**Episode 7: Autism and Bullying**

**JESSE:** An individual with autism may be so desperate for friendships or what seemed like friendships that they’ll tolerate being taken advantage of or treated like a doormat. Other cases, they’re just very much naive and they cannot understand someone's true intentions.

**HOST:** This is Autism Points of View by Autism Speaks. I’m Felipe Maya. Through research we know that students with autism, and other disabilities, are more likely to be bullied than the general population. To understand how bullying can affect people with autism, we spoke with autism self-advocate and author Jesse Saperstein.

So Jesse, I know that you are an autism advocate and an anti-bullying advocate and you’ve given speeches, can you tell us about, can you tell me about um the first time that you’ve experience bullying?

**JESSE**: I'd say the first time I remember being truly bullied was in fourth grade. It was probably physical. I remember the day that I pushed back. Two boys cornered me and they were pushing me back and forth in the middle of a line. Back in middle school it was occasionally being punched in the stomach or being pinched, and I know that some other peers with autism and just people who are different in general, received much worse. My stories probably pales in comparison to other horror stories.

**DR. PETER FAUSTINO**: I'm Dr. Peter Faustino school psychologist with the National Association of School Psychologists. We get reports about bullying from lots of different sources. And I want to make it clear that reporting bullying and acknowledging that it's not tolerated is probably the first and most important step. I would never say to a parent or a student, you know, don't share something or don't report it because that really is the first step. It’s that acknowledgment that if you see something, say something. We really do want open lines of communication.

The Center for Disease Control defines bullying as really any unwanted aggressive behavior from one youth to another where there's an observed or perceived power imbalance. These are not behaviors that are unique to a particular group or a particular age. In fact, we're finding bullying behavior from very young ages all the way up and through adulthood.

**HOST**: For Jesse, the bullying didn’t stop in grade school or high school.

**JESSE**: I always thought things would get better at adulthood but my case it became a little bit worse or stayed the same. In college I was called a lot of names.

In college it’s even more difficult to coexist in this type of a social environment because there's no home-- if you’re fortunate, or if someone's fortunate enough to have a decent home life then, that serves as kind of a haven to refuel. But in college, if it’s a residential school like mine was you’re kind of exposed all the time to the social world. And there is no break, there's no reprieve, it can be relentless at times and quite stressful.

It is true that the abuse that you experience at 12 years old probably will not be happening at the age of thirty-two, at least not nearly as tenaciously. But why should somebody have to wait years and years before they can see relief? For a child that’s a veritable lifetime. And that's not acceptable. And we as a society can do better because, “It gets better,” does not cut it for me.

**DR. PETER FAUSTINO**: My primary role is as a school psychologist in schools and I've done that for 20-plus years. But I also have a private practice that I‘ve run for the last ten years. And some of the individuals that come there are college-aged kids who maybe had a lot of supports and maybe even a network of friends or peers when they were in public school, or in their home school community, but then branch out to college or to jobs and don't always find the same type of climate that exists. When you begin to peel the layers back, you discover that there is quite a bit of either social or relational aggression that goes on in the workplace. Rarely is it physical, but cyber-bullying, certainly, and quite often just even verbal aggression, sometimes more overt and other times just quieter about it. So, but it is, it's a sad issue that I think everyone at some point in their life has dealt with and is looking for answers on how to deal with.

**HOST**: With almost everyone online and on social media, even kids, is the “cyberbully” replacing the school bully?

**JESSE:** An example of cyber bullying as an adult is that an acquaintance from high school contacted me shortly after my first book was released and she made up a cockamamie but, unfortunately, pretty convincing story that Dr. Phil was interested in having my book on the air. You and everyone else is probably wondering how could you fall for that? Well it’s easier than you think. Honestly, I just did not think a grown adult would waste much energy on such a ridiculous lie but it happens even in adulthood. And you just have to realize that these trolls or cyberbullies, they're like poison ivy. Poison ivy serves no function to mankind. It just takes up space and makes our lives miserable. But it's out there and it's our responsibility to look out for the signs or face the consequences.

