



Podcast

# Autism Conversations

UNM Autism Programs

## The Impact of Bullying: Signs & Self-Care Strategies for People with Autism Podcast Transcript

**Jayme A Swalby:** Hi, everyone. Thank you all for being here today on Autism Conversations.

I am Jayme Swalby, and I'm a Senior Program Therapist here at the Center for Development and Disability, and I'm so lucky to be a part of the podcast team, and also as today's facilitator for this much needed conversation, that we're going to have today.

We have a really incredible panel with us. We have 3 folks here joining us, and they're here to help us discuss, *The Impact of Bullying, Signs, and Self-Care Strategies for People with Autism*.

It's such an important topic, and, often we don't hear a ton about it, so I really thank you all for being here and for your willingness to come and have this conversation with us and share today. And just thank you for being here and taking the time out of your day. We're all so busy these days, and so everyone, please help me welcome Tanya Burnett, Daniel Ekman, and Savannah Oster.

And I don't want to miss anything. You all bring such incredible wisdom and knowledge to us today. I don't want to miss anything. So, I would love it if each of you could introduce yourselves.

Savannah, would you mind starting us off?

**Savannah L Oster:** I am more than happy to start off, Jayme. Thank you so much for this wonderful opportunity, for this wonderful podcast, and much needed discussion. My name is Savannah Oster. I am an Education Associate at the CDD, and I'm a member of the Autism Conversations podcast team.

**Jayme Swalby:** Thank you, Savannah, and welcome!

Okay, Tanya.

**Tanya Burnett:** Hi, I'm excited to be here and be part of this conversation today. My name is Tanya Burnett. I work at the CDD with New Mexico's START program, which is a crisis intervention and prevention program for people with autism, as well as developmental disabilities. And I've worked in mental health, since around 2006 and I have definitely seen a lot of the effects of bullying and different, different issues like this, so I'm glad we're here to talk about it today.

**Jayme A Swalby:** Thanks so much, Tanya! And Daniel!

**Daniel Ekman:** Hello there, so my name's Daniel Ekman, and I actually work as the program manager for the Center for Self-Advocacy Program. It's a leadership development and training program, and we are part of the Developmental Disabilities Council. So, I've been there for over 10 years now, since 2012, and I'm very interested in this topic from a couple of angles. Obviously, my own experiences, but also I have a 9-year-old son, so I've kind of see the effects on that end as well.

**Jayme A Swalby:** Excellent. Thank you, Daniel! Gosh, I just am really excited about this conversation today. It sounds like we all have some interest in this. I, myself, have interest in this, both as a parent and just I've seen it happen. I'm an educator by trade, and I've seen it happen for so many kids, and also adults as well. So, I'm just really grateful you all are here today. Let's just go ahead and jump in, shall we?

We get questions from the community to kind of guide our conversation, and one of the first questions that has come up on our end is, how do I know someone is being bullied?

**Tanya Burnett:** I think that is such a great and complex question, and one simple answer that jumps to my mind first is oftentimes we don't know.

And, so there's a lot of different things we can look for to see if people are being, or to kind of try and pay attention to, if we're concerned that somebody might be being bullied.

If the bullying is some kind of physical or more direct aggression, I mean, obviously we might see bruises, markings, destruction of people's property, different things like that. However, that is, like, the least common type of bullying.

So, oftentimes it can be a lot more difficult to detect.

And it depends on, of course, the age of the person and their ability to express what's happening to them. You know, people with developmental disabilities sometimes have a hard time expressing the things that are going on with them.

But some... some signs can be, like, withdrawal from social activities, school, and group, activities that they usually enjoy. Sometimes you're gonna see more anger or outbursts. Sometimes you might see more depression, more, just a lot of different, behaviors that we might see, or just changes in their day-to-day affect, kind of how they act every day. These are some things you can look for.

