Three researchers at Utah State University’s Center for Persons with Disabilities hope to create a bully-free school environment through a series of trainings for teachers and parents.

Senior researcher Vonda Jump, research scientist Gina Cook and Director of the Research and Evaluation Division Mark Innocenti, wrote the grant which will fund the project, will conduct the training at eight Utah Head Start locations, and will evaluate the results. The grant is funded through the Interagency Outreach Training Initiative.

“Kids with disabilities are much more likely than kids without disabilities to be bullied,” Jump said. Studies show that children with disabilities or special health care needs are more than 50 percent—with some studies indicating more than 90 percent—more likely to be bullied than other children.

Children need more social skills development, both to avoid being victims and to avoid being bullies themselves, Jump said.

The researchers will visit Head Start locations in Price, Duchesne, St. George, Salt Lake City, Layton, Provo, Ogden and Logan to work with teachers, for four 4-hour training sessions, probably over a period of four months, Jump said.

“They can go out and use the strategies, then come back and tell us what they’re running up against,” she said.

Parent training sessions will probably be four 2-hour sessions over four months, with child care, refreshments and transportation assistance provided.

“We’ll have the parents come, try the strategies with their kids and come back for the ‘yeah, buts,’” she said.

The researchers are hoping for 20 teachers and 20 parents in each location, for a total of 160 teachers and 160 parents. All of the training materials will stay with the teachers, so they can train other teachers, Jump said.

“Hopefully, we’ll get some data to get an idea of how this training might make a difference in kids’ social skills,” she said. “Then, hopefully, we can take the data to a funding organization and get a bigger grant for more training.”

Jump said signs of bullying behavior have been observed in children as young as two or three years old.

“We’re hoping we can create a different kind of school environment, to change those trajectories so that bullies and victims have a different way of interacting,” she said.