

Mate crime in Merseyside

What is mate crime?

Mate crime is a hidden form of disability hate crime, where vulnerable people, such as those with autism, are bullied or manipulated by people they consider to be friends. This abuse of friendship can take many forms. It may begin in the playground, with pushing and shoving and low-level bullying. Amongst adults, it may result in vulnerable people being manipulated to give away money or possessions or even to commit crimes.

Wirral Autistic Society's mate crime survey

In January and February 2015 an online survey questionnaire exploring the issue of mate crime amongst people with autism in Merseyside was created by the Society and promoted via regional press and social media. 141 responses were obtained, all were anonymous. Respondents were either people with autism (responding by themselves or with support) or the parents/carers of those with autism. Respondents were from four age groups - 5:11, 12:16, 16:25, 25+.

Summary of key findings:

- In a national survey by the National Autistic Society (NAS) in 2014, 49% of adults with autism reported that they had been abused by someone they thought of as a friend. Our survey of Merseyside in 2015 found that 80% of those over 16 felt they had been bullied or taken advantage of by someone they considered a friend.
- Around 11% of the general population report feeling lonely. The NAS survey found that 41% of adults with autism often feel lonely. Our survey of Merseyside found that 85% of those with autism over 16 often feel lonely and left out.
- Our survey found the most vulnerable age group to be 16-25. One hundred per cent of our respondents in that age category reported having difficulty distinguishing genuine friends from those who may bully or abuse the friendship in some way. Eight out of ten said that fear of bullying had caused them to turn down social opportunities.
- Of the respondents who reported experiencing mate crime, 71% across all age groups had been subject to name calling and verbal abuse. Fifty four per cent of 12-16 year-olds had had money or possessions stolen. In the 25+ age group, 74% reported that they had been manipulated or forced to do the wrong thing.
- Over a third of adults with autism (or their carers) who responded to our survey had been subject to bullying or manipulation of a sexual nature - including being coerced into 'sexting'.
- Thirteen per cent of children in the 5-11 age group had experienced online bullying. This jumped to 21% for the 12-16 age group.

Responses to part one of questionnaire, completed by all 141 respondents:

Question	Age	Age	Age	Age	Totals	Totals
<i>Percentages shown indicate 'yes' responses</i>	5-11	12-16	16-25	25+	All ages	16+ only
Do you have difficulty distinguishing genuine friends from those who may bully or abuse the friendship in some way?	81%	84%	100%	85%	87%	92%
Have you ever been scared to go out or turned down social opportunities for fear of bullying?	29%	71%	80%	61%	57%	70%
Do you ever feel lonely or left out?	54%	75%	90%	81%	72%	85%
Have you ever been bullied or taken advantage of by someone you thought was a friend?	64%	87%	87%	74%	77%	80%

Of the 108 people who specifically reported that they had been bullied or taken advantage of by someone they had considered a friend, these were the types of mate crime reported:

Question	Age	Age	Age	Age	Totals	Totals
<i>Percentages shown indicate 'yes' responses</i>	5-11	12-16	16-25	25+	All ages	16+ only
Have you been called names and been picked on?	68%	71%	73%	74%	71%	73%
Have you been pushed, shoved or physically harmed?	52%	43%	46%	43%	46%	45%
Have you had food, money or possessions stolen?	26%	54%	34%	57%	42%	45%

Have you been manipulated or forced to do the wrong thing?	45%	57%	58%	74%	57%	65%
Have you been bullied online?	13%	21%	19%	22%	19%	20%
Have you been sexually bullied or manipulated, eg: sexting?	3%	4%	12%	35%	12%	22%

What our survey respondents said about their experiences of mate crime:

Parent of a 12-16 year old son

He thought he had to do what he was told and complied with demands from so-called friends. Once he was made to steal. He was even made to pull his pants down. He's had money taken and he's been threatened. I can't let him out to play with the kids I don't know as I feel I can't trust anyone and he's so vulnerable.

