days a week.

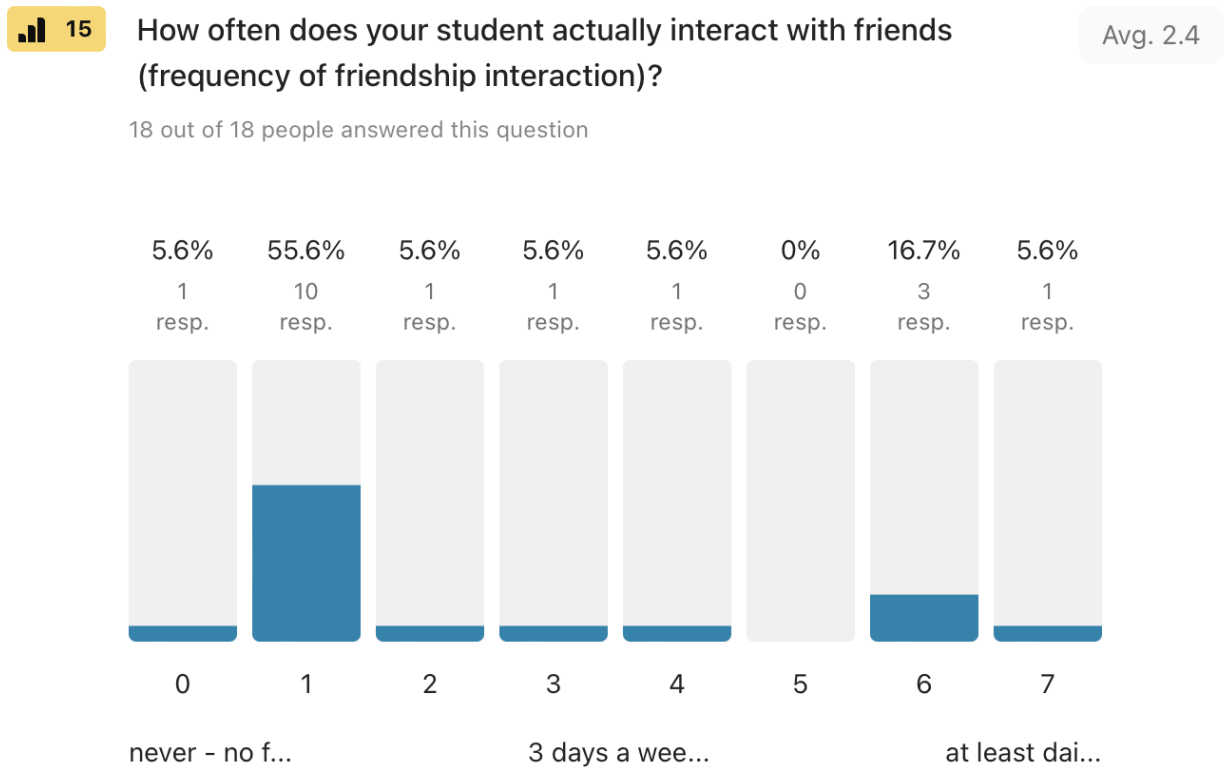

Figure 28: Student Response to frequency of friendship interaction

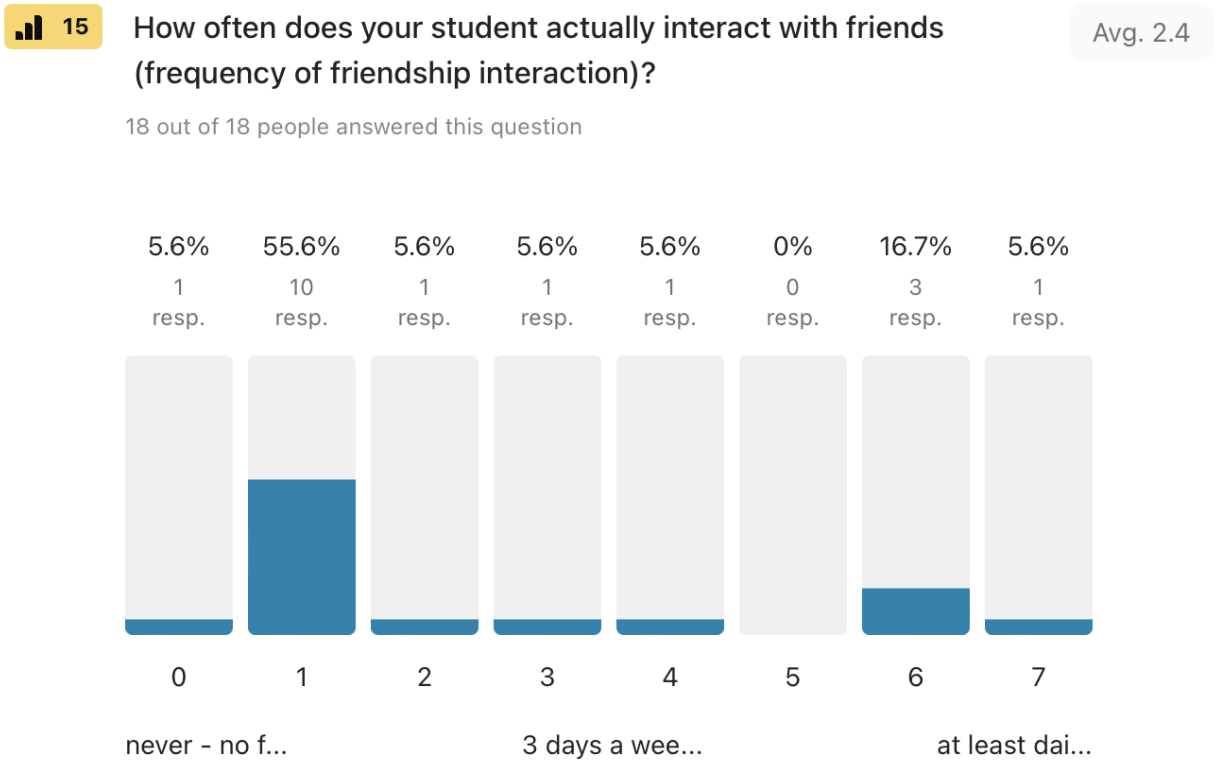

Figure 29: Parent Response to frequency of friendship interaction

4.6 Additional Parental Insight into Student Social Interaction

Parents were asked six additional questions related to their HF-autistic students' desire for social interaction with their peers.

First, parents were asked the *level* of their student's desire to interact with peers compared to actual. As noted in figure 30 below, it is

significantly higher than the 2.4 average interactions per week outlined in figure 29 above.

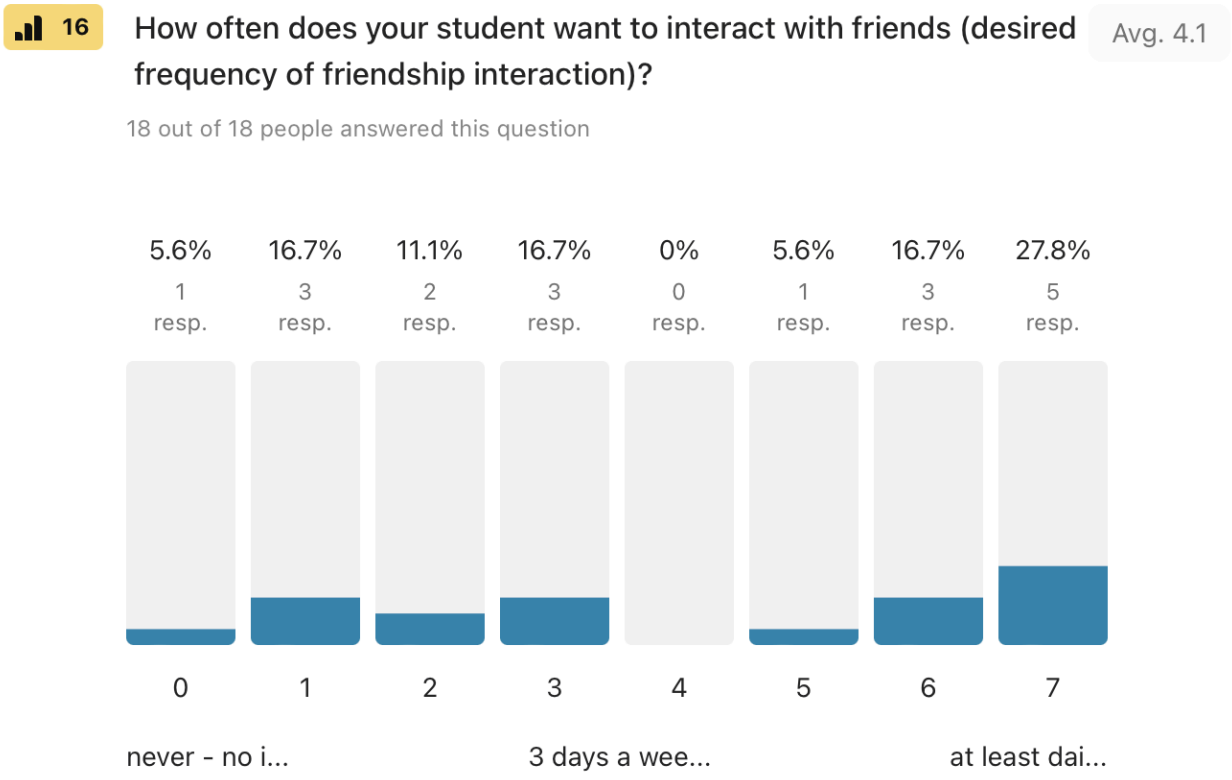

Figure 30: Parent Response to desired frequency of friendship interaction

Next, parents were asked how often their students entered into group conversations or activities without prompting. It is notable, but not surprising given the characteristics associated with autism, only slightly more than 10% responded that their student routinely interacted with others without prompting, as shown in figure 33 below.

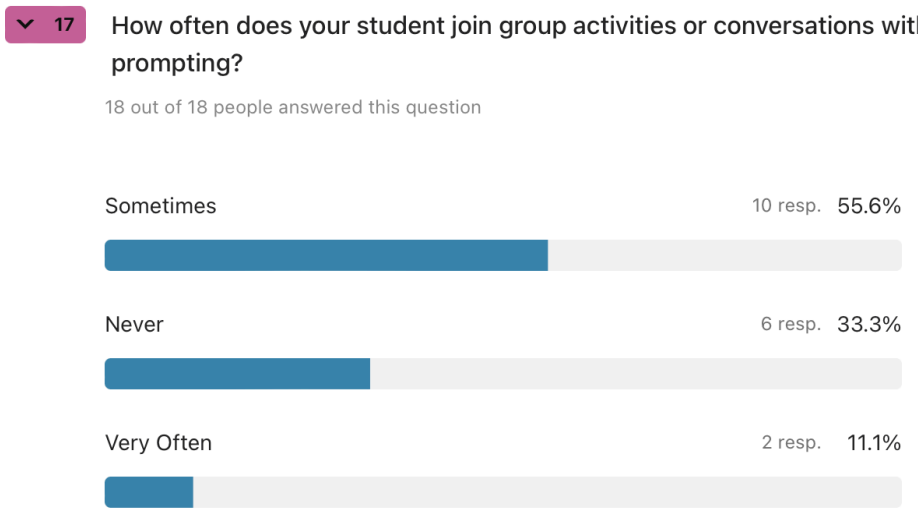

Figure 31: Parent Response to need for prompting to join group activities or conversations

Next, parents were asked about their perceptions of their student's ability to make friends.

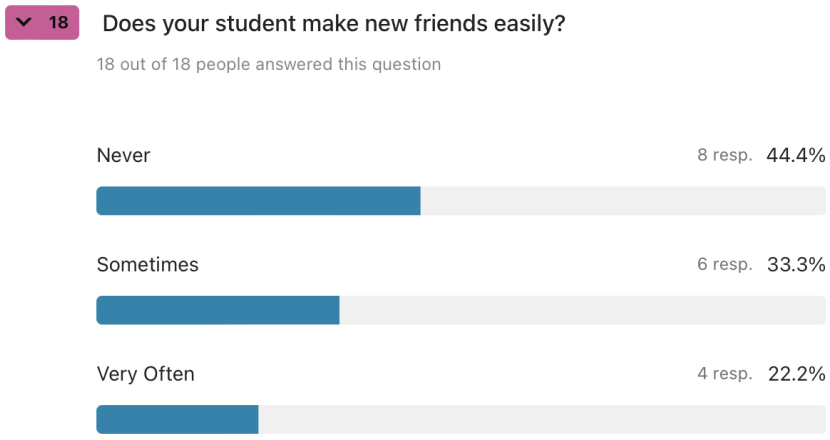

Figure 32: Parent Response to student with HF-autism's ability to make friends

Subsequently, parents were asked to rate their perception of their student's social confidence levels, seen in figure 33 below.

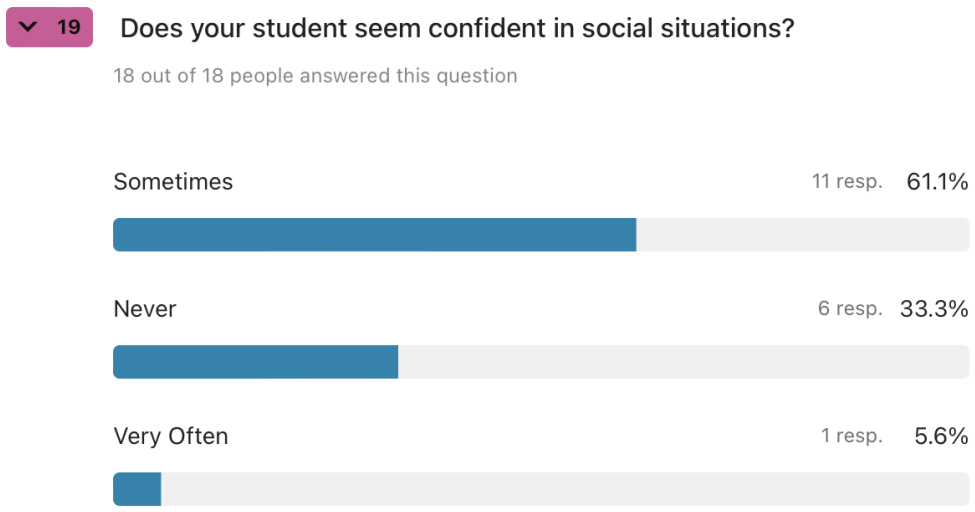

Figure 33: Parent Response of student with HF-autism perceived social confidence

Then, parents were asked to report their perceptions of how frequently their student with HF-autism initiated conversation versus waiting to join an existing conversation. Only 1:6 reported their student would "very often" or routinely start up a conversation, as shown in figure 34 below.

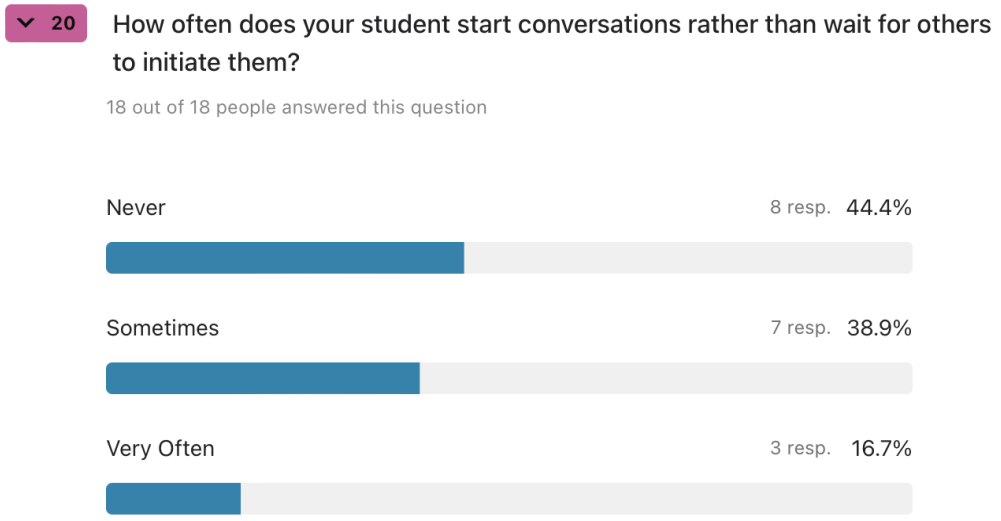

Figure 34: Parent Response of student with HF-autism perceived social confidence

Finally, parents were asked how willing their students were to engage in conversation outside of restricted interests, a hallmark characteristic of autism, as noted in figure 35 below. Two-thirds of parental responses indicated their student would "sometimes" be willing to participate in conversations outside of their own restricted interests, with one-third reporting their students would not.

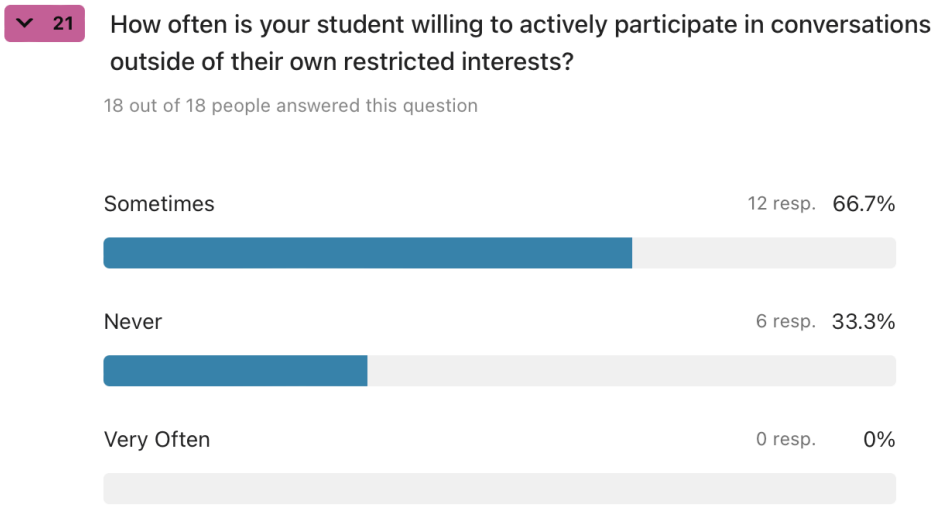

Figure 35: Parent Response of student with HF-autism willingness to socialize outside of restricted interests.

4.5 Incidences of Bullying at School

The second survey students and parents were asked to complete related to incidents of bullying and school and their perceptions of school support. One of the students did not complete the survey responses in its entirety, so their responses were excluded from analysis. Six of the parents did not complete the responses in their entirety, so their responses were also excluded from analysis.

Students and parents were asked how often they experienced bullying during the 2022-203 school year. The vast majority of students with

HF-autism reported bullying victimization happening to them **one to two times a month**, with nearly 15% reporting **bullying victimization occurred nearly every school day.** Data associated with this query is outlined in figure 36 below.