**Daniel Ekman:** I'd like to, add also that one of the things that can really help in this situation, and this is maybe where the long term comes in for me as an adult. If I'm dealing with young people, or even if I'm just dealing with another adult. I think that's where relationship building is very important, because not only does that mean, for example, my son might tell me what's going on and feel okay with my reaction to it. He might feel okay with how I'm going to approach it. He's okay being vulnerable, but I think even if you have someone that's not gonna verbalize it, I remember someone telling me this as a parent one time, that if a child is maybe more willing to do certain behaviors that are nonverbal in front of you, that that actually could be a sign that they trust you. And you can see some of those symptoms, maybe, that Tanya's talking about, if they feel comfortable with you. They don't feel like they have to hide it or hold it in. So, I think I think a lot about, you know, checking in with people that we know, making sure everything's okay.

If you see something that's off, checking in and asking someone, you know, is anything going on? Not pressuring them or forcing them to say anything or express anything, but just letting them know you're open to it.

**Savannah L Oster:** I agree a lot with what Tanya and Daniel are saying as well, because it's really important to give someone comfort level to be able to open up to you about how knowing if someone is being bullied. Usually, from my perspective, a person has to feel really comfortable enough to open up to the person, open up to me what's going on in time. You kind of give them the cushion of opportunity to let them express their feelings as the person's comfortable. As well as, if you kind of witness some of the bullying, or if you feel it, from my personal experience, I felt it in my gut. I knew when I was getting bullied, I knew. I just didn't know how to express myself when I was younger, so much later on, when I started my recovery journey, I recognized the symptoms. I recognized it in a bunch of counseling.

As well as I'm talking to my parents, and they've given me opportunities to really be vulnerable with them. They've given me room, and I said, I don't know why I'm sad, I don't know. And I talk about all the situations, and my parents were telling me how they're gonna handle it by calling the school. And at the time, they told me what they did, just so that way I know the action's being taken.

And there was times when I was younger, that there was no action taken at all, so I just moved schools. I moved, that way none of that happens anymore, and I did. It made it so much better for me personally, and I made my own decision to move schools, and my parents were with me on that decision.

Nothing got resolved, so just really keeping an eye on how to handle that situation is really important, too, as well as knowing. I knew when I was a child. It was happening. I told my parents when I figured out how to express myself.

**Jayme A Swalby:** Thank you all so much. I think, you know, when I hear you all talking, some of it is that piece, and Savannah, you touched on it a little bit, of how do you yourself even know that you're being bullied? And that might even be a confusing thing to know whether someone is being friendly, or whether, that is actually not what is happening. And so, having those trusted people in your life that maybe you can open up to, or you're, just having, you know, the things that you were sharing with us, Tonya, those pieces that are more of an expression of what's going on instead of that verbal language saying, hey, I'm being bullied. But having that trusted person that can talk to you, that's super important. Thank you all for sharing that.

How do you go about talking about bullying that you've experienced? So, if you've experienced bullying, how do you even begin that conversation with someone?

**Savannah L Oster:** For me, I have I have opened up about my life experiences throughout my life, even through my adulthood and my childhood. The older I have gotten, and I've been in therapy for a long time, recovering from some of the bullying I've gone through as a child, and I talk to my therapists about it, I go to recovery groups to heal from some of it as well, and I talk to my friends and my trusted loved ones and even my parents, still to this day. Even my brothers, I have talked to my family members about it, just my symptoms, just the things I know I've been through.

And it was touched a little bit a second ago, Jayme, when you said whether someone thinks they're joking, and I've experienced that, and it's not funny to me, and I talked to my parents. And I knew, like, when I get upset, because all feelings are very valid, very, very valid, so all the feelings people go through are raw and real, and they're very, very, very authentic, and that's been definitely my experience. So, if I'm facing trauma, for example, I'm very open to help me heal more, so I'm open to talk about this conversation to really help people in the world.

And bullying's not acceptable, it's really not. And just leaning on your loved ones, just giving someone comfort to talk to you when you need them is most important. That's really, personally, has helped me.

**Tanya Burnett:** I think, you know, it depends, talking about bullying can be hard. It depends on, kind of, your situation. You know, as a kid, I feel like if you have a good relationship with your parents, you're oftentimes gonna go to them pretty quickly and let them know what's happening, or they're gonna find out, even if you don't know it's bullying. You might come home and talk about things that happened at school, and your parents start to realize, and can even maybe help you understand what's happening, and process it, and respond to it in appropriate ways.