Parent of a 16-25 year old son

He used to get followed around the playground at primary school by a small group, one of them was supposed to be a friend. They would call him names and say unpleasant things, then 'accidentally' knock into him. The school offered no support at all.

Parent of a 14 year old son

This is an ongoing thing which saddens me to the extreme . My son cannot distinguish banter from bullying and thinks it's ok that his so-called 'friends' call him names or 'accidently' hurt him or get him to do things for their amusement, but he's just trying to fit in. He's absolutely harmless, extremely vulnerable and it's so, so hard explaining that people are making fun of him and trying to get him into trouble for their own fun. He's 14, I want to wrap him up in cotton wool, but he just wants to do what his peers are doing. I've found out about several bullying incidents from others witnessing things. It breaks my heart as a parent.

Male with autism, aged 16-25

I was frightened to tell anyone about the bullying and theft and manipulation, as if my grandparents found out, they would report this to my head of year, the bullies would be sanctioned and things would get worse for me the next time.

Female with autism, aged 16-25

In primary school I allowed a few class mates to take my glasses and coat for the purpose of mimicking me during lunch time. I always got them back undamaged so I thought nothing was wrong. I was the only one who got mimicked.

Parent of daughter with Asperger's syndrome, aged 16-25

My daughter was diagnosed at the age of 14 with Asperger's but she had been bullied all her life from Reception onwards, with kids pushing her in the playground. When she was older her £100 iPod disappeared then her Blackberry disappeared and she was always asking for money for one thing and another. At 15 things started to go wrong again. She was mixing with others and going out and asking for money again. Now at 17 she has a boyfriend who always turns up when it is her pay day for her DLA. I have made several complaints to all and feel that there is no support out there for a single parent bringing up her child with Asperger's syndrome. I feel very isolated.

Brother of an adult man with autism

My brother was befriended by neighbours. They robbed him of several items and also stored drugs in his flat so that if the police raided their flat, nothing would be found. The police were generally very nice to him but were not happy about the drugs issue and said he should know it was wrong. My brother had never had friends before and it was his independence from my mum and dad.

Parent of a son with autism, aged 24

He wants to mix and meet girls but it's a minefield. The worst thing that happened was when his 'friends' picked up his phone and started texting a girl he liked. He was very deeply hurt and has never recovered. He's so trusting and honest and can't seem to learn from or manage situations like this. He's had problems with money, too. He left his credit card and pin number with a so-called friend who then used it to run up a huge bar bill. These days he has no friends and feels very lonely. He spends all day on his Play Station. He has no interests or motivation. He just wanted to be like any other 24 year-old.

We asked what action people had taken to tackle mate crime:

The majority of respondents with younger family members had reported incidents to the school or institution where the bullying took place. In the case of the youngest children (5-11), 29% of families had taken up the issue with the bully's family. Incidents were reported to the police by 28% in the 12-16 category and 30% in the 25+ category. Social services were most commonly involved with the older age groups.

What our respondents said about how their 'mate crime' issues were resolved:

Respondents with family members in the 5-11 age group:

- *He had to move school.*
- *Had a talk with my child about bullies and told him they were not 'real' friends. I stopped him playing out if the bullies were around. Found himself new friends in the street and children/parents appear more understanding of his difficulties.*
- *We educated the other child about how our child is not like other children and does not understand social clues or reading situations. The other child seemed happy to be included and have someone explain about autism spectrum disorders and how they could help play with our child by playing games that don't single anyone out or cause too much upset if the rules are simple and kept to.*
- *My child ended up being removed from school while those who bullied him went unpunished.*

Respondents with family members in the 12-16 age group:

- *We threatened to take him out of the whole school education system all together and report our reasons why.*
- *School could not understand that he could be manipulated in that way. They asked the other children if they were bullying him, the children said no - so we were told that our son must be lying.*
- *School are well aware of my child's social issues, he is very, very hard to read, and sometimes mistakes little issues for huge ones, and vice versa. I've been to school on numerous occasions and to be fair most things have been resolved. It's outside of school where my main concerns lie.*
- *The most recent issue was resolved, but I suspect there are going to be more as my son gains more independence. He has just turned 16.*
- *We had to move house.*

Respondents aged 16-25, or their carers

- *Changed school to a completely new area.*
- *Teachers denying bullying in school yet my child had constant bruises on her spine where she had been pushed over and on her shins where she had been kicked and bikes had been rammed into her legs. Goods that were 'lost' were never returned. There is NO SUPPORT OUT THERE.*
- *Situation never resolved. I still fear going out at school times.*
- *It continued without escalating until I started secondary school. The bullies went to different secondary schools and I never saw them again. I think it might have been the presence of my helper in class that stopped them from escalating the bullying.*

Respondents aged 25+, or their carers

- *No one listens to victims of crime who have autism. The police do not consider they would make good witnesses in court and let's face it, the lengthy process of a court case and testifying would be a nightmare for someone with autism.*
- *Went to court but unsupported as nobody turned up to help. Following court, attacked again and again police failed to do anything. Social Services have for years failed to provide support or protection.*
- *The situation was resolved as sensitively as it could have been and we were very grateful for that.*

Conclusions

We have to acknowledge that respondents may have been drawn to our survey *because* they had experienced mate crime. However, equally, some respondents will have not realised that they had been subject to mate crime until the questions in the survey were posed. It is part of the nature of this crime that vulnerable people often do not recognise that their trust is being abused.

We posed the question: *Have you ever been bullied or taken advantage of by someone you thought was a friend?* We find the adult 'yes' response in our region to be staggeringly high compared to the national survey conducted by the NAS in 2014 - 80% for all respondents 16+ in Merseyside compared to 49% for 18+ nationally. We are not exactly comparing like with like, as we have included 16 and 17 year-olds as adults in our total, whereas the NAS did not. We need to explore this further: do our figures represent a localised peak in mate crime, did *how* we asked the question provoke this response or is it the case, as we suspect, that the 16-25 age group is the most susceptible to mate crime?

Other figures in our survey also underline the vulnerability of the 16-25 age group. One hundred per cent of our respondents in that age category reported having difficulty distinguishing genuine friends from those who may bully or abuse the friendship in some way. Eight out of ten said that fear of bullying had caused them to turn down social opportunities. Ninety per cent report feeling lonely and left out.

The overall picture our survey paints is one of heightened vulnerability amongst people with autism and Asperger's syndrome to an insidious, hidden form of crime. Often, the person with autism is unaware that what they consider friendship is potentially an abusive relationship. It is the parents and carers who recognise the issue but then struggle to find the right way to provide support to the individual. Some parents feel isolated, distraught and at a loss about who to turn to.

Parents reported that they felt a lack of support from schools, which may be based on a lack of understanding of autism and Asperger's syndrome and failure to recognise the significant detrimental effect these issues were having on children and young people.

As a Society we feel that mate crime must be higher on the national agenda. This evil, subtle crime can only flourish whilst it remains hidden. Within our own region, we can begin to tackle this by:

- Raising awareness amongst the general public through a media campaign.
- Adopting a multi-agency approach. All stakeholders supporting vulnerable people need to be involved in eradicating mate crime - the public, private, voluntary, community and faith sectors.
- Working with the education sector. Teachers and fellow students need to understand that people with autism and Asperger's syndrome are very vulnerable to abusive friendships simply because they want to be liked and accepted. They need to understand that these people have emotions and *feel* as keenly as the rest of the population. Autism awareness training alone is not enough: the *social* and *emotional* wellbeing of vulnerable people is at stake.

In conclusion, there are no easy answers to this issue. However, we look forward to working with parents, schools, families and colleagues in a concerted effort to eradicate mate crime in our region.

Wirral Autistic Society

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