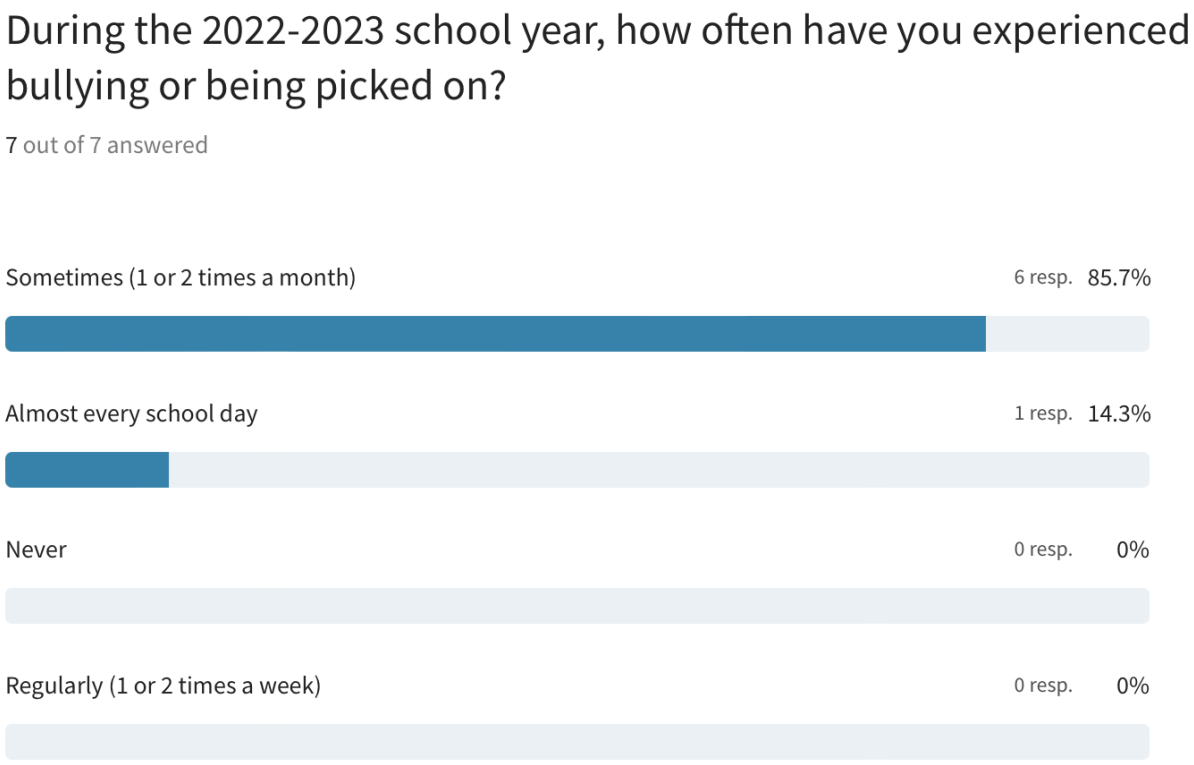

Figure 36: Student Response to frequency of bullying victimization at school

When looking at parental agreement in the same question, the numbers changed significantly, as revealed in figure 37 below.

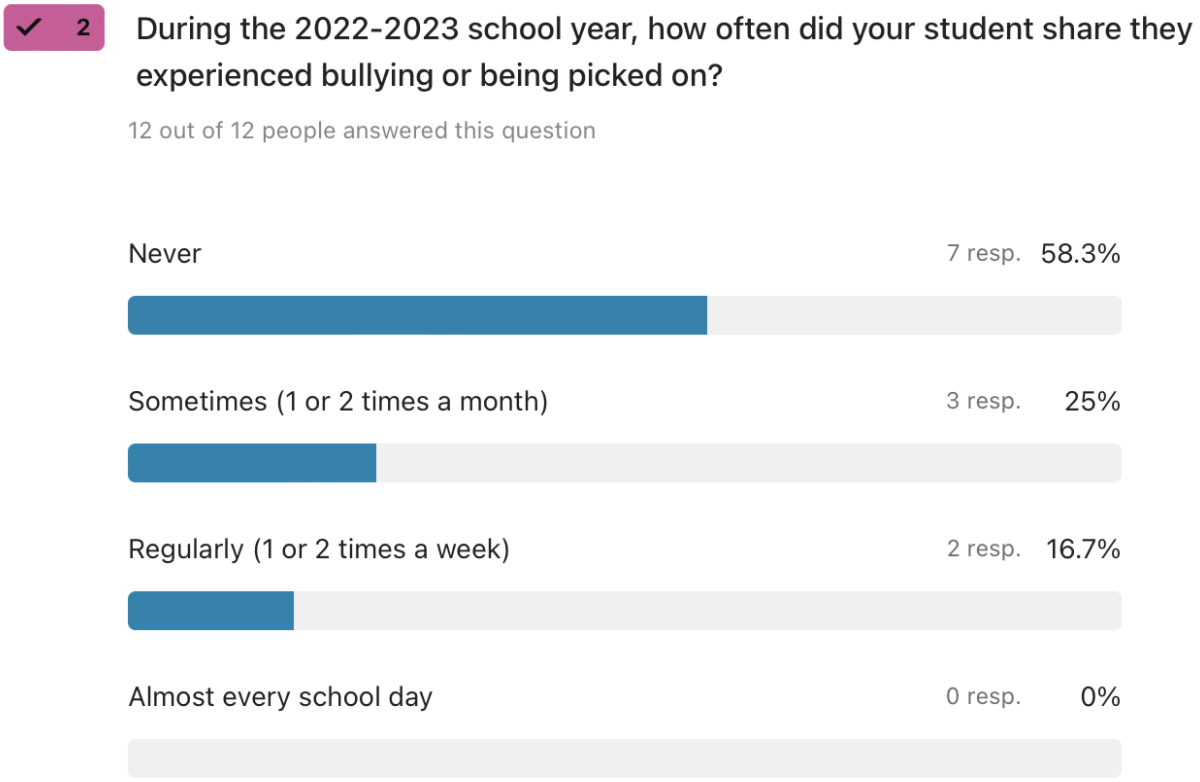

Figure 37: Parental Response to student self-reporting frequency of bullying victimization at school to them

Students and parents were also asked about how often students with HF-autism saw *other students* experience bullying victimization at school, as noted in figures 38 and 39 below.

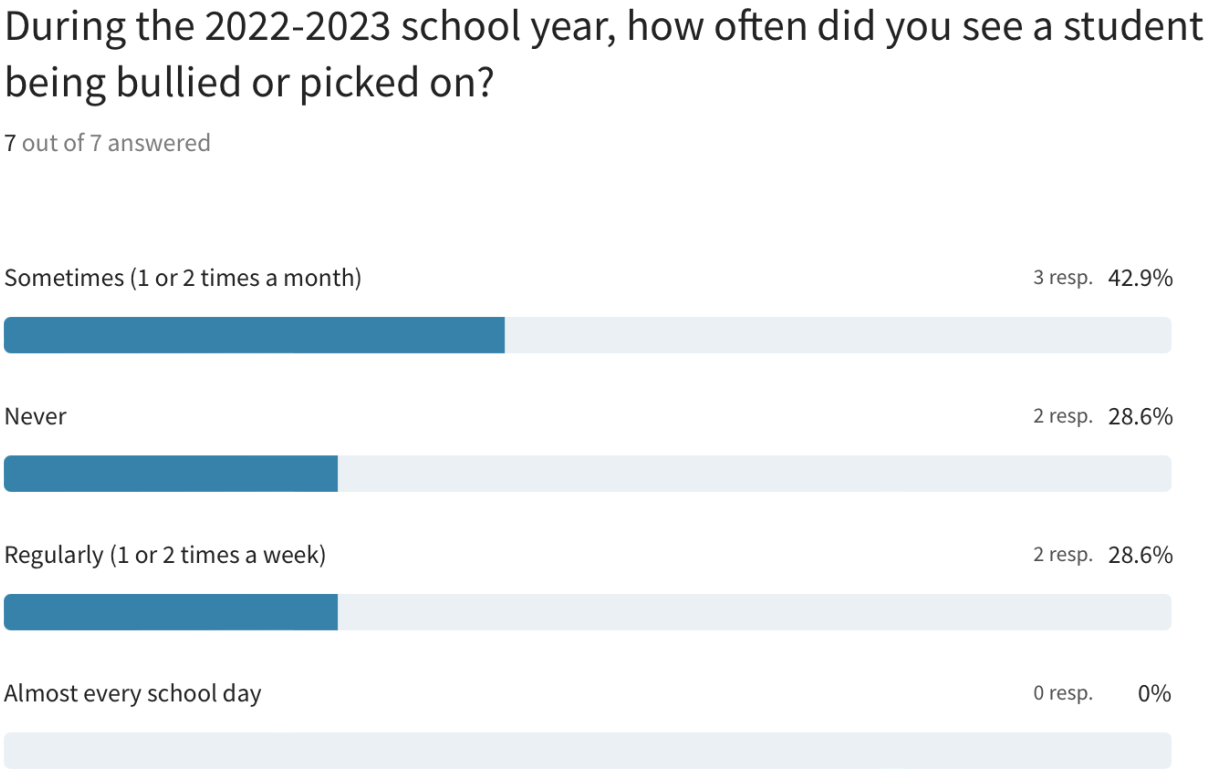

Figure 38: Student with HF-autism Response to frequency of bullying victimization *of others* at school

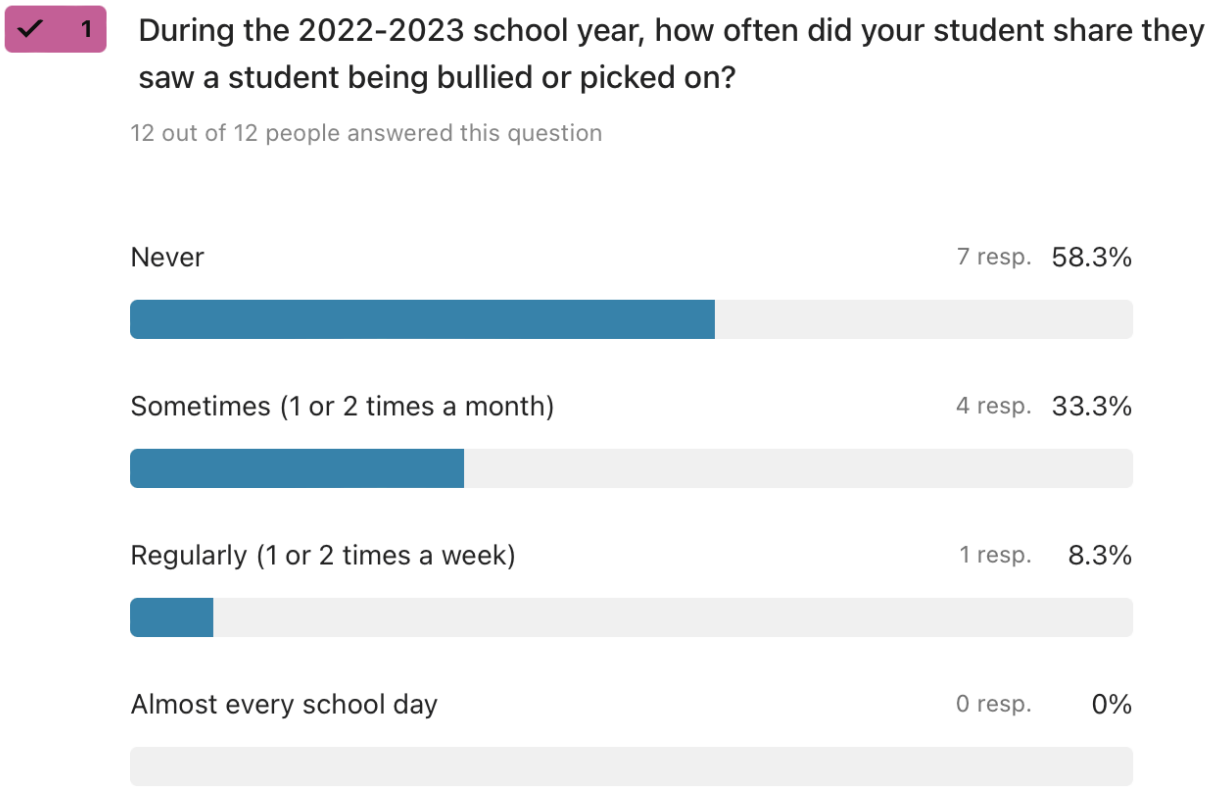

Figure 39: Parental Response to student with HF-autism reporting frequency of bullying victimization *of others* at school to them

Students and parents were then asked about the method and manner of students' with HF-autism bullying victimization experiences at school, as outlined in figure 40, 41a and 41b below. The most common student self-reported responses were verbal bullying and social exclusion. When looking at parental agreement responses, it was noted that physical bullying was present in 25% of responses, but absent from student self-reported responses.

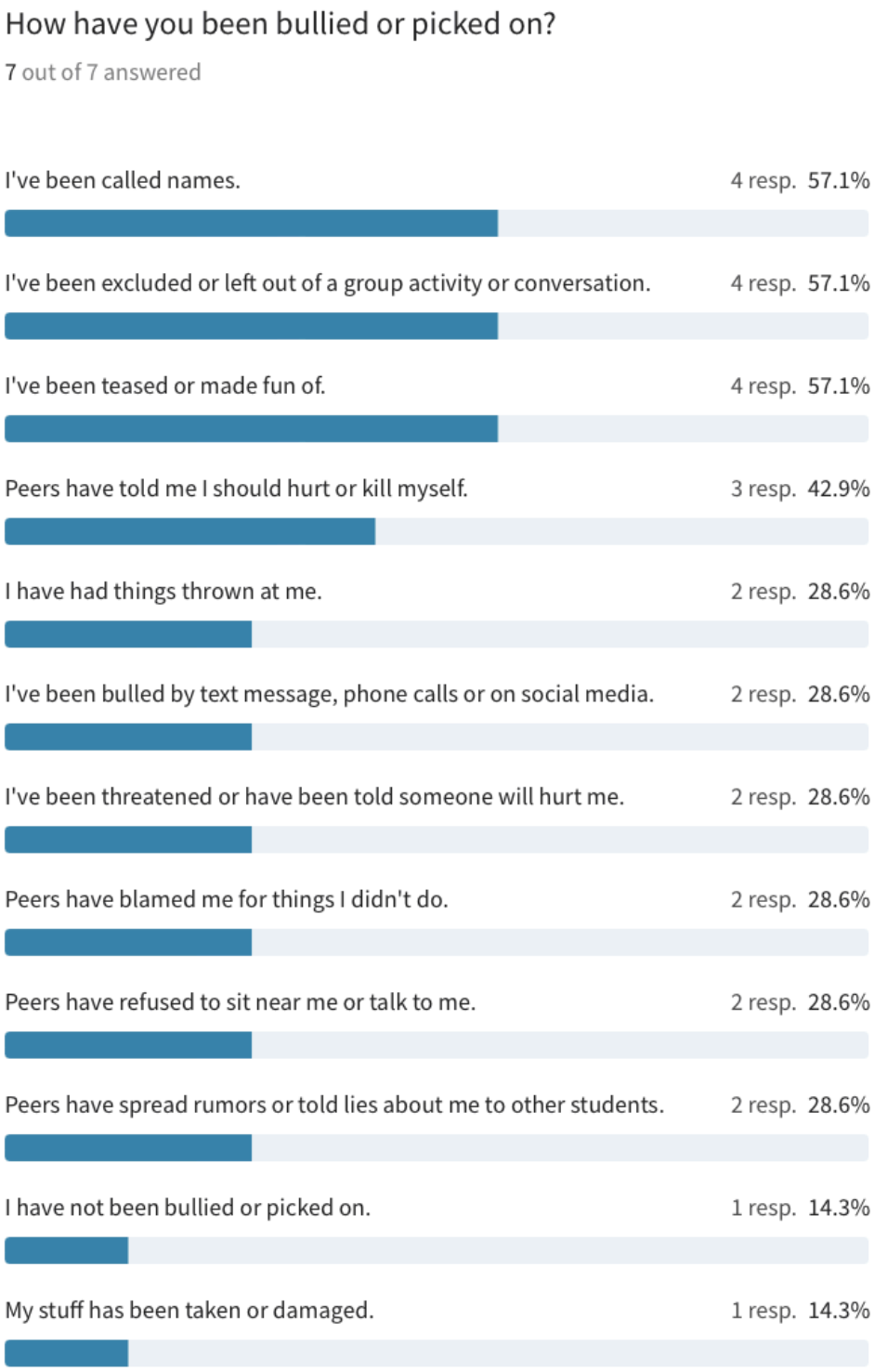

Figure 40: Student Self-Report of methods of bullying victimization at school

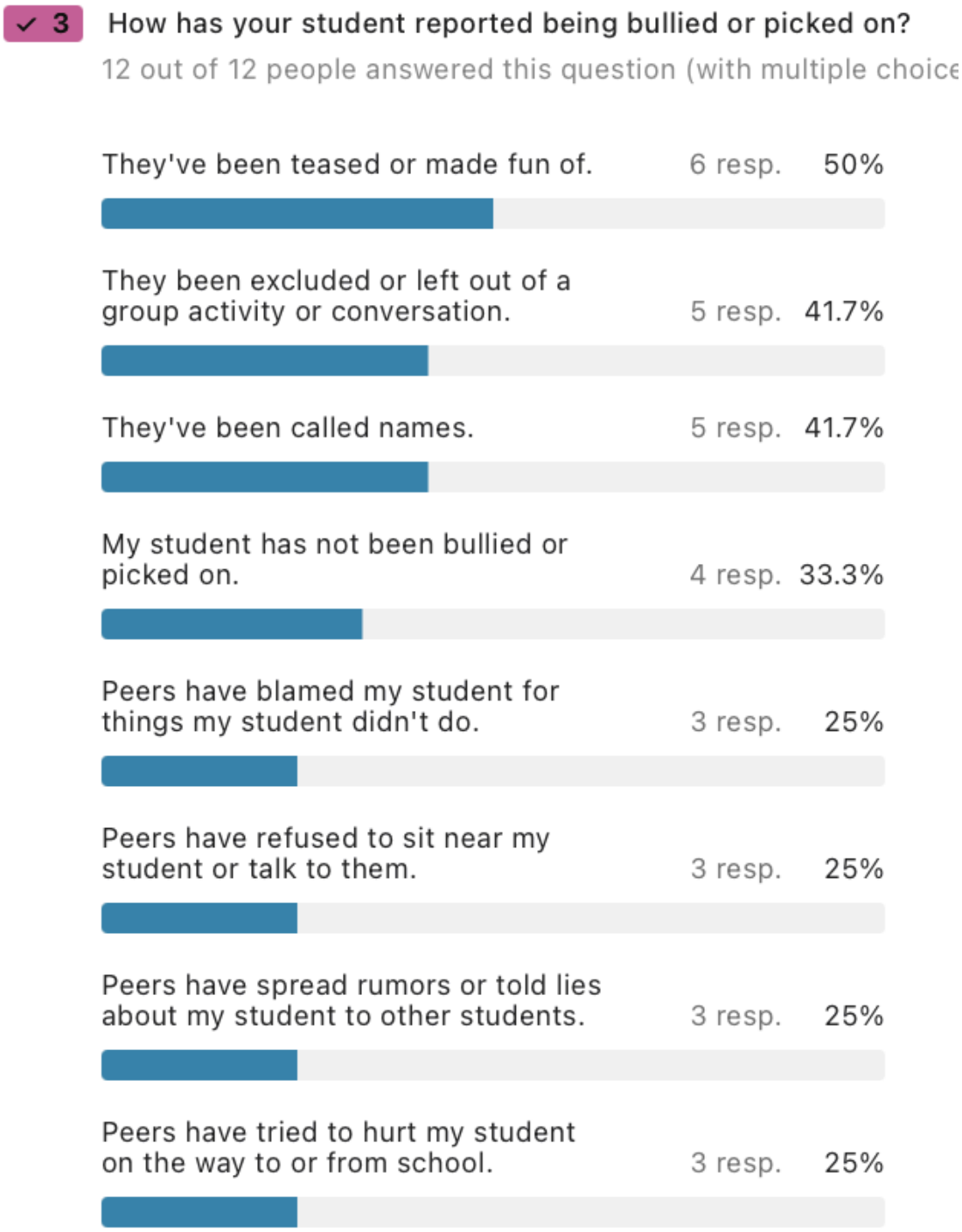

Figure 41a: Parent Report of Student Self-Report of methods of bullying victimization at school (1/2)