I think, though, where it can get really tricky and get more difficult is under, like, social bullying, and more so in, like, adulthood. Because things can be more manipulative, and more kind of underhanded and sly and sneaky. And so, you know, this type of bullying can be a lot more difficult to even understand, and it can be helpful maybe to talk to friends or people you trust.

And get some kind of insight into that. But also in the work environment, it can be really hard, or in the school environment too, I suppose, when you do talk about bullying, because sometimes that comes back to you, and things get worse. So, it's really difficult to know what to do. I personally have had situations and work situations where, you know, I finally did express something to a supervisor or somebody, and then everything got much, much worse.

You know, the manipulation of the person, she was very close with a lot of the higher-ups, and so she was able to kind of very vindictively kind of cause a lot of problems for me, in my work situation.

But I do think a couple things to keep in mind is, it's important to keep a paper trail, you know, start to document the things that are going on with you. You can even do this when you're in school. You can start to write it down, or have your parents write it down. But as an adult, I think it's really important to start documenting those things, so as over time, if it becomes more of an issue, you have something to back yourself up.

Another thing that's suggested, too, is to kind of go outside of your smaller network, if that's an issue, to go maybe to human resources, and step outside of that where everyone knows each other and everyone's friends sort of a situation, to get that help from someone who's maybe removed and indifferent.

But it is really difficult to talk about sometimes, and you never know what the repercussions might be because people do talk. And, you don't want things to get worse, and I think that's why some people don't say anything for sometimes a really long time, or maybe ever, and also just not knowing if that is bullying, or maybe they're just teasing, or that sort of thing.

But I think if it feels, makes you feel bad, it doesn't really matter. I think you should bring it up to somebody, is my thoughts.

**Daniel Ekman:** I agree about going outside of sometimes our smaller circles. I mean, one of the things that I benefit from, Savannah, I think you talked about this as you know, I've been in therapy for quite a while, and one of the things that I'll do is I'll check in on different things, and I'll ask a lot of questions, because a lot of times. I might not pick up on something as obvious. So I'll ask a lot of questions, you know, is this bullying? Is this okay? Is, you know, what is this a sign of? Is this, you know, maybe more typical or not as typical?

If I have a human resources person, I'll ask them the same thing. If I have someone that I do trust. Let's say, you know, at a management level within an organization, I might ask them the same thing, but I'm always checking in with people that are kind of outside of just the immediate situation. Because I think sometimes an outsider perspective can be very valuable. I think sometimes when you're in a situation. And I know this has happened with me too, you could lose sight a little bit, especially if it's kind of a chaotic work situation. Anyway, you can sort of lose sight of what things are okay and what things are not.

I think the other thing that I had to do when I think about, you know, for myself, why maybe I didn't talk about bullying when it came up for me as much as I think, and this goes back to being in therapy, there's a certain level of self-esteem I had to build up to where I actually was not okay with certain things that were going on. I think when I had, I think about when I had much lower self-esteem, I think I would just put up with things that people shouldn't put up with, because I thought, well, that's just, you know, whether I thought it was deserved, whether I thought it didn't really matter all that much.

So, I think in addition to always working on, okay, how do I identify bullying? It's always remembering that you know, you have a certain level of self-worth, and bullying is never something that's okay, or should just be put up with.

**Tanya Burnett:** I think that is such a great point, too. Yeah, because bullying, especially over time, starts to break down your sense of self-worth.

And when we're, you know, fed these messages from a young age, especially, or just repeatedly over time, you know, we start to maybe think, maybe I deserve this, maybe I'm making a big deal, maybe I should keep my mouth shut. Because these things can really be detrimental to your sense of self-worth and your sense of competency, and all of these things.

**Daniel Ekman:** Also, if you're in a more toxic environment anyway, where it's not just one person, but it's almost pervasive, it can be even harder to figure out what bullying is, because everybody's kind of, whether it's because they're on edge, or whether it's everybody's kind of treating each other in ways that aren't appropriate, then it can become really hard because you can almost normalize things that would

otherwise, in a better environment, be seen as really negative, because you're surrounded by it.

