



Stopping cyberbullies

Research shows parents have a greater impact than school policies

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When an elementary school student came home from class dressed head-to-toe in pink – more pink than usual—her father asked her about it. It was pink T-shirt day, an anti-bullying awareness initiative. When asked what she learned, she replied, “Wear pink and don’t bully. That’s it, Dad.” Clear enough, but surely the school administration hoped more had sunk in.

The reality is that most programs don’t reflect the key role that parents play in combatting bullying.

School-based anti-bullying awareness has a place, but a new student survey released by the Canadian not-for-profit group MediaSmarts confirms that what happens at home truly counts. The report released March 18 affirms the important role parents have in preventing cruel and threatening online behaviour.

Furthermore, the study correlates rules at home about respecting others online with the reduced likelihood of engaging in mean and threatening behaviour. Students from homes without these stated expectations are 59 percent more likely to engage in mean online behaviour.¹

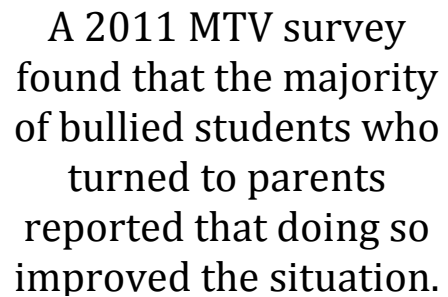
The underestimated power of parents

Parents are the primary partner in addressing online bullying behaviour and should be recognized as such by every school program.

The report also found that the most common response by victims of online threats and cruel behaviour is to seek help from parents. Parents tend to underestimate their own influence, especially as public policy increasingly turns to schools to hold children accountable for bullying behaviour off and online.

¹ Steeves, Valerie. (2014). Young Canadians in a Wired World, Phase III: Cyberbullying: Dealing with Online Meanness, Cruelty and Threats: MediaSmarts, p. 7. Retrieved from http://mediasmarts.ca/sites/default/files/pdfs/publication-report/full/YCWWIII_Cyberbullying_FullReport.pdf

A small survey of parents of fifth graders in the Northeastern US found 37 percent thought schools should resolve bullying incidents without parental interference.² Yet the MediaSmarts survey reports that 72 percent of students agreed with a statement asserting that they can trust their parents to help them solve online conflicts. A 2011 MTV survey found that the majority of bullied students who turned to parents reported that doing so improved the situation.³



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Research shows that family environment and parenting style can protect students from the harmful outcomes of bullying. Researchers writing in the *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* reported that a warm parenting style reduces negative outcomes among victims.⁴ Another study in the *Journal of Criminology* even suggests that lack of parental support may increase the risk of being a victim.⁵

Certainly home life doesn't make children immune from bullying others or becoming a victim, but evidence suggests it is one factor.

The MediaSmarts study shows very little correlation between school anti-bullying rules and student behaviour. Students were likely to hear about cyberbullying from teachers but were unlikely to go to them for help when bullied.

A past student survey conducted by a school board found many students don't have a trusted relationship with an adult at school. The disconnect hurts anti-bullying efforts. Adult intervention is key in helping victims and redeeming bullies.

Some experts argue that school based approaches might be more effective if they integrated the family sphere. Australian researchers Ahmed and Braithwaite concluded that school anti-bullying efforts could be improved by integrating a family level approach.⁶

Yet the challenge is to bring parents and schools together to address the issue. Attempts to provide information nights and resources for busy parents are rarely well attended. It usually takes a crisis to clear the schedule. Of course, there are many stories of parents who have sought help from schools with little success.

² Holt, M.K., Kaufman Kantor, G. and Finkelhor, D. (2009). Parent/child concordance about bullying involvement and family characteristics related to bullying and peer victimization. *Journal of School Violence*, 8. Pp. 52-53.

³ Tompson, T., Benz, J. & Agiesta, J. (2013, October). The digital abuse study: Experiences of teens and young adults. AP-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research. pp. 2, 4.

⁴ Bowes, L., Maughan, B., Caspi, A., Moffitt, T., and Arseneault, L. (2010). Families promote emotional and behavioural resilience to bullying: Evidence of an environmental effect. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* vol. 51, no. 7. p. 809.

⁵ Jeong, S. & Hyun Lee, B. (2013). A multilevel examination of peer victimization and bullying preventions in schools. *Journal of Criminology* vol. 2013. p. 7.

⁶ Ahmed, E. and Braithwaite, E. (2004). Bullying and victimization: causes for concern for both families and schools. *Social Psychology of Education* 7. p. 51.

Taking the lead

The internet is an incredibly difficult place for adults to police; however, parents are well positioned to help children and teens take steps to prevent and respond to bullying. Ultimately parents must take the lead.

Research shows parents that are intentional about media use at home, also enforce guidelines. They tend to be more familiar with the devices family members use.⁷

Parents also need to examine their own device use. A recent study in the journal *Pediatrics* observed parents' use of devices at fast food restaurants. Some parents engaged their children in technology use, sharing a screen together. Other parents were absorbed in their devices and became agitated when children sought their attention.⁸ It is not just the content children view, but how they see devices used.

Yes, there is a need for schools and parents to work together on the bullying issue, and yet parents cannot entirely defer to the school. The recent survey adds to the growing body of research that affirms the role of parents in preventing and addressing bullying. Parents may not be able to know everywhere students go online, but they can save some heartache by fostering healthy parent-child relationships, creating guidelines and modeling healthy online interaction.

Bottom line?

Effective anti-bullying strategies start at home.

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⁷ Whitefield, N. and Schwartz, K. (2008). The wired world of families: youth, their parents and the media. *IMFC Review*, Spring/Summer 2008. Ottawa: Institute of Marriage and Family Canada. p. 24. Retrieved from http://www.imfcanada.org/sites/default/files/Wired_world_of_families.pdf

⁸ Radesky, J.S., Kistin, C.J., Zuckerman, B., et al. (2014). Patterns of mobile device use by caregivers and children during meals in fast food restaurants. *Pediatrics*. Published online first, March 10, 2014. Retrieved from <http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/early/2014/03/05/peds.2013-3703.full.pdf+html>