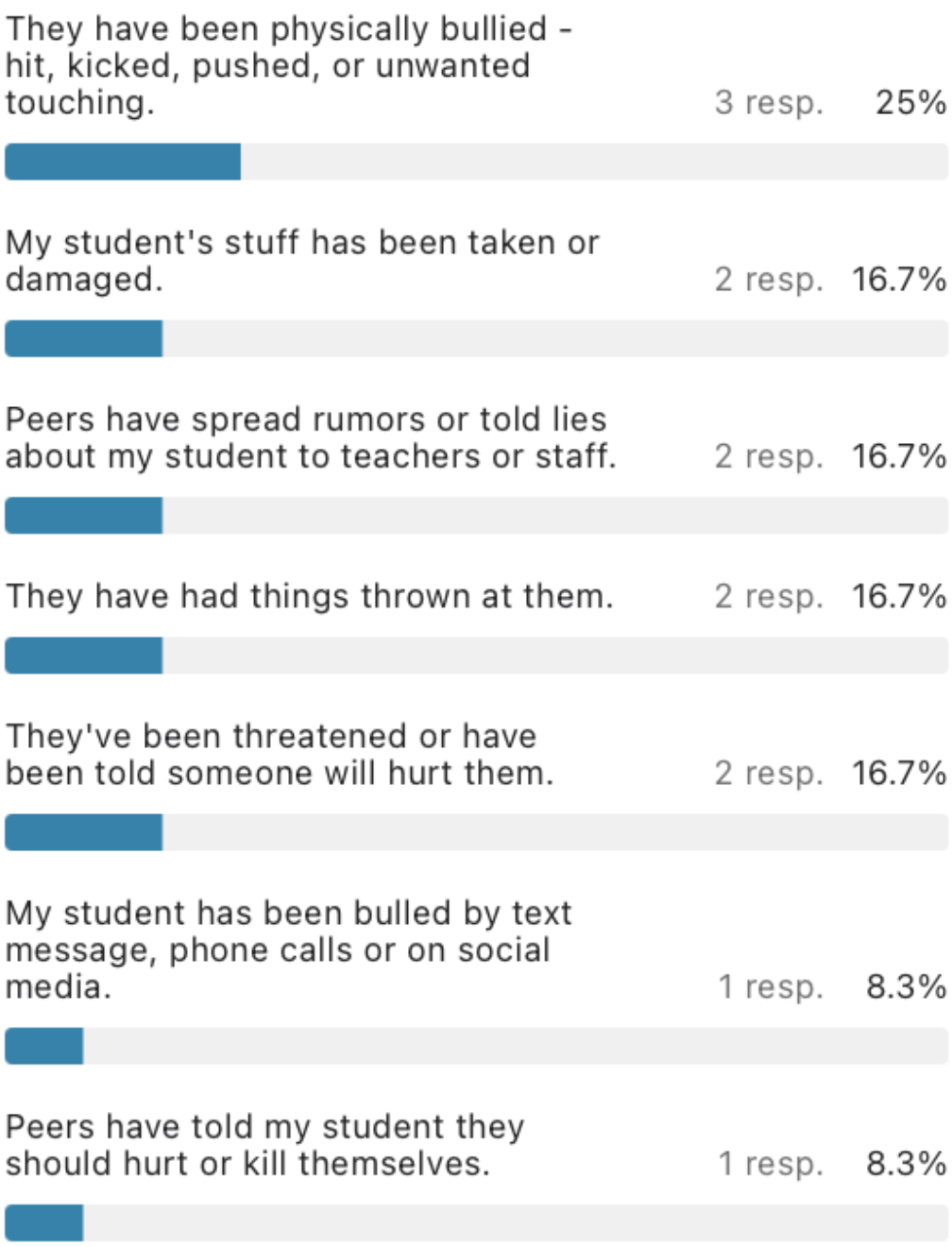

Figure 41b: Parent Report of Student's Self-Report of methods of bullying victimization at school (2/2)

In the subsequent analysis, both students with HF-autism and their parents were inquired about the number of bullying perpetrators targeting the former, as depicted in Figures 42 and 43. A noteworthy discrepancy between parental perceptions and student self-reports emerges in this domain. Specifically, a) 25% of parents indicated that their children had not experienced bullying or teasing, whereas all the students (100%) reported incidents of being bullied. Moreover, b) 8.3% of parents believed that "many students bully or pick on my child," in stark contrast to the student self-reports which indicated a 0% agreement with this statement.

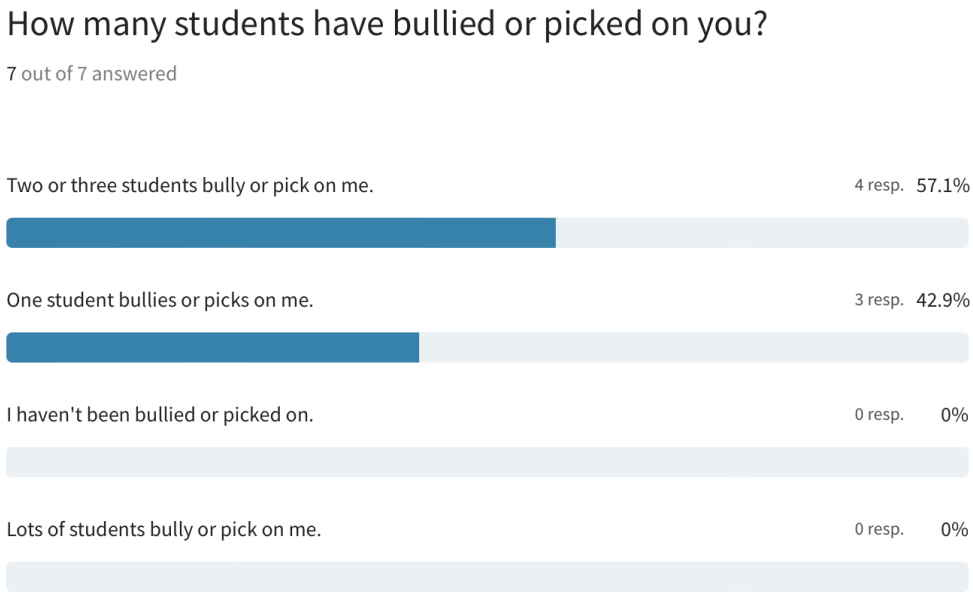

Figure 42: Student Self-Report of number of perpetrators involved in their bullying victimization experiences

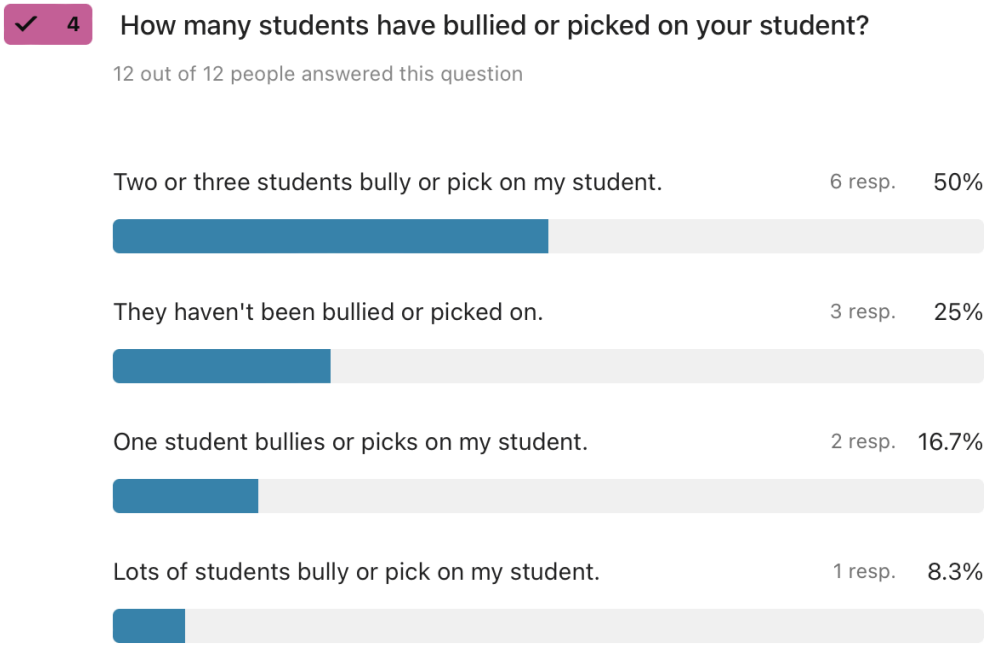

Figure 43: Parent perception of number of perpetrators involved in their bullying victimization experiences

Subsequently, students and guardians were solicited to elucidate their perspectives on the reasons they perceived bullying was directed towards them, as depicted in Figures 44 and 45. The query allowed for multiple selections. Responses from guardians indicated a 25% selection for the "other" category, which incorporated a conditional open-ended text segment for detailed explication. The elucidations provided under

the "other" category by parents encompass "not bullied," "my student displays less coordination than peers," and "currently not bullied."

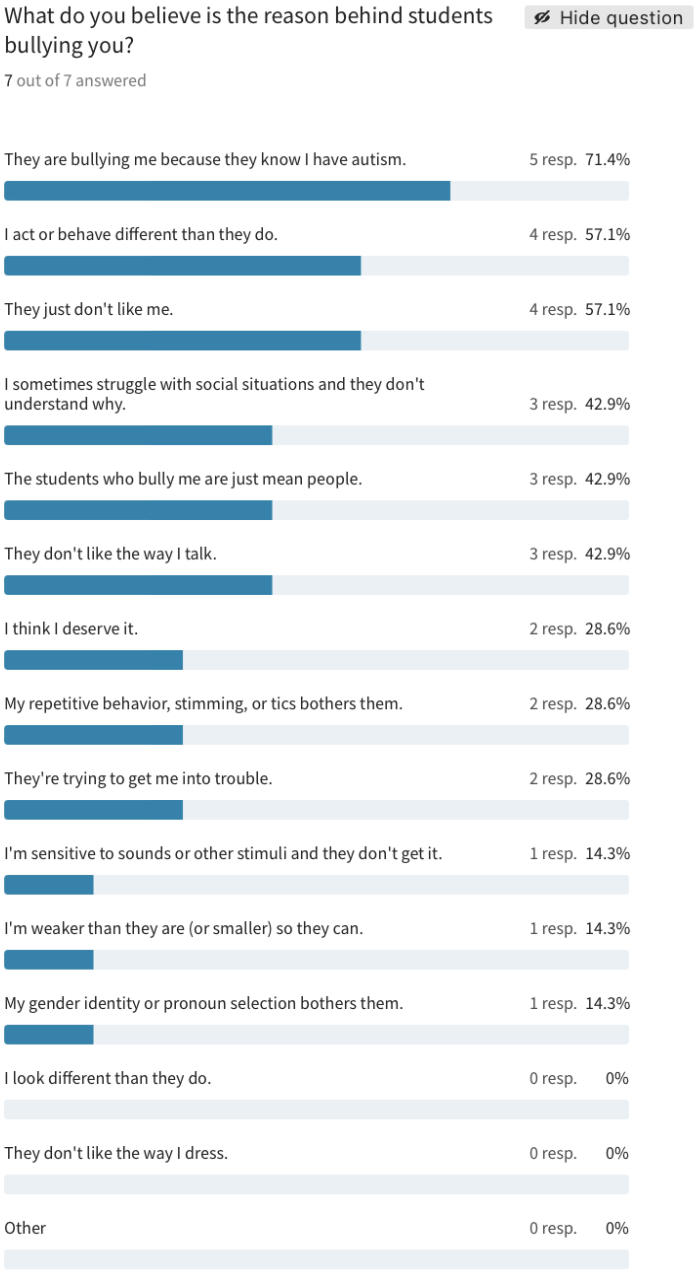

Figure 44: Student perception of why they are targets of bullying victimization

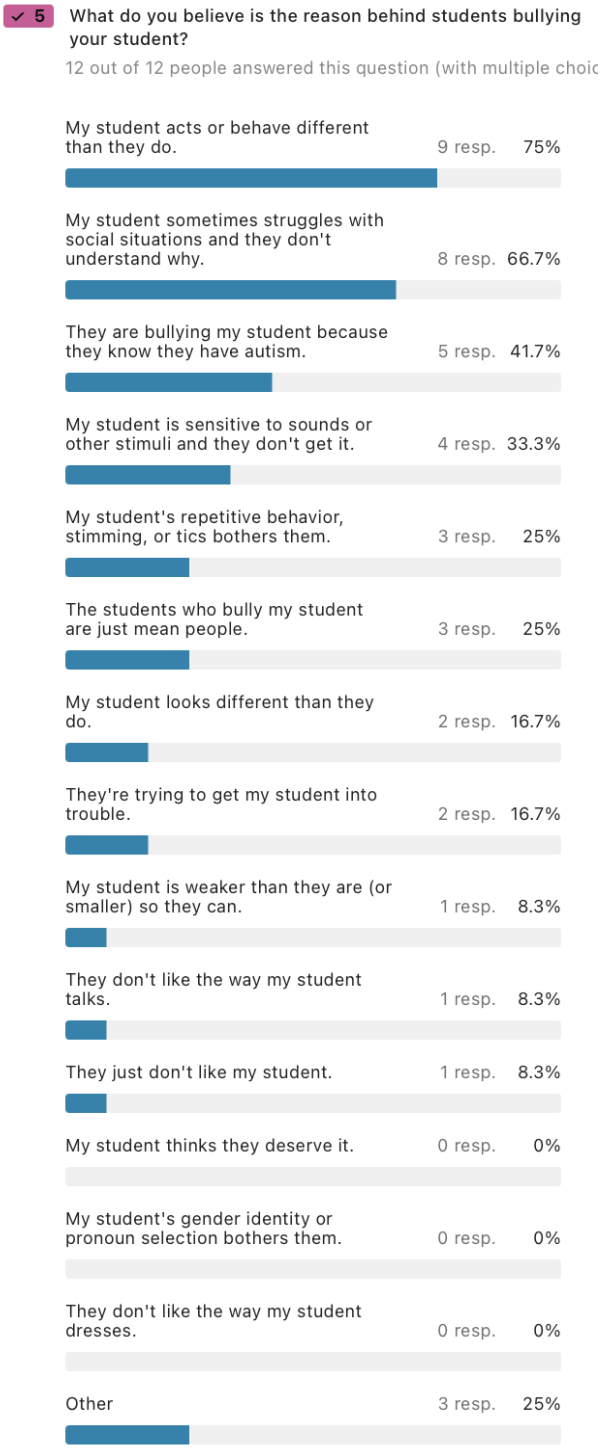

Figure 45: Parent perception of why their students are targets of bullying victimization

Next students and their parents were asked about school absenteeism or elopement due to feeling unsafe at school as a result of bullying victimization. It is noteworthy that over 25% of respondents **self-reported missing school at least once a month** due to feelings of inadequate safety and security at school, outlined in figures 46 and 47 below.

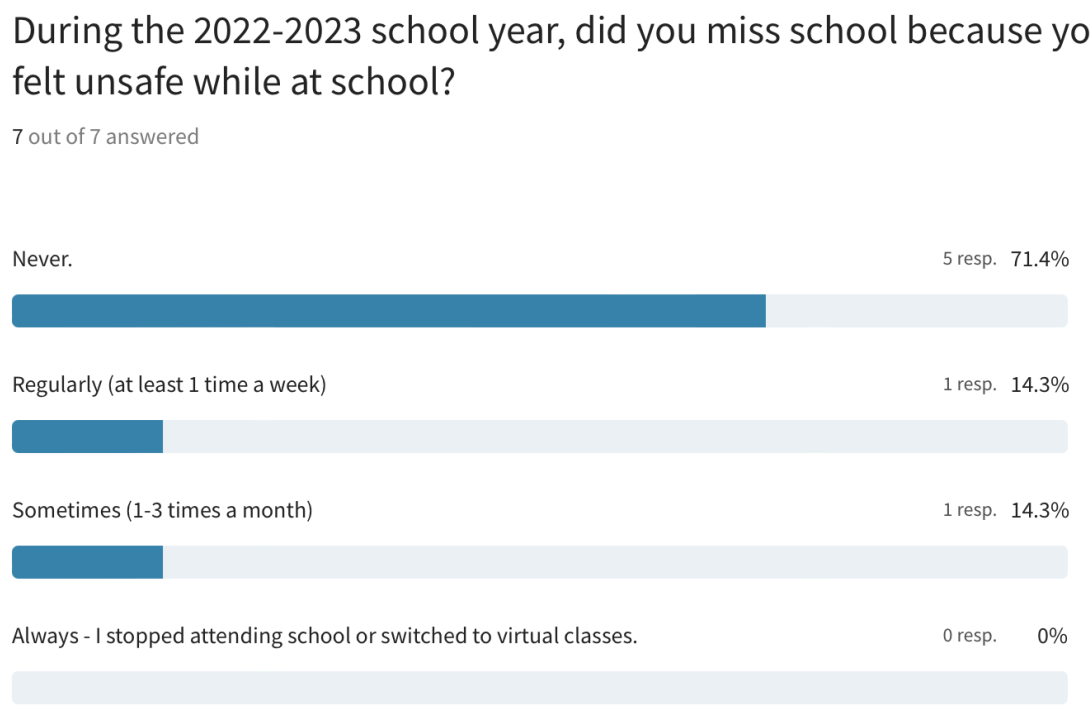

Figure 46: Student with HF-autism self-report of school absenteeism due feeling unsafe at school

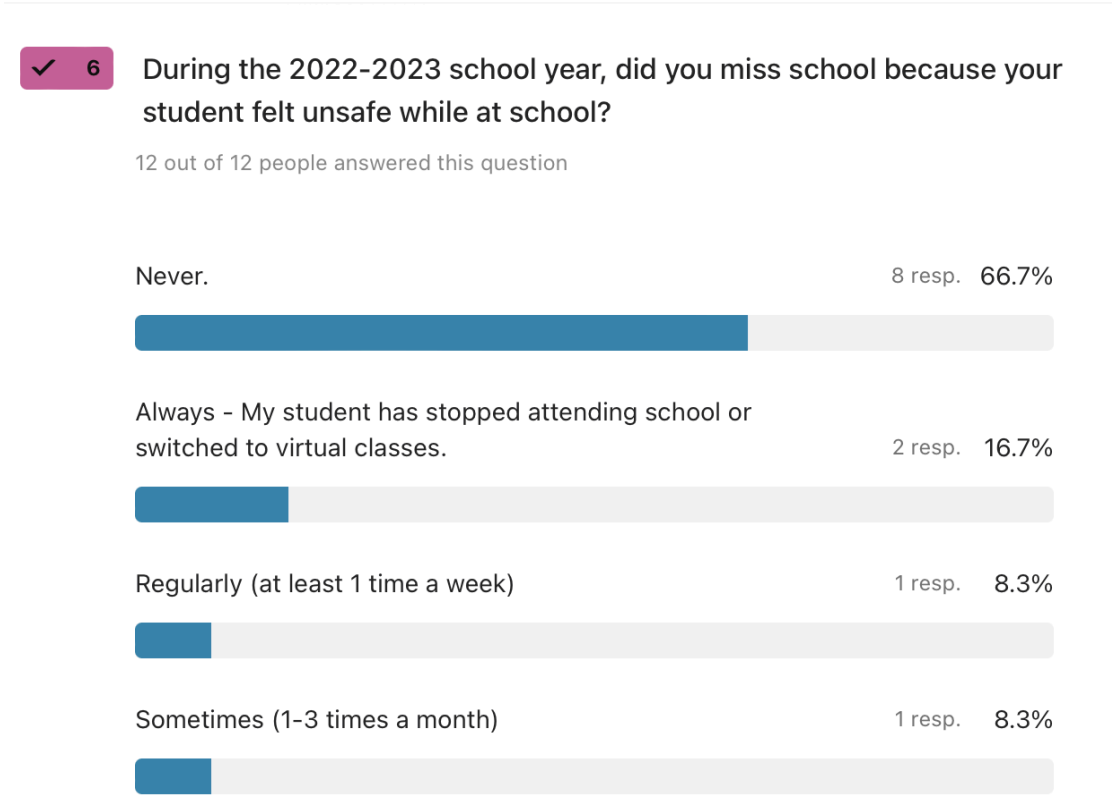

Figure 47: Parent report of school absenteeism due feeling unsafe at school

When probed about the influence of transportation to or from school on student absenteeism stemming from bullying victimization and associated safety concerns, the results were striking in two main aspects. Initially, almost 50% of the students indicated that feelings of unsafety during transit influenced their school attendance. In contrast, when examining the parental perspective on the same matter, only a quarter of guardians believed transportation contributed to absenteeism due to bullying. This presents a significant disparity when juxtaposed with the

student self-reports. These findings are visually represented in Figures 48 and 49.