**Savannah L Oster:** Yeah, I totally agree with you, Tanya, and I agree with you, Daniel. You do start to lose your self-esteem, and there's also trauma after the fact. Like, there's been moments after my bullying experiences that I have had trauma. And it's come back every once in a while, especially when I'm really going through a challenging time in my life. I would question myself if I'm even worth it. Things like that have come up for me. And I'm like, is this even, am I okay? Am I doing something wrong? Am I, is it me? That's some of the stuff that's come up for me in my life.

After me getting bullied, and the result of being bullied for me was trauma. So, eventually, when I got older, my mom did ask me, do you need to, you should go to therapy, that will help you heal. And at first, I was like, no. But eventually, I ended up going to therapy, and that's been a life changer for me.

**Jayme A Swalby:** Thank you all so much for just sharing even the personal, especially the personal pieces of that, it is so powerful, and the couple things that you all touched on that hit me were just that piece of self-esteem, and how it really can just start to feel like you don't have as much of the self-esteem as maybe you used to, or it affects you in a certain way.

And Daniel, you touched on something, and you said a word that it kind of blew me away, but you tend to normalize it. And that piece of normalizing, I think, can be really frightening, because when you normalize it, and it just seems like, oh, this is just your day in and day out, this is just what this is. Then that's hard, and I think it becomes even harder to go and be able to share your experience, because you're like, well, like you were saying, Tonya, this is normal, and maybe I'm just making too much of it, and whatnot. And so, all of what you shared is so incredibly, helpful, and thank you for that.

So, the next question, how can I help someone, or how can I support someone if they're being bullied?

**Tanya Burnett:** So, I think for supporting people being bullied, I guess I've dealt with it in so many different types of ways. I've dealt with it when I was a kid in school, and it would be my friends or my cousins. And I dealt with it, you know, working in, inpatient psychiatric treatment, working with kiddos, that were being bullied sometimes by peers.

And, you know, I think there are so many different ways you can do it. I mean, some thoughts that I have is, I mean, listening without judgment is really important. You know, being sympathetic, and really validating is really important to do.

However, if you're, like, a teacher or somebody working with people, you know, who might be being bullied, like, in your classroom or any other atmosphere, I think supporting people, can take many forms. But one thing is just being kind of hypervigilant and paying attention to the way people treat each other. I guess you can do this as well in work atmospheres if you want to support friends or colleagues that might be being bullied.

But just pay attention to things like microaggressions, when people make slights against each other, when people get excluded often over and over and over.

So just, just kind of identifying when that's happening and things like that. Some methods that are recommended to help people, if there might be a colleague or a coworker or a friend, is to kind of stand with them. You know, when they get victimized or bullied, to kind of be on their side.

But I think some of the main things are just validating that person, listening to them, maybe even helping to come up with a game plan. Helping them build some supports, helping to build, you know, an environment of inclusion, and not seclusion, or exclusion.

I think there's a lot of ways, but just being there for somebody is a huge, huge way to support them.

**Daniel Ekman:** I agree with all those things. One thing I'm thinking about, too, is what do you do when maybe, for whatever reason, the person doesn't want to be open, or come forward, or maybe get uncomfortable talking to anyone.

I kind of think, is there someone in their social circle that can maybe ask them how they're doing, and if anything's going on, I mean maybe approach, if it's a child, maybe approach a parent, or if it's an adult, approach a friend and say, you know, I've seen this stuff go on I think it's having an impact on this person, they probably need someone to talk to about it. I mean, obviously something needs to be done, but they also need to talk to someone about it. You know, do you think you could bring it up with them? Or is something, you know and being careful not to break confidence in any way, but to say, you know, this is something that really should be addressed. And obviously, yeah, you want to take action on the bullying, but I think it's also important to whether it's you talking to them or someone else talking to them figuring out and helping heal. Maybe, Savannah, you mentioned this, the deeper trauma beyond just, you know, well, this happened and it's wrong.

