

Stop Bullying!

The incidence of bullying can be greatly reduced, and it's important.

By Joanne Kates

In the past five years since bullying became parents' topic *du jour*, I've been asked to visit about 20 schools in the Toronto area and teach students and teachers how to combat bullying, the way we do it at the camp I run.

The bullying I hear about most often takes the form of verbal taunts, and sometimes involves apparently purposeful exclusion from birthday party invitations. Sometimes, the bullying happens when all parties to it are in the room; just as often, it's virtual. MSN, the modern kid's favourite toy, is the site of vicious cyberbullying.

When parents call me, sometimes they've already spoken to the teacher, sometimes not. I always give the same counsel: Go talk to the teacher, ask him or her to intervene.

The parents always call back and say the same thing: The teacher made nice noises but won't take action. I tell them to up the ante and go see the principal. The parents call back after that meeting and I hear the same story.

One parent had been to see the school principal about repeated cyberbullying of her child. The principal's response was that it was outside the school's jurisdiction. But just what is in a school's jurisdiction?

Sweden, Ireland, England, and Australia have enacted laws that state schools are responsible for keeping children in their care safe from harm. In these countries, there have been legal judgments against schools that failed to protect children from bullies.

It is the job of all institutions that work with children to protect them from harm, which includes setting and enforcing standards of behaviour.

Why is it that bullies get away with taunting, ostracizing, and sometimes even physically intimidating their victims? If that is the standard of care we are willing to accept in 2006 in a rich nation such as ours, and at a privileged moment in history, who are we as a people?

We know that children don't learn well when they're distracted by anxiety, sadness, or fear. Much as we might like academics to be their top priority, and the pursuit of excellence to be undisturbed by "other agendas", any adult who has ever paid a hair's breadth of attention to a child knows that when things aren't right in their world of friendship, kids get in trouble and don't come anywhere near their potential. How to fix it?

Any anti-bullying program must come from those who set the education agenda. Starting with the ministries of education and flowing to school boards, the obligation rests on those who set education policy to build an anti-bullying program that will be required in every school.

Yes, it will bite a chunk out of the school day (though not a big one). And yes, it will result in children feeling so much safer that they'll be more efficient learners, and the time "lost" will be education gained.

Speaking of education, what are we educating for? It's wrong to say that time spent working with children to grow them into people who treat each other with respect, who know and use tools for fixing social relations when they're broken, is time wasted.

At the extreme end of the continuum, we know from research that aggression is one of the most stable characteristics. In plain English, that means bullies can grow up to be bullies at work, wife-beaters, elder abusers, hostile parents.

Interrupt that behaviour in childhood, and we might reduce some significant suffering and high social costs. In less extreme examples, imagine family life, marriage, and the workplace if everyone had some training in school about how to do better in relationships.

Dare to dream how much better the world would be if every child learned peace in school.

Camp Arowhon's Anti-Bullying Program

The program we use involves, firstly, awareness-raising, via an anti-bullying survey that everyone fills out. The survey, and its subsequent debriefing, raise everyone's empathy about bullying and put it on the radar.

Second is data collection. We regularly ask children about how safe they are socially, and we expect the adults on the scene to be watching how children treat each other. We use social-safety questionnaires that kids fill out in private, and we use sociograms (maps of how groups of children are interacting) that the grown-ups fill out about the kids. Taken together, these data collection tools become regular snapshots of the social dynamics of a group of children.

The final component of the program is a predetermined set of step-wise interventions, starting with a soft-sell meeting with the whole group. This No-Blame Intervention asks everyone in the group (except the victim) what each one of them can do to help the victim feel safer in the group. Its purpose is to raise the empathy of the so-called innocent bystanders, so that they will throw their social power behind the victim instead of the bully.

If and when the No-Blame Intervention fails (about 50% of the time), we proceed through a series of direct interventions with the bully. These begin with talk, continue (if the problem doesn't abate) with increasingly-severe consequences, and end (if necessary) with expulsion. Over the years, the incidence of bullying at Camp Arowhon has dropped significantly.

(Adapted with permission from "Less talk about bullies and more action" in The Globe and Mail, March 18, 2006. Ms Kates is director of Camp Arowhon in Algonquin Park and The Globe and Mail's restaurant critic.)