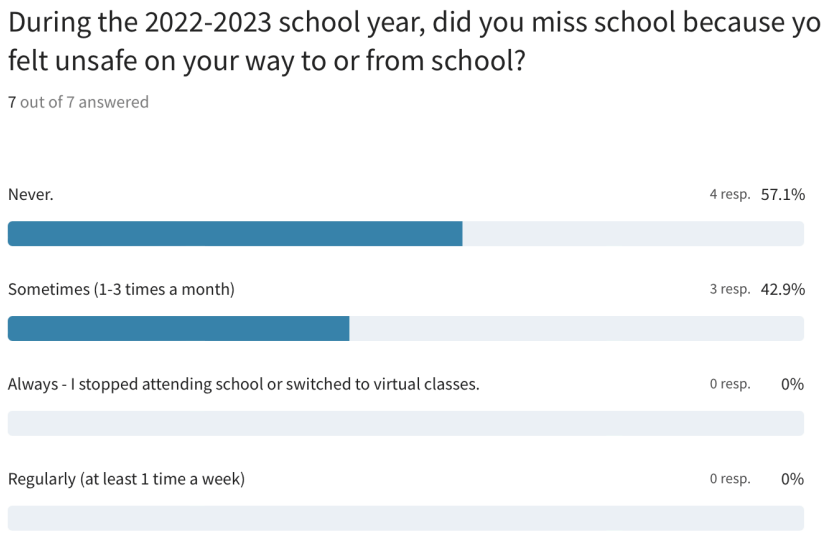

Figure 48: Student report of school absenteeism due feeling unsafe on the way to or from school

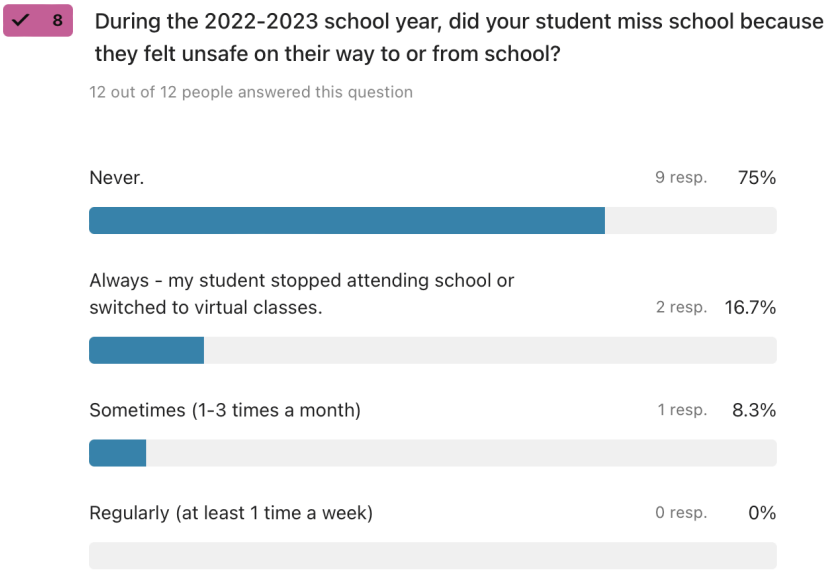

Figure 49: Parent report of school absenteeism due student feeling unsafe on the way to or from school

4.6 Perceived School Support Related to Bullying Victimization

In the following series of inquiries, both students and parents were questioned regarding their viewpoints on the level of support extended by the schools in addressing bullying and its subsequent victimization.

Initially, students were prompted to share their impressions of the adult response to witnessed bullying incidents. Alarmingly, none of the respondents believed that the school holds the aggressors accountable for their bullying behaviors, with over seventy-five percent of the surveyed individuals perceiving a lack of intervention from the school to halt bullying instances. Furthermore, close to 15% of respondents sensed that the school staff attributes the responsibility of the bully's actions and behaviors to the victims themselves.

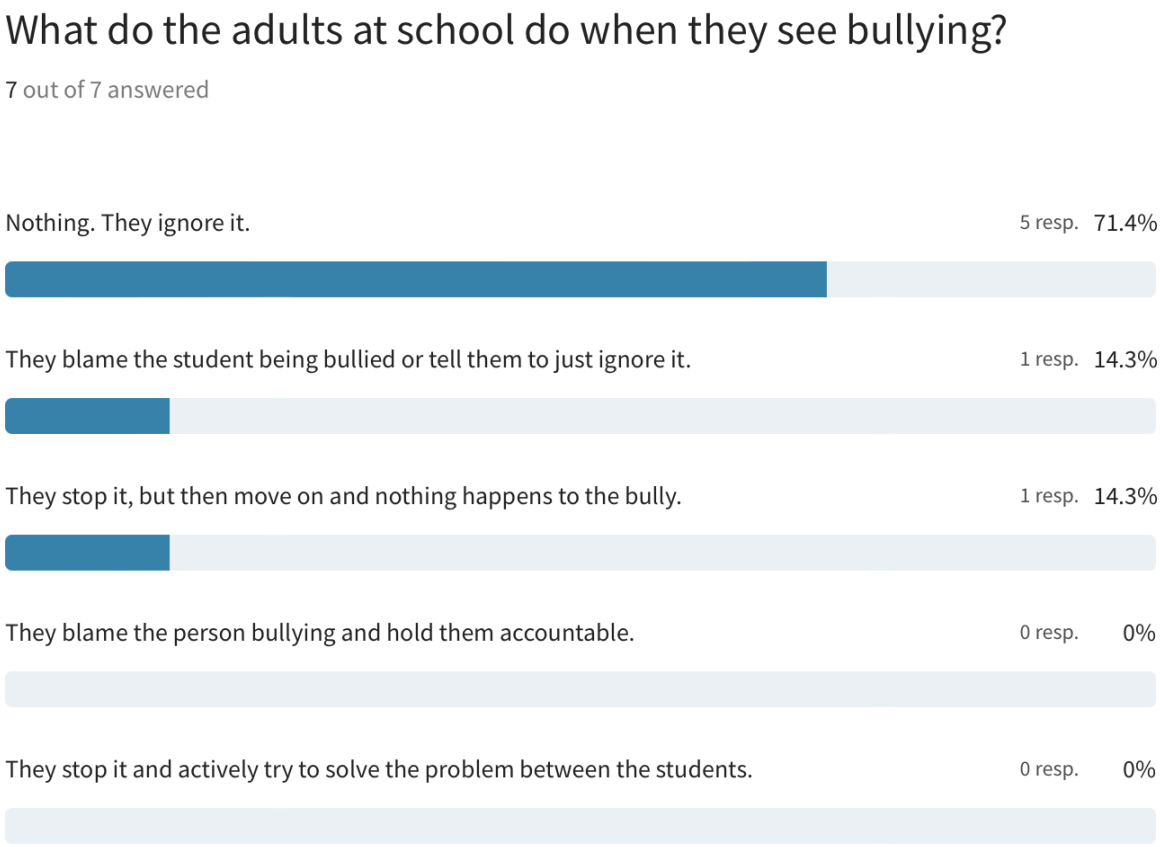

Figure 50: Student perception of school response to incidents of bullying at school

In analyzing the data illustrated in Figure 51 concerning parental agreement, a number of deviations are evident. However, a significant observation to highlight is that fewer than 10% of parents perceive the school to be holding the alleged perpetrators of bullying accountable, with half of the respondents concurring that the school fails to undertake preventative or interventional measures to deter future incidents of bullying. Moreover, there appears to be a greater convergence between

student and parent perspectives regarding the school's tendency to assign responsibility to the victims, either expecting them to navigate their bullying experiences independently or attributing the bullying behavior to them.

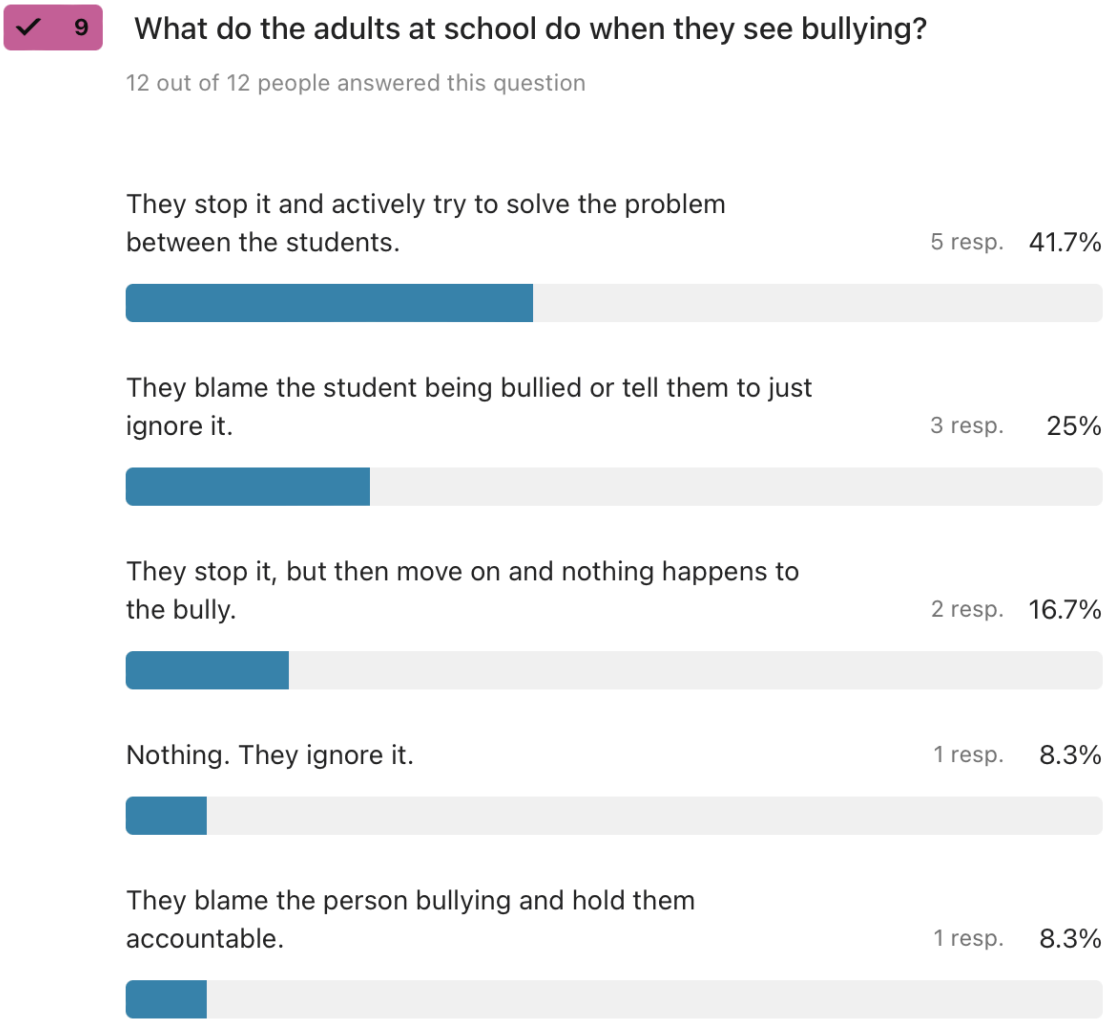

Figure 51: Parent perception of school response to incidents of bullying at school

Students and parents were subsequently asked if the Missouri state-mandated bullying investigation had commenced following a report of bullying to the school, as outlined in figures 52 and 53 below. Disturbingly, students reported only 14.3% of respondents participated in filling out the bullying report form following reporting bullying victimization and told the outcome. Parents denoted a higher response to participation in the bullying report form, but notably none reported being given a copy of the report or awareness as to outcome.

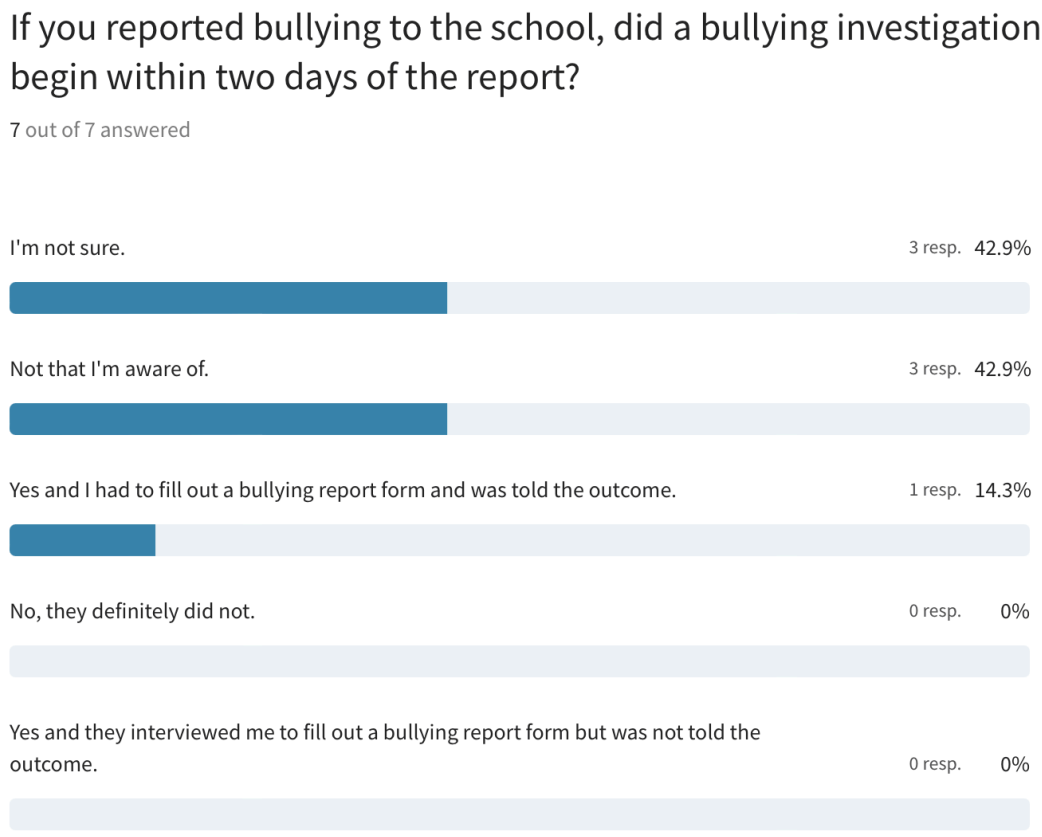

Figure 52: Student perception of school response to reported bullying victimization

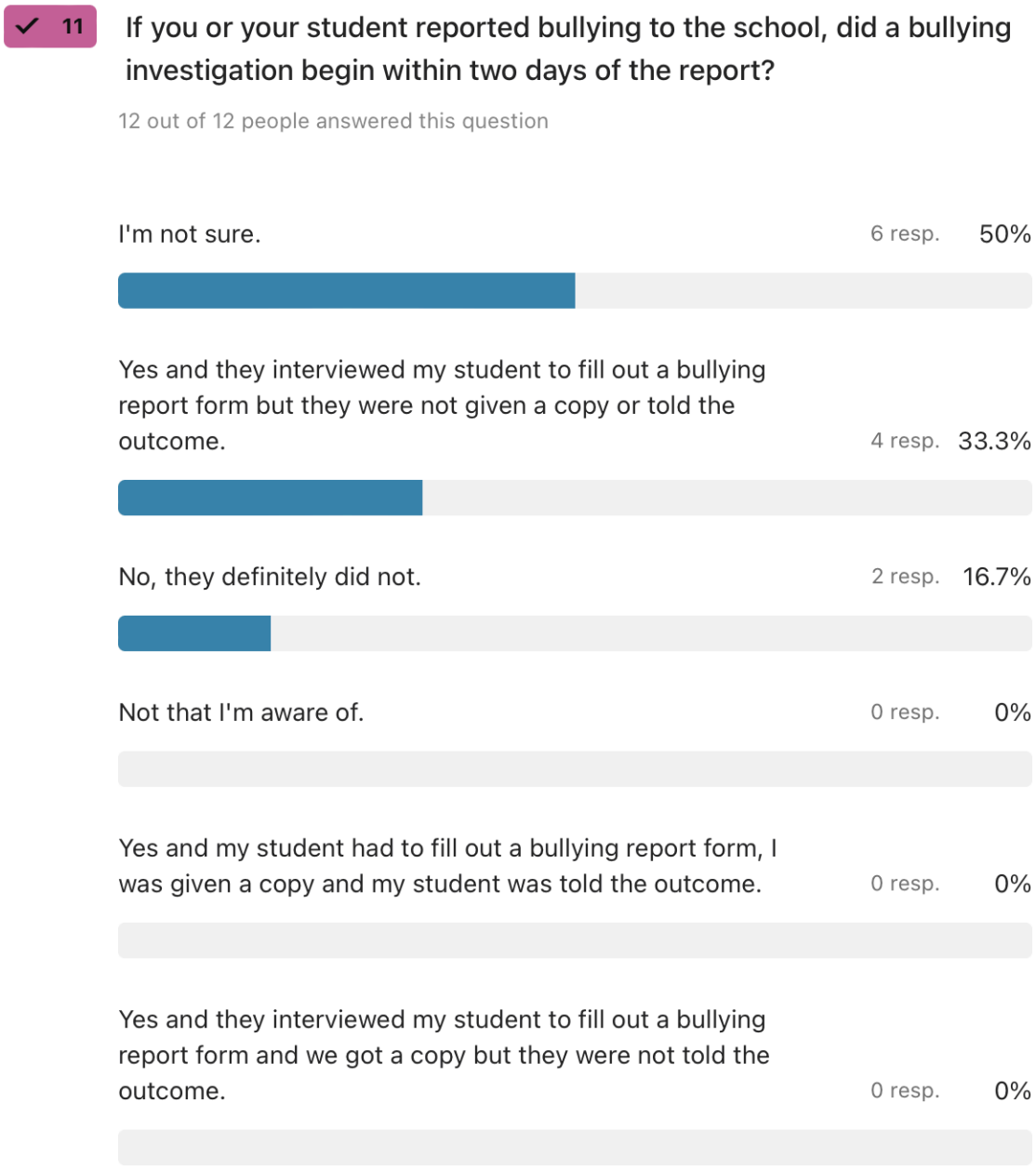

Figure 53: Parent perception of school response to reported bullying victimization

Denoting the importance of education in bullying prevention, students and the parents were asked if the school had speakers on bullying and bullying prevention, as denoted in figures 54 and 55 below.