I know with my son, for example, if he has an incident, there's usually some underlying feeling that he's left with, or he'll have a question about the reason he's getting bullied. He might say, oh, is that, and unfortunately, he might think, well, is that an okay reason? And then you talk to him about well, you know, you have to talk to them about that whole thought process of okay, well, if this is the reason, let's think about it. Let's talk about, you know, does that really matter all that much? Or, you know, is there anything to that? And you kind of have to walk them through why



it's wrong so that they know. So that he understands it's not just you know, oh, it's wrong because something happened to me, but it's also wrong because of the thinking that was going on that was behind it.

**Savannah L Oster:** I totally agree with what you both are saying, Tanya and Daniel. It can be really, really, really, with the deeper trauma, it can be a little bit more difficult, so like how I personally would support someone if they're being bullied is listening. If someone comes to me and talks to me about it, I would, say if they're willing to share their story, listen to their story. I give them my piece of advice based on my lived experience with bullying, and I would offer support on asking, how can I support you right now? Is there anything I can do for you?

And if they feel comfortable sharing with me, great. If they don't, that's okay, too. It's just I think it's really important to have sympathy either way, whether they're comfortable to open up or not.

And I think it's really important to be reassuring the person they are being heard and that they're not alone. Like, Daniel was talking about, the deeper trauma portion. It's really important to reassure the person they're not alone during the bullying process, and I would tell them a little bit about my stuff that I'm comfortable sharing to help them know it's okay. You're gonna be okay. This is gonna move past, I promise, stuff like that I would do. That's how I would support someone if they're being bullied.

**Tanya Burnett:** I also think, you know, helping people kind of process some of the emotions they might have around it can be really important because we don't always understand why we feel the way we do. Sometimes our reactions might just be anxiety, fear, I don't want to go, I don't want to do this, or shutting down, or anger. We might just be really mad, really mad, and maybe we get mad at ourselves because we think it's our fault.

But there's just so many different kinds, maybe we just want to cry. You know, there's so many, maybe we just want to withdraw from life, from different things.

So, there's just so many different types of responses that can happen, and I think it's important to allow people to have those emotions, whatever it is. And let them process it and realize it's not wrong to feel really mad, or it's not wrong to cry. It doesn't make you weak or anything like that. You know, this is an appropriate response if it's how you feel.

And allowing people just to process those things and have a safe space to let some of that out, so they're not keeping it all to themselves because I think that can be really damaging over time, too. Like, the fear and isolation that bullying can cause because, you know, a lot of it is very manipulative and vindictive, and they want you to think it's your fault, because you're no good, you know, that sort of a thing.

So just I think some of those are very important things as well when supporting somebody.

**Savannah L Oster:** I totally agree with you, Tanya. It's like, I've been angry after getting bullied for a while. I have gotten to the point I unfortunately have like, changed the way I function, because I don't feel good about myself after being bullied. Like, sometimes you get so deep with depression and anxiety to the point that you don't even want to function anymore, and that's happened to me before, after being bullied.

And what I basically did to help myself through it is really just lean on my support system, lean on my parents. And they told me, you just gotta move forward, you just gotta. And sometimes that prompt is really important, especially with positive psychology, I think about the positive things.

I just actually heard a conference not too long ago on the positive side that you can really do to move past, like, those trauma experiences, such as, I can do this. You can do this, like, you are capable. There's things I've been reassured, I've been reassured, and that's helped me so much, just to get out. It's a healing and process.

**Daniel Ekman:** I think one other thing when you're listening to someone that's very important is I think it's important that you do something about the bullying, but I also think there's a certain level of keeping confidence. For example, if someone has an underlying trauma. And there's a reason behind that, that they're really hesitant to share with anybody.

I want them to know, you know, it's a safe place to share it for me, I'm not gonna share that with anyone else. Like, I'll make sure that if this is brought up, that that's not going to be part of the conversation at all, because the only person that should be bringing it up, if they're comfortable, is you, not me, not anybody else, you know, that kind of thing.

I think sometimes also with bullying, let's say if I'm in a manager position and I see someone who I think is engaging in bullying, you know, sitting them down and talking to them. Saying, you know, is there something going on here? Is there more to this than just you know, you've said something, and you're not really sure the meaning like, what is going on? What is, what's underlying all of this?