**HOST**: Research shows that two-thirds of people with autism, between the ages of six and fifteen, said that they have been bullied at one point in their lives. Dr. Faustino explores the link between autism and bullying.

**DR. PETER FAUSTINO**: I think part of it is unique to autism and then the other part is maybe just more about human behavior. I think any time something is different or unique or doesn't fit into the norm, it's going to stand out a little bit and people are going to pay attention to it. And so, then I think for individuals with autism, part of their makeup is challenges with understanding social cues and social communication, as well as sometimes having repetitive behaviors that might be different from the norm. So I think when you put those two things together, you really raise the chances that an individual with autism is going to be a target of bullying.

**HOST**: Jesse offers a personal view on this connection.

**JESSE**: An individual with autism may be so desperate for friendships or what seemed like friendships that they’ll tolerate being taken advantage of or treated like a doormat. Other cases, they’re just very much naive and they cannot understand someone's true intentions. That's why it's important for not just educators but for their own peers, who are neurotypical, to look out for them, for their well-being and help them advocate for themselves. And, um, individuals with autism they’re sometimes stunted they may be light years behind their peers who are considered to be “normal.”

I was one of the first victims of what we now refer to as, “catfishing.” I was targeted by a group of students from my school and they literally created a gorgeous but entirely fictional young woman who professed her love to me. And I fell for it head-over-heels. And my mother finally called the school to try to put an end to it and shake me into reality. And then she said to me later that day after she called, “There is nobody named Elizabeth West enrolled in the Hyde Park School District.”

But what really shook me out of my naivete is when I did to the same thing they did to me. I emailed them under a fake screen name. And I asked one of the perpetrators: “Have you ever heard of a Jesse Saperstein?” And then he starts ranting about how he and his friends played this huge trick on me and that this woman did not even exist.

So, at that time I had no choice but to accept it. My goal is to not just, hopefully, punish the perpetrators but teach people like myself and others with vulnerabilities some basic street smarts. Because it makes no difference if the perpetrator faces consequences, somebody still gets seriously hurt, emotionally, and others may choose to take their own lives. It’s so traumatic. The distress is so overbearing.

**DR. PETER FAUSTINO**: I think technology changes so quickly that even if we think we're caught up there's unique ways of doing these kinds of things. And I mean either bullying or cyber bullying and or even just, you know, new mediums of social communication and media.

If my memory serves me correct I think some of the platforms prided themselves on just being these open networks that were not going to be regulated or controlled. And because of the either sheer volume or the stories that have come out about how cyber-bullying has led to terrible things like suicide, or you know, large anti-discriminatory types of practices, I think they are catching on that there does need to be some level of monitoring or regulation. And I find that they're doing a better job than they once were. If they're not regulating it, what I do think a lot of organizations and associations are doing is providing resources for what parents can do.

Every school has bullying policies in place quite often written down and so sometimes you can kind of start with looking at those and getting a sense of, you know, what is the best way to report it; what do I do if I'm concerned and who might be able to help.

**HOST**: But Jesse feels that having a policy, isn’t always enough.

**JESSE:** I think that every elementary school, or at the very least every middle school at the start of sixth grade, should have a class that teaches people about the sometimes deadly consequences of bullying. And not just consequences of bullying for the victims but let perpetrators know that their lives could become unbearable, if say, a parent decides to press charges and it becomes a really big deal. Or, they have to live with the consequences that their actions contributed to somebody taking their own life. And just to strike the fear of God in them and let them know that there will be consequences. And this is a very big deal. And also, explain the differences between the benign teasing and downright bullying, because as I said it's not going to be perfect, and I think it's only teasing if the bully truly means no harm. And also, if the victim is okay with it, if they don't find it personal or hurtful.