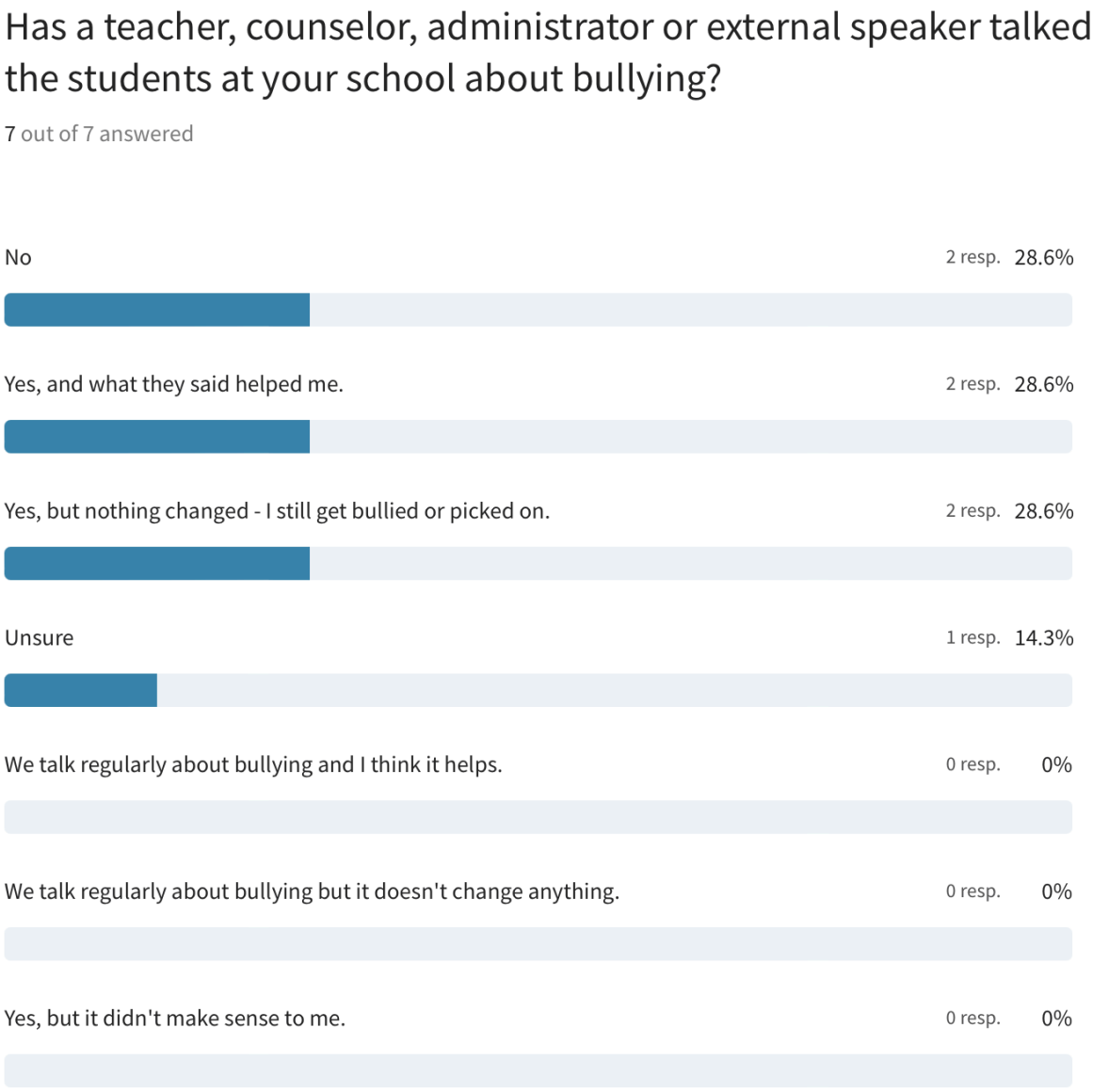

Figure 54: Student perception of school involvement in bullying prevention education

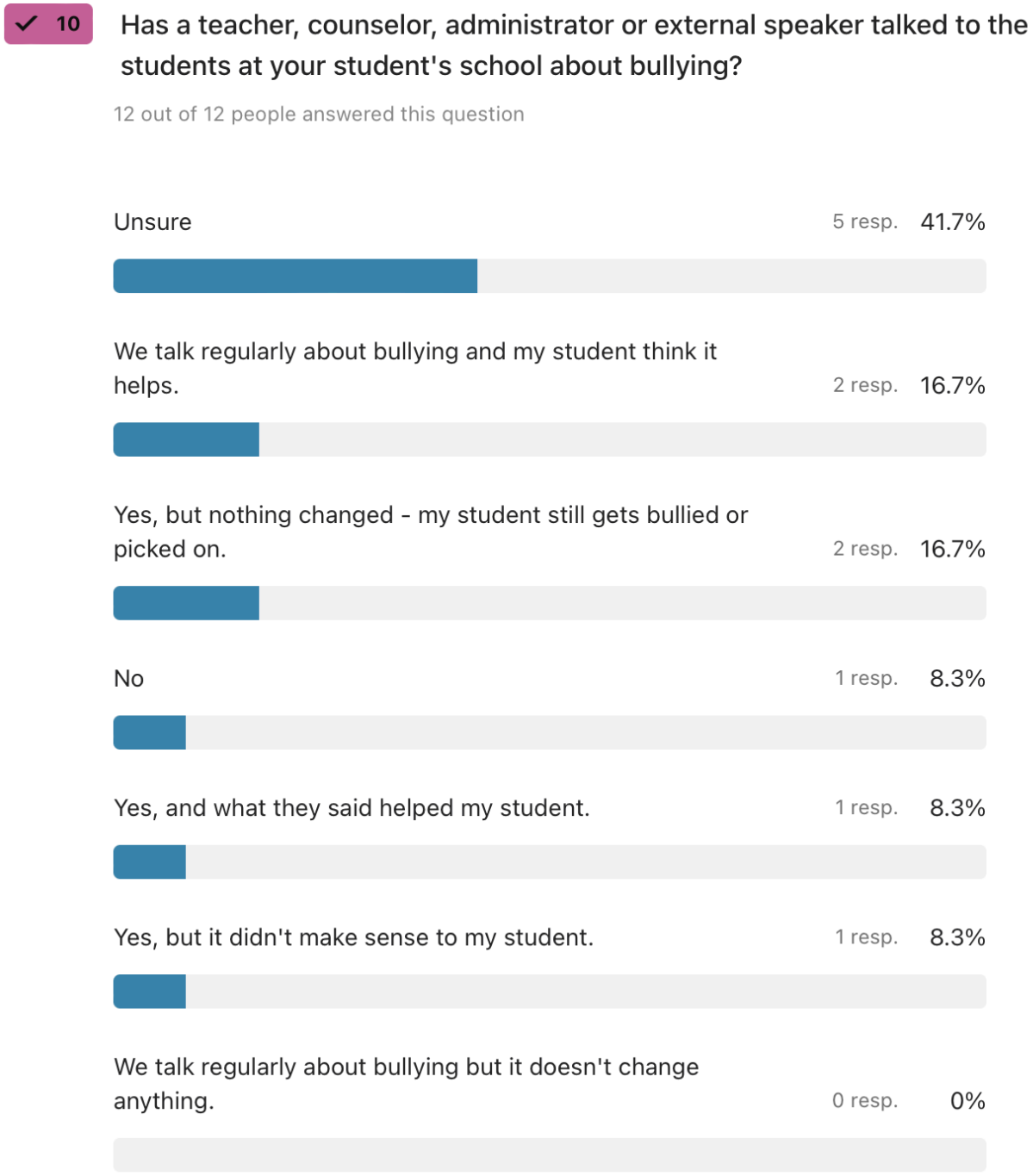

Figure 55: Parent perception of school involvement in bullying prevention education

In the concluding segment of inquiries, both students and parents were presented with a series of questions concerning the individuals whom

students communicate with when they perceive themselves to be victims of bullying. As illustrated in Figure 56, a substantial portion exceeding 50% of students conveyed discussing bullying victimization with a school authority at a minimum on a monthly basis, with a significant **14.3% divulging experiences of bullying victimization almost daily**. Parent reports, shown in figure 57, were fairly close to student reports, showing a high degree of student-parental agreement.

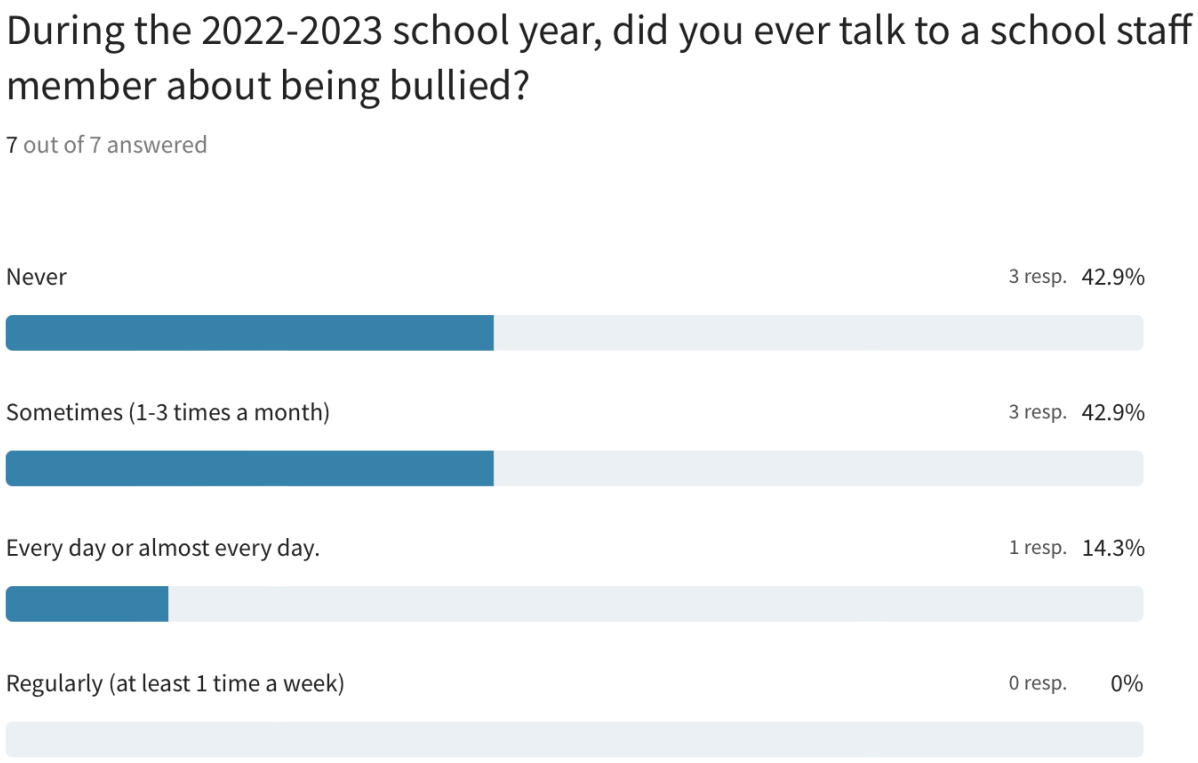

Figure 56: Student self-report on staff reporting of bullying victimization at school

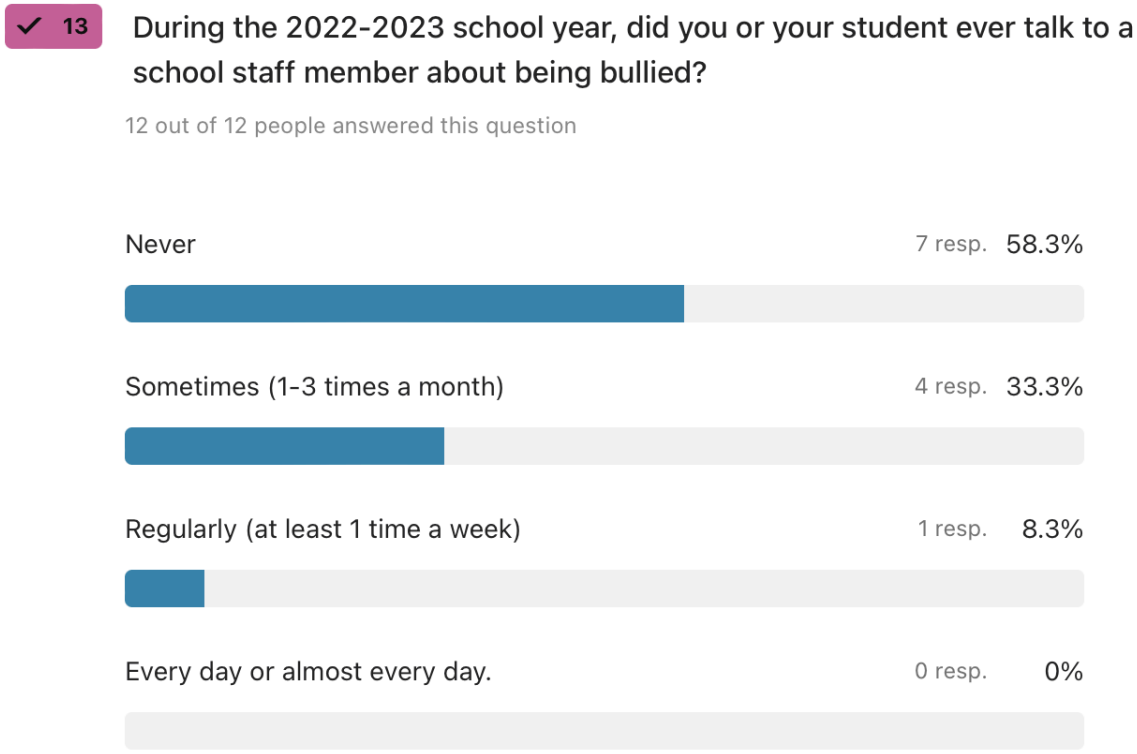

Figure 57: Parent report on student reporting of bullying victimization at school

4.7 Types of Bullying, Impact on Feelings of School Safety and Social Support

4.7.1 Types of Bullying

The research data revealed students with HF-ASD are experiencing several types of bullying. Students and parents reported verbal abuse, social exclusion, encouraging suicide, physical assault, cyberbulling, and property damage, as shown in figures 40, 41a and 41b above.

4.7.2 Perceptions of Cause for Bullying Victimization

When students with HF-ASD were asked why they believed they had been bullied, participants reported several answers, as shown in figure 60 below. The highest response was to people "are bullying me because I have autism, which received a 71.4% affirmative response rate. The next highest response reasonings are associated with causes of perception and require perspective-taking: "I act or behave differently than they do," at 57.1% and "they just don't like me," also scoring at 57.1%.

Taking into account the perception and perspective-taking deficits associated with autism, parents were asked the same question. There were reported variances when seeking student-parent agreement, with the highest parental response noted as "My student behaves or acts differently than they do," ranking at a 75% affirmative response rate, followed by "My student sometimes struggles with social situations and they don't understand why [they are bullied]" at 66.7%, and "they are bullying my student because they know my student has autism" at 41%. You can see the student-parent agreement outlined in figures 44 and 45 above.

4.8 Qualitative Questions and Interviews

Students and parents were given the option of sharing additional information in the survey regarding their experiences with bullying and the school.

4.8.1 Qualitative Survey Responses to Question “Is there anything else you’d like to share about your experience(s) with bullying or being picked on?”

Student Response 1, Quantitative Survey Open-Ended Response:

“I wish people at school would take the time to understand people with autism. Us autistic individuals get treated like we’re animals. We’re humans too. People just don’t seem to understand what we deal with…”

Student Response 2, Quantitative Survey Open-Ended Response:

“I have been told to kill myself before. But the problem is, I never know if they are joking.”

Parent Response 1, Quantitative Survey Open-Ended Response:

“Being bullied was bad. The district's response made it so much worse. The denial by staff and failure to support, report and protect caused a

lack of trust that he would be safe at school. He chose to be [sic] virtual student."

Parent Response 2, Quantitative Survey Open-Ended Response:

"I don't think my son realizes people are mocking him or making fun of him. It is hard when I see things to know if it is playful banter with him or taking something he said and turning it into something that is being mocked. My son sees the banter side so that is where we operate."

Parent Response 3, Quantitative Survey Open-Ended Response:

"Most school issues were caused by administrators and not by other students. Either through an unwillingness to learn about autism or follow an IEP, or unwillingness to use district resources on a student (ie you can't have an ipad to help with communication because it's too expensive)."

4.8.2 Qualitative Focus-Group Responses to Optional Background Sharing

Student participants were given the option to share more about their backgrounds to provide content about who they are and their lived experiences for school officials and lawmakers. While not all participants were comfortable with sharing additional background

information, below is the information for the participants who chose to share more.

Student Participant 1 Background, Twelfth grade, Troy Buchanan High School

“I am part of this group. I find this project very important to me as a person who has struggled with bullying all of my life, all because I was autistic, is such a big deal. Many people throughout my time at school have always - have not - taken autism that seriously as they should be. I enjoy astronomy and meteorology and I like psychology a lot, too. I tend to think psychology is my stronger interest because it’s something that I would like to use to help other people. Everybody has a mind, a soul, a heart, and feelings and everybody deserves to be heard. With this anti-bullying project we’re doing, I feel like it could help make a difference for our future - not just for future generations of people, but people in the *now.* When I get out of school, I want to do something with helping people with mental health or volunteering related to helping those with disabilities. I’ve always wanted to be a paranormal investigator, though I understand that’s not really practical to do.”

Student Participant 2 Background, Eleventh grade, Kirkwood High School

“What I like to do at the moment is go bowling, and work on things like payphones. It got me interested in electrical or mechanical engineering. I want to go to college at Stephens, Columbia University in New York

City or University of Texas at Arlington to study engineering. I like what I'm learning at school, but the small amount of bullying I've experienced makes school challenging. This project matters to me because most of the time, when I report something, almost nothing happens. I'd like to see that not happen to other people."

Student Participant 3 Background, Twelfth Grade, Affton High School

"I like video games, cosplay, and making props. I have several prop guns I've made, but they're not finished - I never finish projects I start. I also like comedy stuff, like podcasts, and drawing on my ipad, which is a big part of my life. I enjoy my classes that I take, and then what's difficult for me is people expect me to do things to the best of other people's abilities when I've shown and proven time and time again that's not in my wheelhouse. I don't know how to be as good as other people. I only know how to be as good as an autistic 17 year old who half-asses a lot of the time. But that's one challenge. Another challenge is relating to work-load, when I have a group project, I prefer to work alone because I'm used to being let down by partners and groups because usually they don't pull their weight. Usually I'm the one who ends up having to pull the team up Mount Everest and dying. When I grow up, I want to be an animator / graphic designer. I'd like to go to the Kansas City Art Institute, Savannah College of Art and Design, or DePaul University.

This project is important to me because I am the victim of bullying, my ex- repeatedly told me to kill myself. I reported that to several school officials, including my biology teacher, and I literally saw nothing happen to either me or my ex. I didn't get any support, I didn't write anything down and I didn't see anything get taken care of. I want to make sure that doesn't happen to other students now and in the future, that it gets dealt with accordingly, and appropriately and in the timeframe allowed."

Student Participant 4 Background, Tenth Grade, Lindbergh High School

"I'm from many places around St. Louis, I was in Affton in Elementary School, have been in Mehlville and am now at Lindbergh High School. When I grow up, I think I probably want to work in the automotive industry as a mechanic or tech support, I don't know. I like cars, computers- kind of, and various electronics. I'm not really involved in anything at school. I might join my school's German club or something, because I take German. I don't see myself as being 'bullied' but my friends have made fun of me while I'm at school."

Student Participant 5 Background, Tenth Grade, Lutheran South High School

"I'm mostly either playing online games or running outside in my free time. Mainly I enjoy being outside and running, that's my top things I like and what I enjoy in my spare time. For school, I like the learning

aspect of it but it hits different for me. I'm not a good student in terms of grades, but I know the subjects and can even teach it to an extent so others know how to do it, so they can pass it along. That's what I enjoy about school, is sharing that knowledge and hanging out with my friends. What's challenging about school is mainly the teachers not understanding what I'm asking for in questions about a problem, a test or whatnot. They don't really understand it, so I don't know if I'm wording things weirdly or don't know how to answer the question. Also, I'm a horrible test taker - I can't get the knowledge out of my head. I've always been a huge Armed Forces type of person, but my Mom doesn't want me to do that, so she's been pointing towards Coast Guard or Fire Investigator, but doing something that has me moving 90% of the time is what I want to do. The reason I find this project very important personally is because when I was younger in school, I would be bullied and the school wouldn't do anything, because they would always blame it on me as the one who was sort of 'instigating' it and I want to get that fixed. Because at my school, I see so many examples of bullying and nothing is ever being done to address it and it just hurts. They're people I know, I've worked with and looked up to in a way. So yeah, I want to fix that."