You know, why is this person being treated this way by you, and they might not tell me, but at least try to figure it out. You know, and letting them know that's not something that's okay. It's not something that's acceptable. It's just not how you treat people. So, if there's a reason for it, you need to tell me, because we need to figure it out.

**Jayme A Swalby:** I think putting together all of what you all just said, one thing struck out for me as, like, a thread throughout everything, and it's just that piece of feeling alone when you're being bullied. And how important it is not to feel alone.

How important it is to know that someone is listening to you, that you're sharing in confidence. That your confidence will be held, or that your story will be held by someone in confidence, and not shared with others. Because that isolation, and I can't remember which one of you said, but that isolation and feeling like you're the only one who's experiencing this, so this must be you. It all kind of works together, doesn't it? And it just creates this big ball of yuck.

But Daniel, you just wrapped us up with something that is so important, and I'm glad you talked about this, Daniel. You have to talk to the person and be open to discussing with the person who is being the bully. What is going on with them? What do they have going on? Can we help them as well? Because, it potentially might not stop if we don't address that side as well.

So, I think that's really powerful, and thank you all for sharing those things, because we don't want people to feel alone. And we don't want people to feel like they're the ones that have to fix everything. It's a big problem all around.

As we move on, the next question is, how do you make yourself feel safe? So if, you know, you're being bullied, how do you make yourself feel safe in that space? That's so hard.

**Savannah L Oster:** For me, how I make myself feel safe is by protecting my privacy, of course, and just by being a little bit reflective a lot of the time.

I come up with coping mechanisms for me to be able to really help me, like, what works for me? I do yoga at home, or I'll exercise at home. I'll listen to my favorite kind of music. I will just, I'll talk to my parents when they're home, and talk to my brother sometimes, and talk to my two other brothers in my family if I need, if they're around me.

I definitely talk to my friends. I reach out to them to ask for advice when I'm trying to make myself feel safe. And I protect myself so much after bullying, because it's so traumatic, to the point I'm really, like, more on guard, usually, after that happening. I'm usually a lot more cautious, walking on eggshells for a while.

And so, I just have, the tendency just do really what I want to do. I treat myself to snacks. I treat myself to my favorite things, and I actually do self-care. That's really when self-care is so critical, especially. It's really doing your favorite things, and really that's why we've been emphasizing self-care this whole time. It's still highly encouraged on our podcast, especially this fiscal year. I'm so thankful we're having a self-care incorporation and wellness theme, because it's just, wellness really comes into play. Doing exercise.

That's just my personal ways of myself feeling safe, and also, like, confident. When I'm, like, confident again at some point, and with private information, just knowing

you can't spread anything around makes me feel more safe, especially what Daniel was touching based on that, too. Oh, when someone tells me that, I'm like, okay, I feel comfortable talking about my experiences.

**Tanya Burnett:** I think you summed up some really good points there, Savannah. Self-care is huge.

You know, when these bad or harmful things happen to ourselves, and getting support from family and friends are both, like, great tactics for feeling safe.

You know, some other things, I've seen kind of in my research. I'll mention, you know some of this stuff is things that I've read about, but I will tell you, in the moment, I didn't know to do any of these things.

As a teenager, as a kid, as a young adult, I didn't know to do these things. I didn't really know what to do, and I didn't feel safe. And that's a really horrible feeling. Especially, you know, especially in your place you have to go every day like school, work. Work is your livelihood, you know? But they do say yes, self-care and support from family and friends. Try not to ever be alone with your bully, if you can, is a good way.

Telling someone who can help you is something that can help you to feel safe. You know, whether it's a friend or if you're a teenager or a kid listening to this, if it's an adult. Whether it's a supervisor, whoever it might be. A big thing, you know, is learning how to advocate for yourself.

And of course, this is so much easier said than done, and I think some of us even find it easier to advocate for other people.

I know for me, I had an easier time sticking up for my friends than I did for myself, or my little brother, or something like that. You know, you don't get to pick on him, I only get to pick on him, you know?

But learning how to advocate for you, I think, is a lifelong skill, but there's no, you know, wrong time to start learning that. But, also just knowing that you're worth advocating for!

