



# SEAC SOUNDBYTES

*Raising awareness of the Special Education process at HCDSB*

*June 2017*

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## **Mental Health**

The relationship between mental health and special education needs is complex and demands a very careful understanding from both parents and educators. Mental health issues may be higher among specific populations such as children on the Autism Spectrum or those with Learning Disabilities or Giftedness to name a few. Protective factors for children with special needs include support, understanding, and self-advocacy skills. These factors will become especially important to prevent mental health issues if your child with special needs should be bullied.

Bullying is every parent's fear and for children with special education needs that fear is exacerbated. Bullying has negative effects on all children but children with special education needs are especially vulnerable. When faced with such a situation your child's supports can assist your child to develop strategies to help cope with the stress of bullying, and step in where necessary to speak to the school administration. It's especially important in such a situation that your child has good advocacy skills, that will assist them in dealing directly with a bully, and if that fails, then provides them with the confidence to speak up to staff about the situation.

It is important for parents to know that when faced with this and other stressful educational situations, there are answers and solutions. One critical tool available to parents is the IEP (Individual Education Plan). A child's team of parents, teachers, therapists should work together to make the IEP reflect the child's unique needs. The IEP speaks on behalf of your child when their own self-advocacy needs are not sufficient. Goals should include social skills development, strength building skills, self-advocacy skills and increasing the child's awareness about their differences. Helping a child to learn about their strengths and feeling proud of who they are and their accomplishments while also understanding how their disabilities may impact them is important. Parents need to stay well connected with their child's team at school where everyone can find the right level of support and understanding for success.