4.8.3 Qualitative Focus Group Responses to Questions Around Bullying at School “Have you had any encounters with bullies and why?”

Student Participant 1, Qualitative Bullying Perceptions:

Yes, I have. I have definitely been bullied because I have autism. I think it’s because people do not exactly understand what autism is and what it can look like, pretty much. Based on what I’ve lived through, I think people will bully people with autism because they don’t understand it and it’s not quote-unquote you know, what a typical person would do in certain situations. Or whenever a person expresses their emotions in a different way, than how they would normally expect, that is also why. Or we get told we’re ‘too dramatic’ for our responses to sensory issues we may have. In the first semester of last year, we finished reading Catcher in the Rye, which focused on mental health stuff. Everyone else hated it because of the main character, but I really liked the book. After we finished reading the book, we had to write an essay about mental health and whenever we got done, we got the grades back, I was the only one that got a very good grade on the essay. The teacher held up my essay in front of the class and used it as an example to show that while I did, most of the class didn’t care about mental health or take any of it seriously. It led to a discussion about why mental health should be taken seriously. I included in my essay my experience with autism and how it connected with other mental health issues, which is what prompted the class discussion.

People with autism can express their emotions differently. We react to things differently than others and sometimes that can be hard for neurotypical students and teachers to understand.

Student Participant 2, Qualitative Bullying Perceptions:

Yes, I have. I'm not one that shows many obvious signs of autism, so I'm not sure if that had something to do with why I'm bullied. I don't do stimming anymore. When I was younger I did stimming with snapping and arm movements in elementary school. The kids that went to school with me in middle school are still with me in high school, so they know the obvious signs of when I'm frustrated and use that now to pick on me.

Student Participant 3, Qualitative Bullying Perceptions:

Two words, my ex. Yes. I think my ex- targeted me because of the ending of my relationship because I was autistic, I was acting autistically and didn't really understand the gravity of the situation. So my first thought was "oh, he's joking." Then, "Oh, he's not joking, this is serious." Now I realize that he was saying those things because of how I was acting, because I wasn't letting go. So my ex- started saying things to the effect of "kill yourself" as a way to get me to let go. In my English class the second semester of last year, it was about rights and

responsibilities. We wrote annotations to the Affton High School student code of conduct and pitched these annotations to the Principal in class. Getting the opportunity to just talk about it was important to me.

Student Participant 4, Qualitative Bullying Perceptions:

Yeah, by my friends picking on me. I may have been bullied because I have autism. I'm going to say it's because they don't know what it is. It's like, I have autism but it's high-functioning where my brother can't as much - because it's a spectrum I think people get confused. People think all autistic people can't talk and can't communicate, or do things such as scream, which is not the case. So the spectrum can be confusing. We had to read a book at school about a kid with Aspbergers, which I know is an outdated medical terminology. It seemed like it was done to pitch mental health and autism into the curriculum, but we didn't discuss it, just annotated pages and did assignments.

Student Participant 5, Qualitative Bullying Perceptions:

Yes. I'm not sure why I'm bullied. They were my friends, but they would pick on me, calling me fat, trying to hurt my feelings. I talked to one of them, but they never really explained why they said those things like that to me. I noticed they didn't really pick on each other, it was mostly just me.

4.8 Conclusion

In this investigation, a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methodologies was harnessed to delve into the overarching research questions and hypotheses delineated. Utilizing both methodologies allowed for a more robust and comprehensive analysis of data sourced from interviewees.

The core research questions explored were:

1. To what degree are Missouri's educational institutions actively committed to educating autistic students aged 13-21 about their rights against bullying?
2. Are these institutions in Missouri ensuring that autistic students (ages 13-21) are thoroughly informed about the schools' duties in preventing, addressing, and resolving bullying incidents?
3. Do autistic students (ages 13-21) in Missouri possess adequate knowledge regarding their rights and responsibilities related to bullying?
4. How profoundly does bullying affect academic achievements and subsequent social assimilation for autistic students aged 13-21?
5. Is there a consistent pattern in the experience and reporting of bullying victimization among students with autism aged 13-21?

The analytical findings underscore a prevailing void in the educational system's support, both at the level of individual students and the broader student community, especially in the domain of anti-bullying education. It also points to perceived gaps in the adherence to state-prescribed guidelines. There was compelling evidence suggesting a link between bullying victimization and hindered academic performance and social integration. Notably, students disclosed missing a minimum of 9 school days annually due to concerns regarding safety. Additionally, even though students with autism frequently perceive instances of bullying victimization, they do not uniformly report such episodes. This inconsistency might arise from a shared sentiment, echoed by parents, that reported cases often remain inadequately addressed by school authorities. A mere 10% of parents felt that schools held alleged bullies accountable, and half of the respondents agreed that institutions rarely initiate preventative or interventional strategies to forestall future bullying episodes. A more exhaustive discussion of the findings relative to the research questions and hypotheses, along with subsequent recommendations, will be elucidated in the succeeding chapter.

Chapter 5. Findings & Recommendations

5.1 Deficiencies in Educating Autistic Students (Aged 13-21) on Their Anti-bullying Rights and School Responsibilities.

This study brings to the forefront a notable deficiency in the educational institutions' commitment to informing autistic students aged 13-21 about their rights in relation to bullying victimization. The amassed data underscores lapses in several areas. The inconsistent adherence to Missouri's anti-bullying statutes across school districts is a cause for concern. However, the evident lack of awareness regarding their rights among students with High-Functioning Autism Spectrum Disorder (HF-ASD) is particularly disconcerting. A consensus between students and their parents emerged regarding the ambiguity surrounding the procedures for reporting bullying, with a mere 14.3% of student participants acknowledging the completion of a bullying report form. Strikingly, none of the parents indicated awareness of any ensuing investigations or their outcomes by school authorities. This, despite a significant 41% of them noting that their child encountered bullying at school at least once a month or more frequently.

Pertaining to sustained educational efforts, a limited 28.6% of student respondents indicated that a school official or external speaker addressed them about bullying. Regrettably, this figure contrasts with the parent

data, where only 8.3% concurred with their child's account. A significant 75% of these parent respondents felt such interventions failed to offer tangible benefit to their child.

The primary research questions guiding this section include:

1. To what extent are educational institutions in Missouri dedicated to ensuring autistic students aged 13-21 are well-informed about their rights in relation to bullying?

2. Are these establishments in Missouri proactive in ensuring that autistic students (ages 13-21) are comprehensively educated about the schools' responsibilities concerning the prevention, intervention, and resolution of bullying episodes?

3. Do autistic students (ages 13-21) in Missouri have a substantial understanding of their rights and obligations in the context of bullying?

Regrettably, the evidence and insights garnered from this study predominantly suggest negative responses to these inquiries. It underscores the imperative for Missouri educational systems, including the St. Louis Special School District, to intensify their initiatives in bettering conditions for this at-risk group.

5.1.1 Recommendations to Improve Students with HF-ASD Knowledge of Students Rights and School Responsibilities:

1. **Staff Education**:

   The data underscores a concerning trend: a considerable number of student and parent respondents perceive a lackluster response from school staff to bullying of students with HF-ASD. Coupled with the marked proportion of students identifying social exclusion, there's an emergent need to reflect on whether ableist tendencies may exacerbate the rift between neurodiverse and neurotypical students.

   To foster inclusivity, regular staff training initiatives could encompass: demonstrating suitable social skills for various age groups, curtailing ableist language and behavior, acknowledging students with HF-ASD as distinct individuals while honoring necessary accommodations, and equipping classroom teachers with strategies like "turn and talk." This not only ingrains a culture of inclusion but also offers students with autism consistent opportunities to hone their social abilities.

2. **Creation and Use of Multi-Sensory Aids to Reinforce Student Rights and Responsibilities for Students with HF-ASD**:

   Missouri mandates necessitate schools to address bullying without further stigmatizing or traumatizing the victim, coupled with furnishing anti-bullying resources to ameliorate the effects through education. Given the executive functioning challenges and memory lapses associated with autism, this mandate poses complexities for educational professionals.

   Adopting a multisensory approach for teaching anti-bullying strategies, reporting processes, and IEP implications can optimize comprehension. Leveraging Gillespie-Lynch, K. et al.'s framework by involving students with autism in crafting these educational tools can enhance their efficacy. Noteworthy samples of such resources co-developed with HF-ASD students are appended. It's pivotal to periodically revisit these materials, preferably monthly, to bolster memory retention and seamless application of learned strategies.

3. **Formalize Bullying Supports and Reporting Process for Students with HF-ASD into IEP Format**:

   Considering the significant proportion of respondents indicating an absence of support against bullying, it's recommended to integrate a systematic bullying procedure within the IEP framework. While aspiring for zero bullying incidents for students with autism is commendable, pragmatism suggests incidents may still occur. As a proactive measure, institute a standardized reporting mechanism, anchored by a bullying report form. Upon submission, this should trigger an IEP team review to assess current safeguards and adapt the IEP to incorporate any requisite additional supports. It should be noted, however, that any additional supports recommended should be positioned in a way that it is clear to the student that the school is not shifting blame for the bullying behavior to the student as the victim. Doing so would victimize the student with ASD. Instead, focusing on learning self-advocacy language, providing the student with *options and opportunities* for additional social skills training around ways to exit uncomfortable situations and ask for help *should the student choose to participate* enables the student to have agency in their own experiences.

5.2 Assessment of Schools' Efficacy in Tackling and Resolving Bullying Episodes.

Holding victims, including those enduring bullying harassment, accountable for the deeds of their oppressors points to a profound lapse in the duty of care expected of educators and the overarching protective mechanisms in schools. It's alarming that an overwhelming majority of student respondents, amounting to 85% as referenced in Figure 50, assert a lack of intervention by adult observers during episodes of bullying. Although the sample size is restricted, it's significant to note that 14.3% of participants felt their concerns were not only sidestepped but that they were erroneously burdened with the blame for the antagonistic actions they faced. It's patently unfair to impose this liability on any victim, more so on autistic individuals. Their predisposition towards emotional dysregulation under intense stress only accentuates the unfairness. This pattern indicates an evident gap in the comprehension of autism by school authorities and the factors intensifying bullying towards students with HF-ASD.

Given the perceptual intricacies often associated with autism, the study probed parental perspectives to ascertain if they resonated with the

reported school lapses concerning HF-ASD students experiencing bullying. A significant 33% alignment with the students' stance emerged, as detailed in Figure 51. The variance between students' and parents' views could be attributed to diverse perceptions of alleged bullying incidents. This difference could also find parallels with the insights from Misna, Pepler, & Weiner, suggesting that parents aren't always in tune with their children's day-to-day experiences – a topic previously delved into in the literature review. Regardless of the reason, a 1:3 agreement ratio between parents and students in the absence of a satisfactory school reaction and the seeming inability to hold bullies accountable stands out as concerning. While one can posit that school officials harbor genuine intentions of ensuring safety, there's a glaring deficiency in addressing the issues faced by this susceptible group that warrants immediate attention.

5.2.1 Recommendations:

1. **In-Service Staff Education and Training:**

   Given the significant alignment of student-parent feedback regarding staff inertia and unaccountability in addressing bully victimization, it is imperative for school districts to prioritize training focused on bullying intervention, especially concerning

students with special needs. With prevalent victim-blaming sentiments evident in both quantitative and qualitative feedback from students and parents, there's a clear need for educators to undergo social skills training. This would enhance their comprehension of communication intricacies related to autism, fostering a more inclusive classroom dialogue. Relevant resources, such as age-adapted versions of the Vanderbilt Kennedy Center's Communication Skills Toolkit for Educators and the Center for Secondary Education for Students with ASD's Autism-at-a-Glance Supporting Communication in High School, can be found in the appendix.

2. **Peer Education:**

   Promoting a comprehensive understanding of neurodiversity, including autism, is pivotal. Students must recognize that having HF-ASD doesn't equate to being inferior. Familiarizing students with autism's realities can pave the way for fostering peer advocacy and mitigating bullying by normalizing neurodiverse behaviors. Cultivating an environment where students advocate for themselves and others with distinct attributes, like autism, is an approach every school should adopt.

Addressing only the victims and staff in anti-bullying education inadvertently implies blame on the victim's behaviors. Such a stance insinuates that better social skills or more effective masking of autistic traits would prevent bullying, perpetuating a cycle of revictimization. This approach neglects addressing the actual culprits and passive bystanders who indirectly endorse the act.

Passive bystanders, along with bullying perpetrators and their allies, should be made aware of their responsibility. Social skills training targeting every entity in a bullying episode, especially those who remain inactive during such incidents, is paramount. Recognizing the bystanders' accountability in bullying scenarios should be a key focus for Missouri's educational institutes.

Moreover, a holistic understanding of autism's spectrum is necessary for the entire student population. HF-ASD students, because of their indistinctive appearance compared to neurotypical peers, often face more bullying. Thus, tailored experiential training is essential over generic ones. Resources that offer perspectives into the sensory experiences of those with autism, such as the YouTube videos “Carly’s Cafe” and “Walking Down the Street,” can offer invaluable insights, fostering empathy and acceptance within the student body.

3. **Strengthen Self-Advocacy Skills:**

   While it is important for students to be able to choose for themselves to engage in social skills in response to bullying victimization to avoid unspoken victim blaming, ongoing self-advocacy skills building is important for students with HF-ASD. Training should include defining self-advocacy in the context of anti-bullying, which includes both helping students with ASD be able to verbalize their needs, the action steps necessary to meet those needs, and how to verbalize the disclosure so self-advocacy is met. Frequency is critical to adoption of this skill, and it is recommended that it be practiced weekly over a significant period of time until generalization of the skill is determined by the student's case manager or IEP team.

5.3 Current Extent of Impact of Bullying Victimization on School Performance and Social Integration for Students with Autism.

The study underscores the profound effects of bullying, both direct and indirect, on academic performance and social integration of students with Autism. Alarmingly, every participant perceived themselves as a target of bullying, attributing this primarily to their autism diagnosis. This perception was bolstered quantitatively with 71.4% indicating bullying stemmed from their ASD status, as detailed in figures 44 and 45 for student and parent perceptions, respectively. Additionally, there was complete alignment between parent and student accounts regarding coercion by peers, with half of both groups confirming this behavior (refer to figures 19 and 20). Social exclusion was another area of concern, with 57.1% of students feeling sidelined by their peers (see figures 40 and 41).

On examining its academic repercussions, a concerning trend emerged around absenteeism. 28.6% of students cited missing school monthly due to safety concerns, while 14.3% were absent weekly. Parental data corroborated these figures, as presented in figures 46 and 47. Notably, one parent even withdrew their child from school, highlighting the gravity of the issue. Importantly, safety concerns weren't confined to school premises but extended to transit as well.

5.3.1 Recommendations:

1. **Student and Staff Education**:

   Ensuring school safety is a primary obligation for every educational institution. For students with HF-ASD to feel secure, regular awareness about student rights and institutional responsibilities is essential for all students and staff. Presently, Missouri schools' anti-bullying training often becomes a yearly ritual of rule dissemination, making it challenging, especially for neurodiverse students, to grasp and retain. Instead, consider splitting this education into monthly digestible sessions like "lunch and learns", focused group discussions, or homeroom lessons. This should emphasize supportive roles for bystanders and highlight inclusivity for autistic students.

   Additionally, a curriculum diving deep into neurodiversity and the experiences of those, particularly with HF-ASD, can nurture empathy among students, subsequently reducing bullying instances. All students should be acquainted with inclusive terminology, promoting not just the cessation of ableist language,

but also the recognition and challenge of inherent biases among both students and faculty.

Further, staff training is paramount. Regular anti-bullying workshops, focusing on the unique responses of victims with HF-ASD, are essential. It's pivotal that staff recognize the behavioral cues of autism, ensuring that the blame doesn't unjustly fall upon the victims. They must understand the emotional volatility often associated with autism, ensuring that affected students aren't punished for behaviors intrinsically tied to their condition. This understanding can help mitigate the growing concern of absenteeism among autistic students who currently feel threatened.

Lastly, while offering alternate settings for autistic students during crises is crucial, suggesting bullying victims vacate the classroom while the instigator remains sends a detrimental message to all. Instead, schools should consider relocating the bully, emphasizing that such behaviors are intolerable.

2. **Improvements to IEP**:

   Considering the identified deficits in memory, conversational abilities, and perspective-taking, modifications to the Individual Education Plan (IEP) are advisable. Beyond the suggestions presented in sections 5.1 and 5.2, it's essential to incorporate quantifiable objectives within the IEP. These should encompass recall of anti-bullying policies and procedures, enhancement of social conversational competencies intertwined with peer and self-advocacy terminology, and a structured protocol for team consultations with RED during bullying episodes, regardless of the student's role as either the instigator or the victim.

3. **Foster Cross-Functional Support Groups for Students**:

   To enhance the well-being of students with autism, it is imperative to implement and continually refine peer support strategies, which serve dual functions: as a mechanism to respond to bullying incidents and as a proactive approach to prevent bullying. Here are some avenues for fostering peer support:

- Formation of "Circle of Friends" or "Bully-Proof Squads"

- Introduction of "Buddy" or "Friend" schemes

- Encouraging peer mediation initiatives

- Establishing peer mentoring programs

While exploring these opportunities, it is critical to tailor them to the varied communication needs of students with autism. Involve them actively in the conceptualization and innovation of these strategies to ensure these initiatives cater to their unique requirements. Moreover, an ongoing review process should be established to gather regular feedback from the young participants, evaluating the effectiveness of these strategies and making necessary adjustments. This approach ensures a student-centric, responsive, and dynamic support system that prioritizes the individual needs and inputs of autistic students.

5.4 Conclusion

In conclusion, while there are undeniably positive intentions towards protecting students with autism from bullying, data and shared lived experiences suggest there is significant room for improvement to be fully in compliance with both the letter and spirit of Missouri's anti-bullying laws. With deliberate effort, schools can foster and create a more inclusive, safe environment for neurodiverse students, improving school performance and social integration. In the following appendices, student participants with HF-ASD helped to create related anti-bullying resources for consideration and use by Missouri schools.

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Appendices

1. Appendix A: Anti-Bullying Rights and Responsibilities Training for Students with ASD (Co-Created by Students with ASD through Freddie Ford Foundation Teen Group)
2. Appendix B: Bullying Perception Infographic (Co-Created by Students with ASD through Freddie Ford Foundation Teen Group)

3. Appendix C: Anti-Bully Squad Selection Worksheet (Co-Created by Students with ASD through Freddie Ford Foundation Teen Group)
4. Appendix D: Vanderbilt Kennedy Center Communication Skills Training
5. Appendix E: Autism at A Glance: Supporting Communication in High School
6. Appendix F: Strategies for Effective Teaming for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

Appendix A: Anti-Bullying Rights and Responsibilities Training for Students with ASD

STL Teens with ASD

Safe at School

Bullying at School: Your Rights, School Responsibilities

STL Teens with ASD

Let's Talk

- How did the school support you?
- Did they take the steps they were supposed to take?
- What do you wish they supposed to take?

STL Teens with ASD

What else can you do?

