

Voices from the trenches

Youths, parents and experts offer their opinions on how to battle the school bully

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Let's get it out of the way right from the start, using words from Canada's National Crime Prevention Strategy: "Bullying is not a normal part of growing up."

It doesn't go away on its own, often gets worse with time, and needs to be dealt with directly by adults.

That's from the Strategy's report "Bullying Prevention in Schools". It's not just kicking and hitting, the report notes, it's name calling, exclusion - anything that involves a power imbalance and repeated negative intent.

And despite a growing body of research showing serious long-term effects on bully and target, the problem persists.

The Liberal set out to write a story following a complaint from a Richmond Hill parent whose son was bullied - but soon discovered their troubles were not an isolated incident.

The newspaper has since spoken with several families from across York Region - in the public, separate and private school systems - who say they have had enough and it's time to speak up.

It's a brave move, stepping forward, as has been witnessed lately in Peel where a teenager spoke to the media about bullying, and has since had her home vandalized.

But the families who spoke with this newspaper say they're tired of keeping it under wraps. They are angry with their schools for allowing the child's problems to escalate, they are angry with anti-bullying systems that do not seem to work, and they are angry that their political leaders are not doing enough to make it stop.

In taking up this battle, they are also hoping to teach their children lessons in standing up for yourself, and that being victimized does not

make you a victim forever.

To be fair, no one is saying York Region has worse bullying problems than anywhere else - although Stuart Auty, of the province's Safe Schools Team, points out that a large number of students are bused in the region and studies show buses are prime bully territory.

But most parents and educators agree: no school - public, separate or private - is immune.

There is some evidence that the situation is improving. People are talking about it, finally. And all Ontario schools now have some form of anti-bullying policy.

"There's enough policy memorandums going around regarding this, to ensure it's reported, and what we should be doing about it," says Lynn Ziraldo, head of the Ontario Association for Learning Disabilities and member of Ontario's Safe Schools Action Team.

Ms Ziraldo believes that, in recent months, schools are making some headway. "There's a lot more awareness and resources, human and dollar-wise. I think we'll find more and more people talking about healthy relationships, and not just in health class."

But those solutions are long-term ones. As parents interviewed for this series say, all the posters, policies and procedures in the world are irrelevant if the bullies just keep bullying and your kid keeps being hurt.

SCHOOL TRAGEDIES FEARED

And lurking beneath the anger and pain is the fear - unspoken, but there nonetheless - of "bullycide" (suicide linked to bullying), and school tragedies like Columbine.

These parents have seen how easily bullying can spiral out of control - and they have also seen what happens when the victim snaps - like the 12-year-old Toronto boy who was arrested recently for bringing weapons to school after being pushed to the brink by bullies.

While administrators continue with their efforts to change school climate, these parents who've fought it at ground level have come up with solutions of their own.

Recess monitoring, for example, is one area many say needs improving. Studies show supervisors intervene in only four per cent of playground bully incidents, according to Canadian



STAFF PHOTO/STEVE SOMERVILLE

Richmond Hill's Samantha Krizel, left, leads friends Melissa Nielsen, Jessica McCormack, Andrew Krizel and Mara Goldbloom in a campaign to combat bullying. Wearing pink T-shirts on 'Wear Pink Day,' Samantha holds a petition with hundreds of signatures.

researchers Debra Pepler and Wendy Craig.

Often, recess monitors are nothing more than untrained parental volunteers, says David Mays, whose teenaged son endured years of bullying in his Newmarket schools.

Peter Krizel, a Richmond Hill dad whose daughter was bullied, is also an education assistant in the schools. He suggests recess supervision could be improved by making better use of education assistants in the playground.

Psychologist Dr. Maggie Mamen agrees. Not only should they be trained what to look for, she says, they should also be on the lookout.

"It's not that teachers don't know where it's happening," says Dr. Mamen, who counsels families tormented by bullies.

"Kids know where it's going on, so how can the teachers not? Teachers on yard duty should be where the action is."

Another issue raised by those in the trenches: school administrators who are reluctant to offend the bully's parents. Parents are sometimes told by principals their hands are tied because "we have no proof."

That, says Dr. Mamen, "is the biggest cop-out ever. I don't care if you have to haul that child in and say that while you don't have proof, you have been told it's going on and either it will stop now if it's true, or, if it's not true, then you've nothing to worry about."

"You don't have to say you're labeling their kid; you're simply monitoring his behaviour. Adults have got to have some backbone."

KIDS KNOW SNITCHES GET STITCHES

The tattletale taboo is another issue. It takes guts to report bullying; kids today are well aware of the "snitches get stitches" ethos. When they do report, adults must pay attention, Dr. Mamen says.

If the teacher is too busy, or tells the child not to tattle or "sort it out yourself," she warns, "kids are left hung out to dry. The lesson is

learned that you can't trust that adults will be in charge."