Kind of tying back into what we were talking about earlier, knowing that it is, you do deserve respect. You do deserve to be treated, and not, not bullied, and not dismissed, and not excluded, and not made fun of.

You know, so I think that's a thing. But, yeah, trying to make sure you're not in those situations can be a good tactic of just trying to avoid situations where you might be alone with a bully. Or, if it's a crowd that you know, like Daniel was saying, if it's a bad atmosphere altogether, maybe try not to be in that if you don't have to. Sometimes changing jobs can be important for your mental health, too. Even if you like your job all in all. If you're in a toxic atmosphere, that's not good for you.

**Savannah L Oster:** I 100% agree with you, Tanya, because I have been in a situation where I've been alone with one of my bullies growing up when I was much younger, and it was so uncomfortable. I was a child at the time, and I just remember feeling super uncomfortable to even be alone.

So, setting those boundaries, Tanya, you made a really good point about this. Like, setting boundaries to make sure you're not alone with a bully is so critical for your mental health.

And what I've done in the past is to really just let an adult know that I can trust I cannot be in the same room as this person. I cannot, and my parents have even helped me navigate that when I was young. So, it helped me just to move schools, and it helped me really to not be alone with him. I didn't want to be anywhere near that person. Usually, after I get bullied, I don't want to be around that specific person for a long, long time.

I took many years to forgive the individual, because it was so painful for me, and eventually, I do forgive them, because that's for me, it's, like, for all of us, it's the right thing to forgive. It's really good for yourself, and so I did forgive the person eventually, and I moved forward. And it feels good once I've forgiven the person.

**Tanya Burnett:** I think that's a great point, too. I actually did have to move high schools. I switched from one high school to another, halfway through my junior year due to how extreme the bullying was for me. And it was the best choice you could have made. I finally was able to just go to school every day and focus on my schoolwork.

And I was friends with the kids I was friends with, and if anyone didn't like me, they kind of left me alone. It was such a huge yeah, it was such a great choice that we finally made for me.

But I think, too, it's a little hard, because bullies are sneaky. They can be. So, trying not to be alone with them can be hard, because they don't want to bully you sometimes in front of everybody. They like to make these little things, do these little things when it's not around people who are gonna do anything about it.

So, it can be a little difficult.

**Daniel Ekman:** I think also what a lot of people will do, and I've seen this, is building relationships outside of just one place. And, for example, I think what helped me get through some more negative environments, versus when I struggled more, was having relationships outside of just that one kind of more toxic environment. And learning, and this took, it's easier said than done, because it took a while to learn, but not putting too much of your value as a person in one place. Because I think the

danger with that is then you, kind of, can feel almost tied to, you could feel like you're tied to your performance in an environment that's putting you in a negative place. Or it's not, and it's not even just work or school. I mean, this can happen within, any kind of group environment.

Unfortunately, sometimes even environments where people are really close to you, like, let's say within family. One thing I know that people have done if they really don't feel like they have an outside group of people or contacts, is people will even use technology. I mean, they'll go online and join forums of people that maybe have gone through similar experiences, or they'll use social media to kind of reach out, talk to people who maybe are geographically very far away, but understand what they've been through, and that in itself can be healing, and can be a coping mechanism for people.

**Tanya Burnett:** I think that is such a great point that I didn't even think about. Even maybe support groups. I would assume they exist, I've actually never looked into it, but I would imagine there probably are those that help you feel less alone and more connected. That's such a great point. Thanks.

**Savannah L Oster:** Thank you all. There is, like, a recovery group I'm in currently to help me recover from bullying. I'm in recovery groups helping me through a lot of trauma I've been working through, and I'm thankful to be in my recovery group and community.

**Jayme Swalby:** These are all excellent ideas, you all. And that piece of, this is just kind of blew me away, but you are worth advocating for.

And I think when you're in the midst of that bullying situation, and you're being bullied, you don't feel that way. And to have someone tell you that, that you are worth advocating for, you are worth other people helping advocate for you, you are worth advocating for your own self.

That is so powerful, and so I think if you don't feel that you're worth advocating for, then you get stuck in those places and can't move forward with some of the things you all were sharing, like self-care. Well, maybe I don't deserve the self-care, maybe. And you kind of can, maybe get into a negative loop.

