

First Place

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9th Grade

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WHY AUTISTIC AND DEVELOPMENTALLY DISABLED PEOPLE BECOME TARGETS OF BULLIES, AND HOW CAN MY SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY PREVENT IT?

In the beginning of the school year, I invited a new student to sit at our lunch table to show our hospitality. Soon enough we found out that she was very quirky and socially awkward. She would constantly interrupt our conversations, trying to be part of every single dialogue, even if it did not pertain to her. She would never seem to be able to comprehend any jokes that we told her and took words literally. Despite her aggressive behavior, she was sweet and innocent, so we tried our best to help her out. Until, one day, she insulted my friend, who broke down into tears. She never took the blame. After some discussions we concluded that she was one of those spoiled, self-centered people not worthy of our friendship. We resorted to ignoring her. Two weeks later, she called me to apologize. She also revealed to me that she had high-functioning Aspergers. I was shocked and heartbroken. My friends and I are not bullies, but we had ignored a friend with autism due to misinterpreting her involuntary actions. Willie Nelson once said: "Cruelty is all out of ignorance". From my experience, I believe that autistic and developmentally disabled individuals become vulnerable targets for bullies as a result of the ignorance of people who attack others for being different or not considered "socially normal."

The bright light of knowledge obliterates the darkness of ignorance. Educating society and raising awareness of autism is the best way to prevent bullying. Teaching young students to understand developmental disorders is the key to helping them better accept people that seem different or behave in ways they find unfamiliar. When children learn more about people with autism, they will be more tolerant and supportive of their disabled peers. This type of teaching should be incorporated into the curriculum from the beginning in elementary schools. Holding classes where bullying is discussed and putting books on the classroom reading list that raise awareness and acceptance for autism. Activities such as Autism Awareness Week, anti-bully

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poster designs and empathy skills workshops are some positive ways to encourage students to gain understanding regarding this matter. Middle and High-schools should create a student volunteer team to work with school social workers. This not only helps autistic or disabled students with their problems, it also establishes a group of peers providing support they may need, such as giving advice on dealing with cyber bullying. Helping out at community events or being volunteers at camps intended for children with special needs should be encouraged. Schools and communities should also provide an opportunity for someone with autism to make a contribution to society.

How a society treats its disabled people is a true measure of its civilization. It is everybody's responsibility to help prevent autistic and developmentally disabled people from becoming targets of bullies. As a musician, performing for children with autism and giving concerts to promote autistic awareness to the public will be the primary goal of my community service.