

## EDITORIAL

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# OPINION

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## THE LIBERAL

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### EDITORIAL

## Society has to make bullying stop

The Liberal's series on bullying has been met with strong emotion. Readers lit up newsroom phone lines and web addresses to tell painful stories and air concerns.

The one irrefutable truth is that bullying still happens in our schools — public, private and Catholic. Some stats say it happens every seven minutes. It can range from name-calling to whisper campaigns. It can lead to violence, and, as we know from the 1999 beating of Newmarket's Jonathan Wamback, coma and brain damage.

We know bullying doesn't just cause private pain and ruin individual lives even to the point of suicide. It can sometimes lead to multiple shootings at Montreal's Dawson College or Columbine's mass murder.

So, what are the solutions? First, parents and students across York identified three concerns. One is that the system seems to offer little help for victims and is skewed to deal with the bullies.

Another huge concern is for children already coping with learning or behaviour issues, who stand out from the norm and are fodder for bullies.

The third concern identified by parents and victims is inconsistent and ambiguous consequences for the bully. Even the most strongly-worded school board poli-

cies must be interpreted by busy principals in times of high stress. Bullies are handled differently depending on the school. Some administrators favour strong consequences, others favour softer methods.

The fact is, if policies aren't implemented and carried out consistently, victims end up being victimized twice — by bullies and by the system meant to protect them.

Many victims say what helped them most was a caring teacher or sensitive administrator who put a stop to their torment. But parents have a role to play too.

Often parents, informed that their daughter or son has been a perpetrator, don't believe it or don't get involved in the resolution. Some experts say bullies learn their behaviour at home or it is tolerated there, so they continue to act out at school.

How can society fix the problem?

Ask your own son or daughter. Many say stronger consequences will work best, as did students at a recent symposium on bullying. Here is a cry for help from one: "Right now, they just make bullies stand up against the wall or write something on a piece of paper. But it doesn't make it stop."

Society, as a whole — parents, teachers, administrators and students — must work together to make it stop.



## Bully series resonates for readers and this writer

Nearly 20 years ago, I was asked by a publisher to write a book for parents about bullying. As an education reporter and one-time victim of bullying, it was an intriguing project — especially since I was just starting a family of my own.

The book was a bit of a voice in the wilderness. Aside from some pioneering research in Norway and Britain, and promising work coming out of York University, no one was really talking much about bullying. It was still just considered part of growing up.

But much has happened since then.

More research has uncovered just how serious the after-effects are.

My kids grew up and, despite my best efforts to raise assertive, not aggressive, children, (and to follow all the experts' advice in my book) they had their own challenges with bullies — from gossip girls to a nasty encounter with ex-lax.

And, perhaps most crucial of all — Columbine happened. Suddenly, bullying wasn't just child's play. The rest of the world — not just experts who were studying it — started to take it seriously too.

The bully hit the headlines, bookshelves and talk shows. Money poured into programs, awareness campaigns and teacher training. There was no excuse for not knowing the signs of bullying — or how to stop it.

Yet, compared to the rest of the world, Canada still lags way behind — 26th in reports of bullying, and 27th in victim-

ization — out of 35 countries, according to the World Health Organization. And despite loads of initiatives being funded to prevent bullying, Canada's ranking has continued to slip.

Sure, we know more about the problem. But that's slim comfort to the battle-weary families trying to save their children — much like improvements in medical science don't make today's sick person feel better, as York Region public board's Fred Faber so aptly put it.

There is something about bullying that leaves an indelible mark. Maybe it's the juxtaposition of what should be innocent youth with blatant cruelty; helplessness with the 'mother bear' response.

As the families featured in The Liberal's recent series revealed, if your family's been hit then it's pretty hard to walk away, tail between legs, and pretend it never happened — especially if you've felt flummoxed by principals who say "our hands are tied" (disturbingly common) and by buck-passing of various levels of government.

That's why so many have taken up the battle — from 12-year-old Samantha Krizel gathering a petition to start an anti-bullying group at her school, to the Morrison family in London and the Seben family in Holland Landing fighting for better legislation.

Our bully stories generated an onslaught of phone calls and e-mails from parents and victims wanting to tell their stories too, memories that in some



Kim Zarzour

cases lay buried, festering like a shameful secret. We heard from seniors who, in shaky voices, related tales of childhood torment seared into memory — into the very fabric of who they are.

It took almost 40 years for Aurora resident Dave Heard to find 'closure'. Tormented for 12 years — until he finally quit school to make it stop — he now spreads his anti-bully message at school presentations and farmers markets and dreams of setting up a bursary for kids who dropped out like him.

When I first wrote about bullying in the '90s, I thought: how hard can it be? You teach kids what it looks like and why it's wrong. You enforce consistent individualized consequences. Bye-bye bully.

But it is, in fact, very hard. Teachers have an overwhelming number of challenges in the classroom. Families bring their cocktails of personalities. Technology turns disses and trash talk into elec-

tronic gremlins.

The other day, one of my sons was at a hockey party. Later, he told me some of the more aggressive boys were laughing at a teammate who often bears the brunt of the wisecracks. I asked him if he stood up for the target — and then realized what an enormous task I was asking of him.

How many of us, even as adults, have the guts to buck the bully — to stand up against injustice? I was grateful that my son was not the target — this time — but I also realized that he could become one if he were the only one to stand up to it. And I, who had spent so many years interviewing bully experts — had no idea what to say.

If it's that hard for those of us who know what's right, how much harder it is to expect it of a child? Or of the families who are struggling with jobs, family issues and health challenges?

In the end, I told my son that the next time that happens, if he's not brave enough to speak up, he should distract — draw the attention away from the bullies' antics and onto something 'healthier'. But it taught me we have a long way to go, and if we're going to succeed, we've got to work hard, every one of us, one step at a time — because if we don't, we are no better than the bullies themselves.

And it re-emphasized for me the truth of something author and bully-victim Jodee Blanco once said: Bullying isn't just the mean things you do. It is all the nice things you never do.