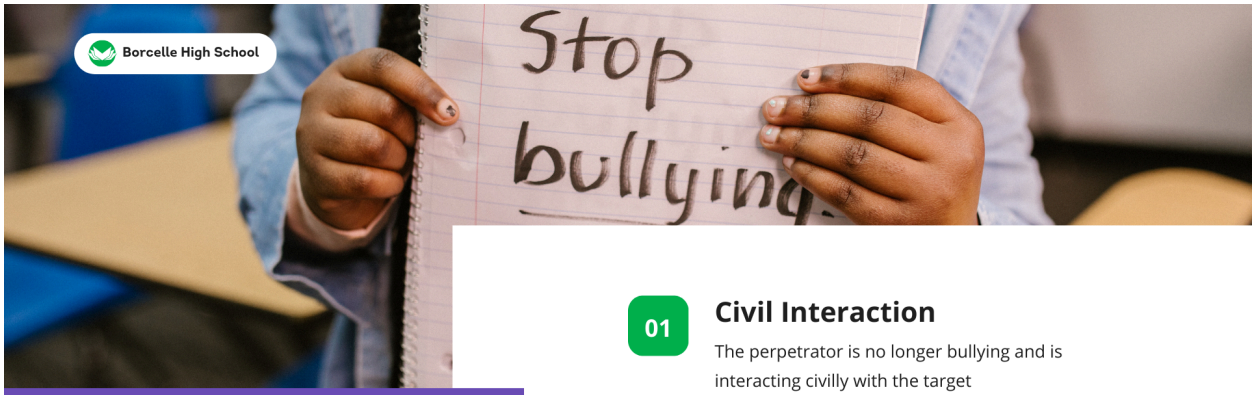
- **Review your school district's Code of Conduct** to ensure that it incorporates anti-bullying provisions. (remember, it's the law & **that's this week's homework!**)
- Make sure you know what process the school has outlined, including adequate supervision in the hallways and separate classrooms, to prevent bullying and harassment and to address it when it occurs.
- When you experience bullying, REPORT IT right away to the school **and** using Courage2Report. It will help ensure the school does what they should.
- Keep a log and journal of bullying and harassment and maintain documentation of any physical evidence, such as photos and medical records.

STL Teens with ASD

You have a right to a copy of the Bullying Form & the Investigation Report.

You have the right to Appeal if you disagree.

Any party who is not satisfied with the outcome of the investigation may appeal to the Superintendent, within 15 calendar days of notification of the Principal's decision.



Understanding Resolution

01 **Civil Interaction**

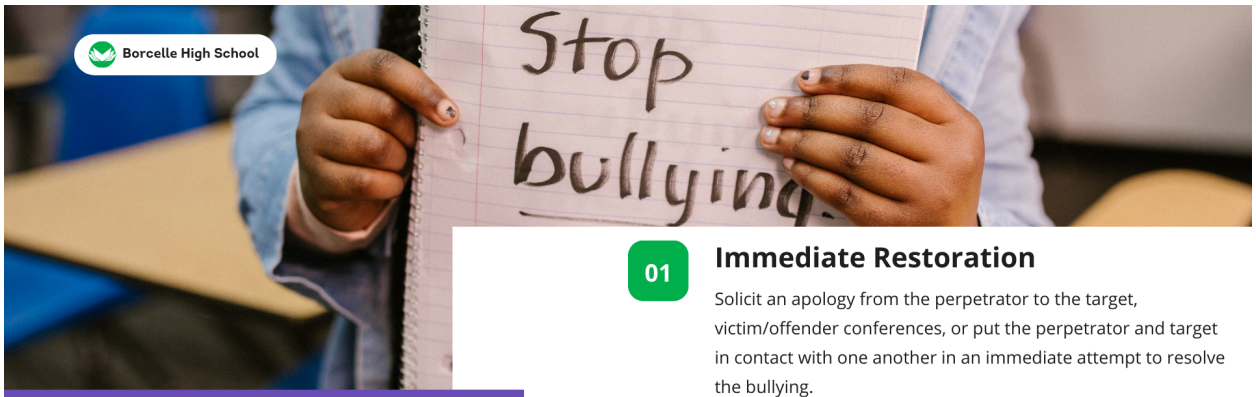
The perpetrator is no longer bullying and is interacting civilly with the target

02 **Feeling Safe**

The target reports feeling safe and is interacting civilly with the perpetrator.

03 **Positive Behavior**

School staff notice an increase in positive behavior and social-emotional competency in the perpetrator and/or the target.



What Shouldn't Happen

01 **Immediate Restoration**

Solicit an apology from the perpetrator to the target, victim/offender conferences, or put the perpetrator and target in contact with one another in an immediate attempt to resolve the bullying.

02 **Dismiss the Behavior**

Dismiss bullying as typical student behavior or assume it is not serious. It is!

03 **Focus Just on Feelings**

Interventions with bullies should not focus on feelings, but changing thinking. The targets of bullying need protection from bullies, but may also need support and help in changing their own behavior.

STL Teens with ASD

School Responsibilities

As a student with ASD, the school has some additional responsibilities. If the **perpetrator of bullying** is a student with a disability, the school shall convene the IEP Team to determine whether additional or different special education or related services are needed.

Services Assessment
to address behavioral/social skill deficits and examine the environment

Determine Changes
to the environment, if needed, or behavior intervention plan

Consider Consequences
and interventions that are appropriate to the student and situation

STL Teens with ASD

School Responsibilities

As a student with ASD, the school has some additional responsibilities. If the **target of bullying** is a student with a disability, the school shall convene the IEP Team to determine whether additional or different special education or related services are needed.

Skills Assessment
to consider if provisions are needed to develop student skills

Skills Assessment
to address individual needs identified in the IEP team meeting

Intervention Plan
to ensure safety and proficiencies in response to bullying behavior

STL Teens with ASD

School Responsibilities

As a teenager, it's crucial to know that if you experience any bullying at school, you have every right to get it taken seriously and addressed quickly. The school has a responsibility to ensure your safety and well-being, so you can feel protected and secure while you're there.

Inform

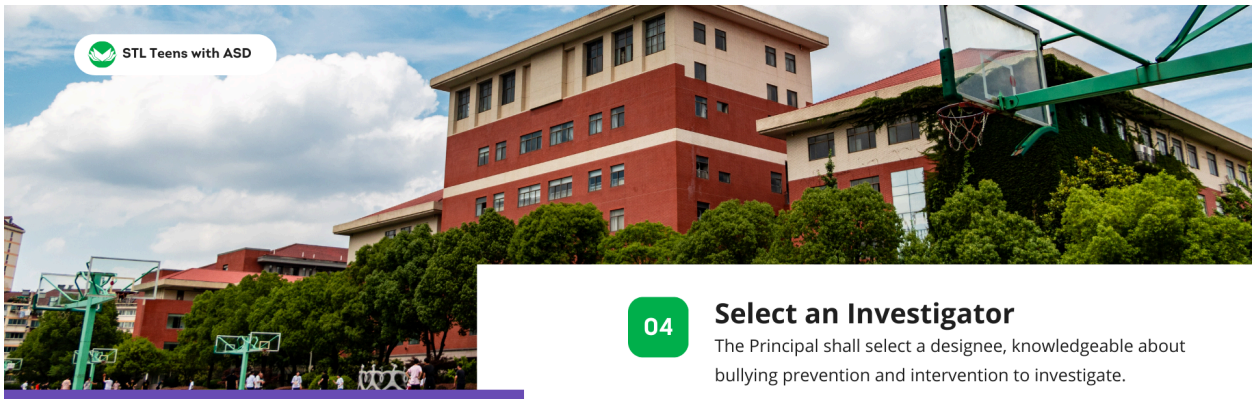
Same Day as Occurrence

Notify

Parents/Guardians as to the outcome of investigation

Advise & Support

Advise of consequences and support with safety plan



Under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, the **school must address the harassment**.

04

Select an Investigator

The Principal shall select a designee, knowledgeable about bullying prevention and intervention to investigate.

05

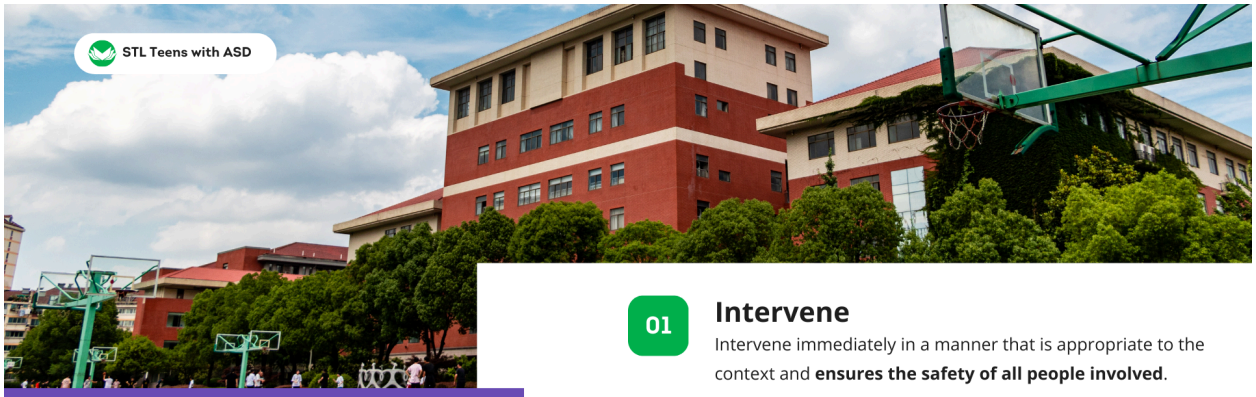
Start in 5, Done in 10 Days

Investigation of a bullying incident shall be initiated within five school days of receipt of a report and completed within 10 school days. Any extension must be documented.

06

Info Must Be Included

Identification of the target, perpetrator(s), bystander(s), and witnesses who may have reliable info about the event. Conduct individual, separate, private interviews. Identify power imbalances and patterns of behavior, & create a safety plan.



Under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, the **school must address the harassment**.

01

Intervene

Intervene immediately in a manner that is appropriate to the context and **ensures the safety of all people involved**.

02

Report & File Complaint Form

report the incident of bullying or retaliation to the Principal within 24 hours, **on the SLLIS Bullying Complaint Form**

03

Investigate & Cooperate

cooperate fully in any investigation of the incident and in implementing any safety plan established by the Principal/Designee.

STL Teens with ASD

Let's Review

Bullying is unwanted, aggressive behavior by one student or a group of students against another student and is usually repeated over time.

Cyberbullying (includes Texting)

Inappropriate Photo Sharing

"Hazing"

STL Teens with ASD

It's a Fine Line

Whether neurotypical or neurodiverse, all students are aware of bullying, and over half have had to deal with being made fun of.

27%
Missouri students report being bullied

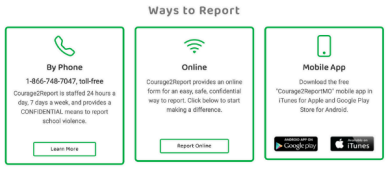
Majority Report
they've *not* bullied others

51%
said they *have made fun* of others, though

STL Teens with ASD

Every school has to have an anti-bullying policy.

Section 160.775 RSMo requires every school district to have an anti-bullying policy.



Do You Know About?

Courage2Report

Appendix B: Bullying Perception Infographic

AUTISM BULLYING SUPPORT

PERCEPTION INFOGRAPHIC

Teen Authors: Henry Clavin, Hayden James-Coombs, Elliot Hardin, Emma Hargrave, Jack Lay
Adult Contributor: Crystal Miller Lay, Partners in Policymaking 2023

1) BULLYING IS NEVER OKAY

When the school responds to my emotional response to bullying harsher than the student who was bullying me, it **makes me think that bullying is acceptable for some** people, but it's not. The school needs to *teach* that, along with student intervention strategies to help. Research shows "**not knowing what to do**" is why students don't help bullied students (1).

2) DIFFERENT CAN BE SCARY FOR OTHER PEOPLE

Students with ASD who have **communication challenges are 7 times more likely to be bullied**, in part because we are categorized as "different," or "other." characteristics that make us more susceptible to bullying victimization (2).

3) OUR SENSORY ISSUES CAN BE CONFUSING

Our sensory systems are easily overwhelmed and **schools are loaded with stimuli**. Our response to it can be hard for neurotypical students - and teachers! - to understand. The school should have low-sensory areas and **sensory education to improve ASD acceptance** (3).

4) SOCIAL SITUATIONS ARE CONFUSING FOR TEENS WITH AUTISM

Teens with ASD experience higher levels of bullying & up to **4 times the peer rejection**, often due to poor social functioning (4). We don't always get what's happening or why, so can't respond as fast as - *or how* - our peers may like.

5) BEING "ON SPECTRUM" CAN MAKE US A TARGET

Neurotypical students often have a hard time understanding the "spectrum" of ASD ability. Research has shown **students with higher levels of autistic traits**, like repetitive or stereotyped behaviors and communication challenges, **are more likely to be bullied** (5).

6) FRIENDS CAN BULLY, TOO

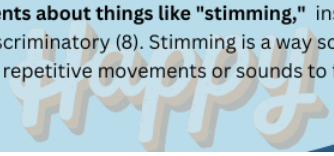
Recent research shows friendship is not a protective factor against bullying for teens with Autism. In fact, it showed we may be **twice as likely to be bullied**. This may due to higher self-esteem associated with friendships, but it makes us more visible to bullies. (6) Teachers need to be aware.

7) TEENS DON'T ALWAYS VALUE MENTAL HEALTH

75% of adolescents with mental health problems are not receiving mental health services and report a reluctance to seek help (7). If teens are allowed to not respect their own mental health without school intervention, how will the school ensure they will respect mine?

8) EMOTIONAL EXPRESSION CAN LOOK DIFFERENT

Our reactions may look different than neurotypical students, even when we are seemingly "happy!" We need the school to **teach ALL students about things like "stimming,"** instead of expecting us to "mask" our behavior, which is discriminatory (8). Stimming is a way some people, especially those with conditions like autism, use repetitive movements or sounds to feel more comfortable and manage emotions.



AUTISM BULLYING SUPPORT

PERCEPTION INFOGRAPHIC

Teen Authors: Henry Clavin, Hayden James-Coombs, Elliot Hardin, Emma Hargrave, Jack Lay
Adult Contributor: Crystal Miller Lay, Partners in Policymaking 2023

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Happy

Appendix C: Anti-Bully Squad Selection Worksheet

Steps to Make a Bully-Proof Squad:

1. Identify three trusted people (family member, friend, teacher, etc.) who you feel comfortable talking to. Who do you feel offers good advise and who can help you assess the situation? (TIP! Try seeking out someone who you think "gets you.")

Person 1. _____
Person 2. _____
Person 3. _____

2. Think about how each of these people might be able to help you. That might be listening and offering perspective, helping you talk to the school or establishment, and help you make change. List how you want your identified people to help you.

Person 1. _____
Person 2. _____
Person 3. _____

3. Set some time to talk to the people you have identified, and ask them if they are okay with being a resource you can go to if you think you are being bullied. If they say yes, ask what contact info would they like for you to use.

Person 1. _____
Person 2. _____
Person 3. _____

Appendix D: Vanderbilt Kennedy Center Communication Skills Training

VANDERBILT KENNEDY CENTER
VANDERBILT CONSORTIUM LEND

Teaching Communication Skills: A Toolkit for Educators

This toolkit provides information about how to help students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) improve their ability to communicate, with a focus on teaching skills for **initiating**, sending a message, and skills for **responding**, receiving a message.

What is communication?

Communication involves **exchanging information between people**. For communication to take place, there must be at least two participants: a sender and a receiver.

The ability to communicate is different from the ability to talk.

- Communication can occur without speech. This includes sending messages with body language, facial expressions, and behavior. Sign language and written messages are also ways of communicating.
- Speech can occur without communication. You might talk aloud to yourself or repeat a phrase without expecting to get a response.

A more detailed review of this material and additional resources can be found in the online version of this toolkit, which can be accessed by registering for a free account at triad.vkclearning.org and accessing the information in the Early Childhood folder and Early Childhood Communication Series.

Continued on next page

This publication was authored by Laura Corona, PhD, LEND (Leadership Education in Neurodevelopmental Disabilities) and TRIAD (Treatment and Research Institute for Autism Spectrum Disorders) fellow; Whitney Loring, PsyD, Assistant Professor of Pediatrics and Psychiatry & Behavioral Sciences, TRIAD Assistant Director of Training, and TRIAD Families First Coordinator; and Kristin Dorris, MS, CCC-SLP, TRIAD Educational Consultant.

This toolkit was edited, designed, and produced by the Dissemination and Graphics staff of the Vanderbilt Kennedy Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities. This publication may be distributed as is or, at no cost. View more printable resources and materials online at: vkc.vumc.org

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VANDERBILT KENNEDY CENTER
VANDERBILT CONSORTIUM LEND

Conclusion

Remember, an important part of teaching communication skills is deciding on the best next step for your student. Once you decide on a skill to teach, you will be ready to use the information in this toolkit to set up the environment for success, wait for your student's communication, and then prompt or reinforce their response to help them be successful.

*If you are interested in learning more about teaching communication skills, please see the full online Teaching Communication toolkit by visiting **triad.vkclearning.org**. Other resources on this website provide more information about visual supports, reinforcement, echolalia, and other topics.*

Resources

Visit **triad.vkclearning.org** for resources, information, and brief trainings related to autism spectrum disorder and evidence-based practices. Online trainings have been developed for educators and caregivers on topics including educational practices, mental health needs, and more.

If you are interesting in learning more about teaching communication skills, the following trainings and resources are available at **triad.vkclearning.org**, under the **School-Age Services (K-12)** category.

❏ Building Blocks of Communication
❏ Visual Supports
❏ Reinforcement in the Classroom

The following webinars are also available about this topic at **triad.vkclearning.org** under **Webinar Recordings**.

❏ Communication Plain and Simple Webinar Series
❏ The Social Communication Skills Network (TSCSN) Webinar Series
❏ Early Childhood Communication Webinar Series

Finally, the following printable resources that go into more detail about topics covered in this toolkit are available at **triad.vumc.org/resources**

❏ Autism Spectrum Disorders Tip Sheet
❏ Visual Supports and Autism Spectrum Disorders

3. How will we respond to the student's communication?

As in teaching initiating, if the student uses the goal behavior, **reinforce** it immediately. If the student does not use the goal behavior, first provide a **prompt** and then provide reinforcement when he or she comes closer to using the goal behavior.

Note: When teaching initiating, the reinforcement was directly related to the student's goal for communicating. For example, if a student communicates to request a snack, the natural reinforcement is receiving the snack. When teaching responding, the student may not be as motivated to communicate for the natural reinforcer. You may need to provide some extra reinforcement, such as specific praise, allowing them to earn a prize, or giving them a token towards a larger goal.

Once you have answered these three questions–the **antecedent** or initiation that will be provided, the **behavior** you want to teach, and the **consequence** or response you will provide–you are ready to teach the communication skill by:

1. Initiating
2. Waiting for the student to respond
3. Providing reinforcement or a prompt

See below for an example.

Example: *Christopher is a sixth grade student who speaks in full sentences. He follows one-step instructions but needs support to complete multi-step instructions given to the whole class. His teacher would like to help him independently follow multi-step directions. The teacher creates a visual support listing the materials Christopher needs for math class. When it is time for math, the teacher stands near Christopher, says "Get ready for math," places the visual on his desk, and waits for Christopher to respond. If he needs an extra prompt, the teacher taps the visual.*

Antecedent	Behavior	Consequence
Teacher places a visual support on Christopher's desk and gives an instruction to the class	Christopher does not respond	Teacher gestures to Christopher's visual support

When Christopher responds to the prompt by getting out his math materials, the teacher provides specific praise and a high-five.

Antecedent	Behavior	Consequence
Teacher gestures to Christopher's visual support	Christopher gets out his math materials	Teacher provides specific praise and a high five

Example of teaching initiating: *Ciara is a pre-school student who is not yet using words. When she wants a snack, she tries to get it herself. Her teacher wants Ciara to point to request what she wants. Her teacher puts snacks in containers Ciara cannot open. She holds two containers out of Ciara's reach. When Ciara reaches toward a snack, her teacher gives her some. Over time, her teacher uses modeling and physical prompts to help Ciara come closer to pointing.*

Antecedent	Behavior	Consequence
Teacher holds snack containers out of Ciara's reach	Ciara points to a snack	Teacher gives Ciara some snack

Teaching Responding

The difference between initiating and responding to communication is what comes *before* the communication. Students *initiate* communication when they are motivated or interested in doing so. When a student *responds* to communication, he or she is reacting to someone else's initiation. Successful responding relies on your ability to initiate communication with your student in the most effective way possible.