**HOST**: Dr. Faustino says that bullying takes more than just a bully and a victim.

**DR. PETER FAUSTINO**: Being sort of a school professional who deals with bullying, I often have to even catch myself to not narrow it down to a bully and a victim, implying that it's just two people that are engaged in this, but rather it's the classroom, the community, the climate, that exists. So there’s a wonderful visual called the “bullying circle.” And you can see where on one end of the circle there might be the victim and on the other end of the circle there might be a bully, but there's lots of people that stand along the outside. So there's people who encourage the bully and laugh when he does something, kind of reinforcing his behavior. There may be people, you know, on a different spot of the circle who just observe and don't interact and don't intervene and don't say anything. And then you get all the way up to--I mean those were bystanders--and then you get up to people maybe a little closer who actually make a decision to intervene by saying something or reporting the bullying behavior that they see.

So I most of the more recent research really talks about the large group of bystanders, the individuals who stand around, observe this type of behavior and the fact that they may have more of an influence on the bully and/or on the victim, than if you work individually with the bully and the victim. So I would say to you to answer your question, The bystanders are probably the ones that we need to do more work with, that we need to encourage to speak up, to intervene, whether that be to tell the bully to stop their behavior or identify that they acknowledge what's going on and that it's not funny, and that it is hurtful. And/or kind of support the victim and say, “I see what you're going through, I'm going to help you,” or “I'm going to take you to someone who can help you,” or you know kind of just support them and say, “ I know what it feels like to go through this as well.” If bystanders turn into upstanders and shut down the bully, then it really doesn't continue, or it minimizes it. And by the same token if they go to the victim and they say, “I've got your back, I'm helping you out,” those are the things that really make a big difference in a school climate.

**JESSE:** The best role models are one’s peers, especially if they’re older and mature. One of my heroes is a boy whose name I will never know. I remember on the school bus, one of these bus bullies was tormenting a little Chinese boy calling him, “gay,” until the boy was in tears. And all of a sudden I heard a voice, the voice said, “Hey, do you even know this kid?” And I believe that the bully said, “I don't know him, but he's gay.” But after that I think the abuse died down at least that afternoon. We need more people to advocate for those who are vulnerable and put others in their place.

**DR. PETER FAUSTINO**: I think for any group if you share the narrative, or you tell your story about your struggles and your hopes and maybe find ways to make connections on a different level, the fact that you have hopes and dreams and that you get sad when somebody bothers you, it hopefully creates more empathy and compassion which is really I think the goal that we're looking for.

**JESSE:** These experiences were quite traumatizing and they're often times at the surface, even at age 36. Maybe some are able to put it behind them forever and say, “Yeah, that was just a part of growing up. It's over now.” But too many others like me will be trapped in that living nightmare or it’s not going to take much to make those memories seep out and ruin a perfectly good moment. I’d say that it's become easier, but it's never going to be easy for me to just let it go. And a lot of my former bullies have reached out to me and said, “I wish I had known you had autism.” One person admitted that he felt ashamed and that's typically—I’d like to think that’s how people feel when they become adults.

**HOST**: My last question for Jesse was what advice he has for students on the autism spectrum who are currently being bullied?

**JESSE:** The best thing I can let them know is that they have the right to go to school and eventually become an adult, without living in a constant state of fear that one day they're going to be assaulted for no reason just because they're considered to be weird. No one has the right to put their hands on them or make death threats. But my best advice is to remind them that no matter how much progress society makes it will never be perfect. Let’s say that maybe 30 percent of everybody they meet think that they're weird and want nothing to do with to do with them, and if that's the case, then it means they're doing something right and they should be very proud of themselves. Trying to make everybody like, and or, accept you as effective as using a wine glass to bail out the Titanic back in 1912.

**HOST**: Thank you for listening to this episode of Autism Points of View. Make sure to subscribe wherever you listen to podcasts. For bonus content and resources related to this episode visit autismspeaks.org/podcasts. If you have a topic you would like us to cover we want to hear from you. E-mail connectwithus@autismspeaks.org and put ‘podcast’ in the subject line. This episode was written by Elaina Feretti and Felipe Maya and edited by Max Schaeffer.

I’m Felipe Maya thanks for listening.