

Debate rages over best way to address bullying



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What's the best way to stop a bully problem: Report it or "restore" it?

That's the debate raging among those concerned about violence in our schools.

The York Region District School Board has garnered praise across North America for its enthusiastic adoption of Restorative Approaches, which, in the case of bullying, involves bringing aggressor and target and sometimes their families together to restore the broken relationship.

"Rebuilding damaged relationships by encouraging safe, supported encounters between bullies and victims is critical if students are going to be expected to move forward together in the same environment," public board spokesperson Ross Virgo said.

The Catholic board has also adopted restorative justice as "one tool on a continuum of interventions," Catholic board spokesperson Joann MacDonald said.

"Our use of restorative practices is based on Catholic values, and the ideas of redemption and forgiveness.

"When we deal with conflict of any nature in our schools, we use restorative practices."

But not everyone is convinced.

Critics say it can be a scary thing for victims to go face-to-face with the bully. Some say the bully shouldn't face his victim anyway, he should face consequences.

The Liberal has heard from families whose schools refused to punish the bully with a suspension and the harassment continued.

And, the newspaper has heard from families where bullies were suspended over and over again, but nothing changed.

The fact is, neither punitive nor restorative approaches seem to offer an easy solution,

One Richmond Hill family says their school's attempt at restorative practice was a "complete failure".

After two years of Jenny (not her real name) being teased, excluded and shoved around by a group of bullies at her French immersion school, her parents decided it was time to step in — first by asking for teachers' help and, when that failed, seeking action from the principal.

"He told us he didn't believe in

suspensions and he didn't believe in punishment," said Jenny's dad.

Instead, the principal recommended the 'restorative approach'.

At first, it sounded like a great idea, said Jenny's mom, who is a social worker with another school board, until they learned that the principal did not feel qualified to include parents in the round-table discussion.

Jenny felt intimidated to meet the bully face-to-face, but under pressure from the principal, and a desire to "just make it all stop," she reluctantly agreed.

"It ended up being this 'Kumbaya' kind of meeting, like 'everyone just needs to get along,'" her dad recalls.

Jenny was not allowed to give a victim impact statement, but was told she and the girls who bullied her each needed to accept responsibility for the harm they caused.

"She was treated as equally to blame; it was totally inappropriate."

It's an example of how, when it's not handled well, restorative practices can cause more damage than good, says Corina Morrison, who heads a grassroots anti-bully coalition.

Mrs. Morrison had a similar experience when her family met with the principal and the family of their son's bully.

"It was the biggest mistake of our lives. They just said we had to get our f.ing heads out of the sand, our kids weren't street-smart and they were going to have trouble some day. It went nowhere."

Their school's principal brought the parties together without adequate training, Mrs. Morrison said.

That's not to say restorative practice is a bad idea, she added.

Mrs. Morrison now works as a volunteer in Restorative Justice in the London area, but only after undergoing 12 months of training - something she feels is crucial.

Dr. Mark Totten, president of Totten and Associates — a social worker and criminologist with 25 years experience working with high-risk children — agrees.

He says restorative practice only works when it's led by trained, skilled facilitators, where victims and parents are willing participants, and the victim's safety is made a priority.

In York Region, the Catholic board has central staff trained in the program, with plans to extend the training to school-level employees. The public board does

not train people specifically to use restorative processes for bullies and their targets, says spokesperson Ross Virgo.

"We take a much more holistic approach to a variety of situations ...to strengthen the sense of community in the school and strengthen the capacity to resolve conflicts in a positive way."

But others think they're taking the wrong approach altogether.

"What a crock of liberal crap this is," said one father, in response to a story by *Georgina Advocate's* Tracy Kibble about the restorative program. "I have never found any parent who is happy with this softer/gentler approach to discipline."

"Crock" is the same word used by a veteran elementary school teacher, who called restorative practices "something the boards can point to say that they have a way of handling the problem."

The Aurora teacher, who asked that her name not be used, said that when it was legislated several years ago that teachers and administrators had to report incidences of physical or sexual abuse, "suddenly school boards paid attention and we [teachers] were all workshopped thru it."

She recommends similar legislation to deal with bullying. "Bullies don't stop unless they see there are consequences for their behaviour."

Which is what Aurora-Newmarket MPP Frank Klees is calling for.

"Not only are there no consequences for bullying, but there are no consequences for administrators who don't handle it properly," Mr. Klees said. "Boards become defensive because they don't want the publicity. There's this circling of the wagons"

Right now it's up to the principal, following an extensive protocol developed with York Regional Police, to determine when an incident should be reported.

That makes no sense, said former police officer David Mays.

"I just don't understand, why are they messing around with this?" asked Mr. Mays, whose son was bullied at his Newmarket high school. "If it were committed anywhere else (outside a school) the police would be called. But leaving it to the principal to decide - what gives them the right to be judge and jury? Teachers are not trained investigators. They should stick to teaching and administration and stay out of police work."



CORINA MORRISON: Anti-bullying coalition head believes restorative practices can work.

But Fred Faber, a retired principal who is co-ordinating the York Region public school board's initiatives on bully prevention, said principals are not deciding independently. He says there is a "very carefully crafted protocol ... and it's worked very well for us."

Under the document, incidents that must be reported "forthwith" to police include: physical assaults causing significant bodily harm or requiring medical attention; criminal harassment; extortion; threats of serious physical injury.

Subtler bullying, which can be more difficult to deal with, is handled at the school level, Mr. Faber said.

"If every time someone said 'he yelled at me' or 'he looked at me in the wrong way' we contacted police, police wouldn't have time to do what they need to be doing."

Besides, he said, research shows that the hardline approach doesn't work. The few boards that tried 'Zero Tolerance' discovered it made things worse, he said, while those that approached bullying as a relationship issue requiring "relationship solutions" - like Restorative Approaches - had fewer incidents of bullying being reported.

Mr. Virgo said the board does not have aggregated statistics to prove it, but "I have heard anecdotal reports from principals indicating they have seen some reduced use of suspension."

Angie Dornai, the public board's Restorative Approaches facilitator, says punishments like suspensions aren't the answer anyway. "The bully returns from his suspension well rested and angry at whoever got them suspended. Where's the lesson there?"

BULLYING: A SIX-PART SERIES

The schoolyard bully has been around forever. So have attempts to solve the problem.

In recent years we've seen a multitude of reports, statistics, websites and recommendations infused with good intentions to solve the bully issue.

The problem is, bullying keeps happening - once every seven minutes, experts say. Young people are still hurting young people. Parents are still reeling with helplessness and kids are still being damaged - sometimes for life.

In this series, we look at several families and courageous students who have decided to speak out, who have battled the schoolyard bully and emerged feeling bruised, belittled and bitter - and we'll look at where the system seems to have failed them and what can be done to help.

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