And so, you know, I think how important it is to put your value in multiple spaces, as you were talking about, Daniel. Not just putting everything into one pot, so that then if you end up in this kind of situation, then it just all comes together. It feels like your whole entire worth is in that.

So, all of these things, have been fantastic, and I'm taking notes over here myself, so thank you all for what you're sharing.

As we kind of come to the end of our podcast today, we have one more question, and that one is, what are some prevention and intervention strategies?

Do you all have thoughts about that?

**Tanya Burnett:** Well, there's a lot. There's a lot in my research that I've seen. I mean, providing social network is good. And intervening at the first sign of bullying, if you can. Like, if you're the one observing it, whether you're a manager or a teacher or whatever else, just early, early intervention can be really helpful, you know, just so people know that this is not acceptable from the very beginning of it, so it doesn't continue.

Also, just making sure you're not embarrassing the victim, you know. Do things privately. Daniel touched on, you know, making sure things are in confidence, which is super important. And a lot of it just talks about social support, that sort of a thing.

In calling out bullies, letting them know that you know what they're doing. And that it is not cute, not funny. Being that kind of, maybe, stick in the mud sometimes when everyone's kind of laughing. And being like, actually, guys, that was kind of mean. Or I don't actually really think it's funny to make fun of how that person talks. Or, you know, kind of just going against the grain.

You know, you have to do sometimes and people don't always like it. And sometimes we're afraid maybe it'll get us pulled into the bullying, too, and maybe it will. But I think those are some important things.

Yeah, it's important to just call people out, and create an environment of inclusion. I think, is a really good way to do it. You know, making sure, like, yeah, you know what, we all go to eat lunch, you know, on Wednesdays at this place. I don't know about that new guy over there, maybe I don't know if we want to invite him. But just making that the way everything is. We all get invited.

Maybe they won't go. Maybe they're kind of socially anxious, and they don't want to always go, but still, they're always invited. You know, creating that culture and making sure it's spread.

**Daniel Ekman:** I don't know if there's anything else I can add to that.

**Savannah L Oster:** For me on my end, with prevention and intervention strategies, intervention for me is to encourage to advocate and stand up for yourself. That's really what I've done throughout my life, is advocate and stand up for myself. And tell my trusted ones how I really feel.

And just educate the community on telling them, in the first place, bullying is not acceptable and not okay.

And it is okay to take care of yourself, always, regardless of what life throws at us. Like, it's really important to take really good care of yourselves, and myself included, and it's a work in progress. And advocate for what you need. Advocate for every single thing that we possibly need as intervention.

And for prevention, what came to mind was to give life advice, is actually, don't open, don't disclose when you don't feel right in your gut, basically. Just because you never know who you're talking to. You don't know.

If you don't know the person that well, then really just don't, just don't, disclose your information. And that's why I've only chosen to disclose my information to people who I trust, and people who I can truly trust inside. I really have to listen to my gut instincts when it comes to that kind of stuff. Like don't give life advice to someone you don't know, that you're not comfortable with. Just give life advice to people that you do know is the right way to go.

**Tanya Burnett:** Also, it can be helpful, most schools and employers have, anti-bullying policies and different things like that, so it can be helpful to investigate what that is, what those are, so you can help advocate for yourself or others.

It can be... yeah, those can be good interventions as well.

**Jayme A Swalby:** These are all wonderful, and I'm really glad that we're sort of wrapping up on this note. And Savannah, you said something that I really hope listeners can take away with them. That it's a work in progress. That all of these things that you wonderfully and graciously have shared with us today are fantastic ideas.

But they may be hard, and that sometimes they may be harder than other times, and giving yourself, some leeway to just know that some days it might be easier. Some days it might be harder. And you are a work in progress, as we all are. And so, you guys, thank you so much for what you've shared with us today in this fantastic conversation.

**Jayme A Swalby:** On behalf of the Autism Conversations team, I want to thank our incredible panel for joining us today. I also want to thank you, the listener, for tuning in to this wonderful conversation. Be sure to check out our other conversations about autism wherever you get your podcasts, and until next time, keep the conversation going.