Just as in teaching initiating, there are three questions to answer when teaching a student to respond.

1. How will you initiate?

Think about what you want your student to respond to. In school, students are often expected to respond when an adult gives a direction, asks a question, or makes a comment. This section focuses on teaching students to respond to adult initiations; however, similar strategies can be used when teaching communication with peers.

Initiating in an effective way increases the chances of the student responding successfully. Here are some strategies for initiating effectively:

- Limit distractions. Especially when a student is first learning a skill, practice at a calm time.
- Move closer to the student to make sure your student can see and hear you.
- Get the student's attention by saying his or her name, catching his or her gaze, or tapping him or her on the arm.
- Use the least number of words possible to give the direction or ask the question. For example, instead of "Let's use walking feet," say "Please walk."
- Pair your initiation with a visual support, such as an object or picture that clarifies what the student is supposed to do.

MORE INFO

For more information on visual supports, see the Visual Supports online training at ***triad.vkclearning.org****.*

2. What response will we teach the student to use?

As with teaching initiating, the behavior you teach will depend on your individual student. Remember to think about the **best next step**.

Teaching Initiating

When we teach *initiating*, we are teaching a student to *start* an interaction. To teach initiating, we need to answer three questions:

1. What will motivate this student to communicate?

What is motivating to your student will depend on his or her unique wants, needs, and interests. In general, students communicate to **access** or **escape** items, activities, or attention. For example, a student might be motivated to communicate when he or she wants or needs help, wants an object but cannot access it independently, does not want to continue doing an activity, or needs a break from an overwhelming situation.

With a student's motivations in mind, you can set up the environment to increase opportunities for a student to initiate communication. Some strategies for setting up the environment include:

- "Sabotage"–Ask or tell students to do something that you know they will need help with. For example, place materials in a container they cannot open without help.
- Out of reach placement–Place items where students can see them but have to ask for them. For example, store ... higher than your students ...
- Forgetfulness–Forget ... necessary items for an activity so students must request ... "forget" to put out dry erase markers after handing out dry erase boards.
- Novelty–Add something new and interesting to your classroom so students will comment or ask about it. For example, bring a new or unusual decoration into the classroom.

Once you have set up something in the environment to motivate your student to communicate, it is important to be close by so you can respond immediately when he or she initiates! It is also important to **intentionally wait** to give your students the chance to initiate on their own.

2. What behavior will we teach this student to use?

When choosing a behavior to teach, remember to think about **the best next step**, as described on page 3. The best next step will depend on your student's current skills.

3. How will we respond to the student's communication?

Your response to the student's communication depends on how the student initiates. We will respond in one of two ways:

- If the student uses the goal behavior, **reinforce** it immediately.
- If the student does not use the goal behavior, provide a **prompt**, or cue, to help them move closer to the goal behavior. Once the student uses, or comes closer to using, the goal behavior, provide the reinforcement.

MORE INFO *For more information on using prompts effectively, choosing the most appropriate prompt for your student, and providing reinforcement, see the online version of this toolkit referenced on page one.*

Once you have identified the **antecedent** that will motivate your student, the **behavior** you want to teach, and the **consequence** or response you will provide–you are ready to embed communication opportunities throughout the day by:

1. Setting up the situation
2. Waiting for the student to initiate
3. Providing reinforcement or a prompt

See page five for an example of this process.

Why teach communication?

- Being able to communicate with others is an essential skill across settings. Communication is important for expressing wants, needs, feelings, and emotions. It is important for interacting with others and building relationships. Communication skills are important at school, at home, and in the community.
- Difficulty communicating plays a role in many challenging behaviors. If students have a need and don't know an appropriate way to communicate for it, they may use less socially appropriate ways of getting that need met. Teaching communication skills can help reduce and prevent challenging behaviors.
- Teaching communication opens up opportunities for students. The more a student is able to communicate, the more successful social interactions they will be able to have, which in turn create more opportunities for learning and practicing communication skills.

- Teaching communication also increases educational opportunities and students' ability to participate in different settings. The more a student is able to communicate and respond to others independently, the more able they will be to participate in a variety of educational environments.

Deciding what to teach

The first step in teaching communication is deciding *what* communication skill to teach. It is important to use your student's current communication skills as a starting place. Your ultimate goal for your student might be to communicate like his or her peers, or to communicate in an age- or grade-appropriate way. However, when choosing a communication skill to teach, think about **the best next step**.

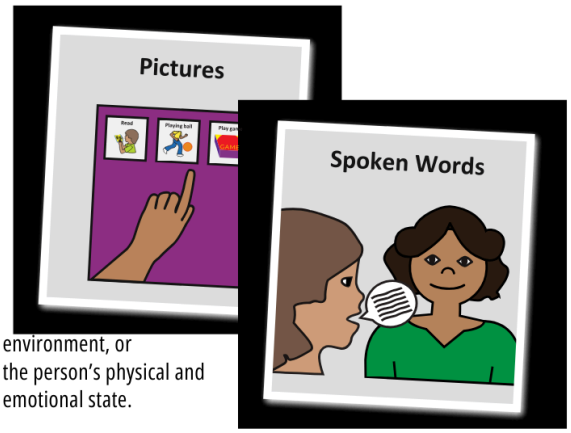
The best next step for your student could be:

- A **replacement behavior** for a challenging behavior, such as teaching a student to touch a break card or say "no" instead of hitting others when she wants an activity to end.
- The best next **developmental step**, such as expanding the student's current form of communication to another setting or teaching a new communication method. For example, if a student touches objects to request them, a next step might be to teach the student to use pictures of objects to make requests.
- A **functional skill** to be used at school or home, such as teaching a student to ask for help, ask for a break, or answer a teacher's question.

Communication comes in many forms.

- Spoken words–Use of words or phrases
- Signs or sign language–A formal system of hand gestures with specific meanings
- Gestures–Hand or body actions
- Sounds or vocalizations–Use of non-word sounds or vocal noises
- Facial expressions–Movements of the eyes, nose, or mouth
- Pictures–A visual method using photographs that represent vocabulary
- Line drawings–A visual method using drawings that represent objects or vocabulary actions
- Written words–For example, through a note or sign
- Physical behaviors–Behaviors such as running away, leading someone by the hand, giving someone an object, or turning away
- Aggressive behaviors–Behaviors such as pushing or hitting another person
- Eye gaze–Using eye contact or a gaze toward a person or object
- Echolalia–Echoing or repeating back someone else's words
- Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC)–Any communication other than verbal speech

These forms of communication range from concrete, such as throwing a tantrum, to abstract, such as spoken language. A person's communication skills may differ depending on the situation, what else is going on in the environment, or the person's physical and emotional state.



When students with ASD struggle with communication or respond to others in a way that is different than expected, it is often rooted in the core characteristics of ASD: differences in social communication and restricted or repetitive behaviors. *More information about ASD can be found at* ***triad.vkclearning.org***.

Communication is a process, or a series of steps, carried out to achieve a goal. The process of communication starts with a desire to communicate, or a need to be met.

We can use the ABC framework to understand the *why* of communication. The ABC framework stands for Antecedent, Behavior, and Consequence.

Understanding this framework can also help us set up situations that may result in increased communication from students.

MORE INFO *See examples of the ABC framework in the online version of this toolkit referenced on page one.*

ABC Framework

Antecedent	Behavior	Consequence
What happens right before the communicative behavior	Goal-directed actions to send and respond to messages	What happens right after the communicative behavior

Appendix E: Autism at A Glance: Supporting Communication in High School

autism at-a-glance

Feb 2014

Autism at-a-Glance is a publication of the Center on Secondary Education for Students with ASD (CSESA)

Supporting Communication in High School

This issue of *Autism at-a-Glance* focuses on understanding and improving the communication skills of adolescents on the autism spectrum. The content specifically targets the needs of students who are able to communicate conversationally. Examples are provided in the context of academic courses and teacher and peer relationships.

If you serve students with more significant communication needs, please see our *Autism at-a-Glance* titled *Supporting Functional Communication in High School.*

Autism at-a-Glance is designed for high school staff members supporting students on the autism spectrum, as well as family members of adolescents on the autism spectrum. *Autism at-a-Glance* provides a current summary of topics relevant to high school students on the autism spectrum as well as practical tips and resources for school and community personnel and family members.

Students on the autism spectrum exhibit characteristic difficulties associated with communication. Deficits appear in three main areas: comprehension, expressive communication, and interacting with others.

Comprehension

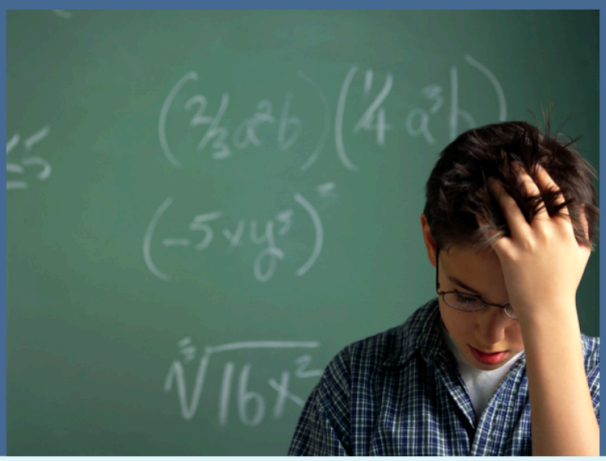
Understanding verbal and non-verbal communication

Potential Areas of Difficulty Related to Comprehension

- **Speed of processing language.** Students may process comments, questions, and directions more slowly than would be expected for their academic or cognitive abilities or age.
- **Non-literal language.** Students may struggle to understand sarcasm, hyperbole, figures of speech, or other forms of non-literal language.
- **Inferences.** Students may have difficulty reading between the lines or making assumptions about information that is not directly presented.
- **Vocabulary.** Students may have difficulty generalizing vocabulary words outside of the specific contexts in which they were learned.
- **Point-of-view.** Students often struggle to understand points of view other than their own, which can inhibit their understanding of oral and written language.

What This Might Look Like in the Classroom

- Mr. Van Rynbeck tells the students to put their pencils down and pass their papers forward, but Darnell takes 10 seconds to put his pencil down, and does not pass his paper forward until he gets another prompt.
- A peer says “thanks for letting me know” after Garrett rudely corrects her, and Garrett responds with a very sincere “you’re welcome,” not understanding the sarcastic tone.
- The short story mentioned “an emotionally draining year” and a character’s “first birthday dinner without his mom,” but Monique could not figure out that the character’s mom had died.
- In classroom discussions, Khaled struggles to understand the arguments of peers who have different opinions and values from his own.



There are numerous approaches you can use to support and encourage comprehension, expressive communication, and/or interaction in the high school environment. Some of these key strategies and examples include:

1. Priming

Provide information about tasks or activities ahead of time to support comprehension and expressive communication in the classroom.

- Provide an outline of class notes or written directions.
- Offer a list of questions to student before the beginning of class so they can formulate answers ahead of time.

2. Additional Processing Time for Support in Communication

Build in extra time for support in processing and responding to directions or questions presented to the class.

- Warn the student that you will be asking them to respond to the question next.
- Have the class think about or write down answers for 15–30 seconds before raising their hands.

3. Modeling

Demonstrate and identify appropriate use of communication and social skills.

- Model target communication skills and social skills in class to the student.
- Model appropriate ways for peers to interact with and respond to the student with ASD.
- Show a video of another person or the student appropriately performing the target skill(s).

4. Peer Supports

Encourage and coach peers to provide supports (e.g., prompts to participate in discussions) to the student in class.

- Intentionally seat the student near peers who you have coached to provide support.
- Give the student specific roles within small group activities that challenge the student with ASD to practice target skills (e.g., group leader for a student who needs practice initiating).
- Give the student a list of topics or questions to use when initiating conversation.

5. Social Connections

Help students to connect with peers in and out of class.

- Point out commonalities or shared interests with peers in the class.
- Sponsor a club around a student's interest.
- Offer your classroom as a meeting place and arrange a lunch group once a week.

Expressive Communication

Using verbal and/or non-verbal means to convey a message

Potential Areas of Difficulty Related to Expressive Communication

- **Sentence formulation.** Students may have difficulty putting words together fluidly, which can show up as struggling to find the right words or abandoning sentences mid-stream or using long sentences without much actual content.
- **Vocabulary.** Students may have limited expressive vocabulary or, at the other extreme, may use unusually complex, obscure, or formal vocabulary.
- **Stereotyped speech.** Students may use certain words or phrases over and over.
- **Nonverbal communication.** Students may have difficulty using appropriate tone of voice or body language or gestures. Their tone of voice or body language or gestures may be confusing or off-putting to others.

What This Might Look Like in the Classroom

- Oskar says "as a matter of fact" before nearly every comment, which is noticed by his teachers and peers.
- When asked a question about how he solved a math problem, Jeremy starts his response with "I was putting together, well, adding, I mean multi...actually, first, I was, I looked at the formula..."
- Ashleigh is excited about her upcoming art show, but when her homeroom teacher asks about the show, Ashleigh speaks in a monotone voice with her arms crossed over her chest.
- Emmett uses obscure and oddly formal vocabulary stating "Actually, I have impaired emotional capacity, which makes the possibility of a romantic relationship virtually inconceivable, at least for the foreseeable future" after being asked if he will invite anyone to the homecoming dance.

Interacting with Others

Using communication to collaborate or engage with others

Potential Areas of Difficulty Related to Interacting with Others

- **Initiating interactions.** Students may be less likely to initiate casual communication with others. They may also over-initiate communication at times, such as blurting out, interrupting, or asking too many questions.
- **Conversation.** Students are challenged by the give and take of conversation. They may have difficulties starting or ending conversations.
- **Maintaining topic.** Students have a hard time staying on topic. They may make tangential or off-topic comments or stay on a preferred topic for too long.
- **Reading non-verbal cues.** Students have difficulty interpreting facial expressions, gestures, and body language during conversations.
- **Perspective taking.** Students may have difficulty understanding the perspective of another person, which may result in misunderstandings with others.

What This Might Look Like in the Classroom

- Janella wants to make friends. Yet, during downtime in her advisory period, she looks at peers who are talking, rather than joining the conversation.
- Despite his peers looking at their watches and tuning out, James continues to talk about obscure naval military battles.
- Nyoshi will engage in conversation with peers by asking questions, but rarely comments or expands on their answers, typically just switching to a new question.
- While talking about future plans, Tony says "Anyone who doesn't go to college is either an idiot or worthless," not recognizing or understanding that some people may struggle with school or may have career plans other than college.

Important Reminders

Slow Down, Support, and Simplify

Remember, high school environments are fast-paced and complex which often makes comprehension, communication and conversations more difficult for students with ASD. Think of strategies to slow the pace, minimize confusion, and reduce complexities in conversations, activities, and other situations.

- Use a subtle signal that the student knows to indicate when you are joking or using sarcasm or when the student is drifting off topic.
- Pair visual supports with verbal instruction in order to maximize comprehension and capitalize on strengths and preferences for visual modalities.

Provide Specific Positive and Constructive Feedback

Offer specific feedback to the student (and others in the class) about their communication skills. General feedback, such as "good job" or "nice work in class", does not provide enough information to reinforce specific target skills.

- "Nice job focusing on the main idea. Next time try to look up at the class when you talk."
- "I like how you are facing me while you listen. It might be helpful to give some other clues that you are listening—maybe nodding your head or saying 'uh-huh'."

Resources

American Speech-Language Hearing Association
http://www.asha.org/slp/clinical/autism-resources/

Understanding Autism: A Guide for Secondary School Teachers

DVD
http://www.researchautism.org/resources/teachersdvd.asp
Brochure
http://csesa.fpg.unc.edu/resources/understanding-autism-guide-secondar y-school-teachers

Recommendations for Students with High Functioning Autism

http://teacch.com/educational-approaches/recommendations-for-students-with-high-functio autism-kerr y-hogan

Understanding the Student with Asperger's Syndrome: Guidelines for Teachers

http://www.aspergersyndrome.org/Articles/Understanding-the-Student-With-Asperger-s-Syndrome.aspx

autism at a glance

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CSESA
The Center on Secondary Education for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder

Appendix F: Strategies for Effective Teaming for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

Strategies for Effective Teaming for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

Mary Jimerson, M.A., Ph.D. Candidate
Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities Division

Building and sustaining collaborative educational teams is an effective approach for meeting the diverse needs of students with ASD. Effective teaming amongst educational teams can be beneficial to a broader group of people including family members, students, administrators, educators, and ancillary staff members.

There are numerous advantages in using a team approach when educating students with ASD. These advantages can include the following:

- Team members work together to achieve a common goal, which can be program or student specific.
- Effective team meetings can provide professional development opportunities regarding evidence-based practices and interventions.
- Generating and implementing educational plans that are tailored to meet the specific needs of the student (i.e. IEP and BIP). This component can improve student success because everyone is knowledgeable and responsible for the plan.
- Progress monitoring among various educators and other providers to improve the implementation of IEP goals, effectiveness of interventions, and instructional strategies
- Teaming opportunities allow professionals to share their knowledge and expertise with each other to provide effective educational programming for the student (s).
- Generalization of interventions and skills across settings and people can occur through collaborative programming. This can occur when team members discuss ways to implement interventions, share strategies and ideas, and collect data.
- Data collection systems are reviewed and shared by team members weekly or bi-weekly

Creating effective teams involves the following:

- Establishing support from administrators to meet and function as a team is an absolute essential
- Creating an atmosphere that welcomes all team members to include multiple disciplines
- Defining roles and responsibilities amongst team members (i.e. roles/responsibilities associated with administrators, educational and ancillary staff members)
- Developing common goals which can include team and student goals.

Strategies to promote collaboration:

- Create a consistent schedule to meet as a whole team (i.e. bi-weekly or monthly - plan to meet for approximately 1 hour)
- Include administrators in the planning and implementation of team meetings.

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Tips for Success

Components of effective and collaborative teams include:

- Building a team structure
- Acquiring teamwork skills
- Implementing action plans
- Working together in collaborative ways
- Improving communication and develop ways to handle conflict

Create equity and positive interdependence among team members:

- Teams can be comprised of two or more people that share a common goal. Teams can be also be as large as 10-15 with administrators, professionals, and paraprofessionals.
- Create an inclusive environment/atmosphere where everyone feels a part of the team.
- Invite all team members to scheduled meetings and give advanced notice of changes.
- Encourage and demonstrate active listening during consultations and team meetings.
- Rotate and share responsibilities during the team meetings so all team members fill the following roles: meeting facilitator, timekeeper, and note taker. Sample agenda template is included in this information brief.
- Keep a binder of agendas and notes in a centralized location to reference and access if absent from the meeting.

Resources:

- Heflin, L.J., & Alaimo, D.F. (2007). *Students with autism spectrum disorders: Effective instructional practices.* Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson.
- National Professional Development Center on Autism Spectrum Disorder (NPDC): http://autismpdc.fpg.unc.edu/
- Snell, M.E., & Janney, R. (2000). *Collaborative teaming.* Baltimore, MD: Brookes.

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Sample Agenda

Team Meeting _____

Date/Time: _____

Location: _____

Facilitator:	Timekeeper:	Note taker:
Attendees:		

Meeting Objective	

Agenda/Discussion Items

1.	
2.	
3.	
4.	
5.	

Action Plans

Description	Person Responsible	Due Date

Next Meeting Date/Time: _____

Facilitator: _____

Timekeeper: _____

Note taker: _____

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For more information about this resource or to inquire about the Autism Programs call
(505) 272-1852 or **1-800-270-1861** www.cdd.unm.edu/autism

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