Students should also be warned that coercion is a major offence, she says. Bullies often use fear, warning kids that if they snitch, they'll suffer retaliation. "Students should be warned that if they pull that, adults will come down on the bully like a ton of bricks."

The proliferation of cell phones is another concern, says Newmarket parent David Mays. "When something happens in a school, or if someone reports bullying, thanks to text-messaging, 'the entire student body can know about it in five minutes. The answer's simple: have them check their phones at the door.'"

And he suggests teachers stand outside their classrooms between class and watch for simple things like books falling onto the floor or a body hitting a locker - if teachers have their "radar" up and detect a pattern, it could be bullying. In the classroom, he suggests teachers watch for little things - like items taken from a desk.

INCREASED AWARENESS

Stu Auty, who has been battling school bullying since 1990, has noticed an increasing awareness of the impact of bullying - thanks, primarily to the "watershed moment" of the Columbine high school massacre in 1999.

But since that day when two victimized kids killed 12 and injured 23 others, Mr. Auty says there have been many more instances of bully-related shootings. Technology like computers and cell phone cyber bullying have made the problem even more complicated, he says.

But Mr. Auty remains hopeful. The growing groundswell of angry people - mostly victims' parents - and the growing number of lawsuits, may be turning the tide.

In York Region, both the public and Catholic systems have safe school policies and a variety

See **SCHOOLS NEED RULES**, page 7.

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www.kidshelpphone.ca - counseling, referral and information for children

<http://www.yrdsb.edu.on.ca/pdfs/p&p/a/policy/668.pdf> - public board's Safe Supportive Schools policy

<http://www.yrdsb.edu.on.ca/pdfs/a/cat/edu/safe-schoolsprotocol.pdf>

www.ycdsb.ca - York Catholic District School Board policies and guidelines

York coalition to fight for better anti-bullying laws started by the Sebben family: k_sebben@hotmail.com

The Krizel family has set up a facebook support group: Parents AGAINST Bullying in York Region: <http://www.facebook.com/group.php?sid=0&gid=27118929866>



BULLY SERIES

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Schools need rules: parents

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of promising strategies.

But no matter how good those policies, procedures and protocol are, if they aren't reliably and consistently followed, "they aren't worth the paper they're printed on," says Janis Jaffe-White, a member of Family Alliance Ontario.

"It just gives families false hope if nothing's being done to monitor these plans and ensure they're even effective."

Students end up being victimized twice, adds Dr Mamen. "They're not just victimized by the bully, but also by the system. Kids need consistency. They feel safe if they know a policy is in place and they can trust it."

As one mother, whose daughter was bullied in Grades 1 and 2, said, "schools talk the talk and they have posters and things but it's just a bunch of tinsel and gloss. You have to walk your talk ... you've still got children coming to school scared."

Some of the anti-bullying programs being used in schools – like Second Step – are proven effective, but they aren't quick fixes – and they are not used consistently, says Mr. Mays. The programs are brought in when there is someone on staff who is keen, he says, but when the staff member leaves for another school, or when other priorities take precedence, "it just sits in a box somewhere and it's a waste of money."

Randy Ketterling, a therapist in Newmarket who says he is treating 12 to 15 young clients traumatized by bullying, suggests schools should make use of students' knowledge.

"Kids know the hidden codes and social hierarchies. Who are the mean kids, the powerful ones, loners, losers? Each school has a different structure – but do the adults know what

it is?" Focus groups and questionnaires could reveal what's going on under the radar, he says.

Students who attended a recent bully prevention workshop in Stouffville were eager to have their voices heard. While they agreed awareness-raising programs like the one they took part in are helpful, the Grade 5 and 6 students were clear on what they thought would work best: stronger consequences.

"Right now they just make them stand up against the wall, or walk with the teacher at recess, or write something on a piece of paper. It doesn't make it stop," said Vanessa Coscarella.

Liam Timewell suggested older students keep an eye on the younger kids. Those who bully should stay in at recess – on good weather days – and schools should inform the bully's parents. "Maybe they'll ground him or something."

Hannah May Ricketts goes even further. "They should be expelled or suspended."

One dad in Aurora thinks the kids may have the right idea. He believes his son was bullied from Grade 3 through 9 because the school system has not made it clear that bullying won't be tolerated. He compares it to the sports world.

"Football has zero tolerance for fighting, therefore there's little fighting. But with hockey, the rules are muddy, and fighting continues.

"In the same way, schools tossed out 'zero tolerance' in favour of murky approaches open to interpretation – and bullying continues. Without very specific rules that are enforced, bullying will continue.

"But in the end," he adds, "is it really the school's responsibility to teach moral values? Was it the school's fault that my son was picked on by a couple of boys for so many years? I don't think so. I think their parents failed to teach them some very important life lessons."

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