

Learning to confront a bully; One-quarter of students report being harassed

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Page: H01
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Peter loathed recess. That was the time when he was often bullied by a group of boys who had harassed him since Grade 1.

In Grades 2 through 4, the bullying would become the most physically dangerous during the wintertime, when the Mississauga student was tripped and pushed on the ice. These incidents landed him in the school office on more than one occasion with a headache.

"He could have easily cracked his skull," says his mother, Laura, who has asked that all names be changed to protect her son's identity.

Girls, too, excluded him from their activities.

Throughout this time, Laura and her husband, Bill, met with Peter's teachers, some of whom were supportive and talked with their son and his classmates, while others "weren't much help."

Peter, who's now 11 and entering Grade 6, was reluctant to open up to his parents about the bullying. He seemed to be able to cope and his grades weren't suffering. Laura thinks her son was targeted "because he's sensitive ... and he doesn't necessarily stand up for himself."

But his personality was also affected, as he withdrew into himself. When it came to the point where Peter was crying every day after school in his Grade 5 school year, his parents went to see the school principal. The principal, through no fault of her own, was called away unexpectedly and couldn't devote the time needed to the couple. So Bill and Laura followed up their meeting with a letter outlining their concerns.

"The principal never responded to the letter. To this day when the principal sees us (at academic functions) nothing is mentioned about the letter," says Laura, angrily.

And although Peter's Grade 5 teacher was very supportive, his hands were tied by the principal's lack of action.

So the family pulled Peter out of the school and placed him in another school nearby.

Peter is much happier now, he has good friends - and there's been no more bullying. He takes karate lessons to build up his self-esteem and is involved in the Scouting movement. The couple also sought counselling for their son, to help repair the emotional damage.

"Teachers have to look out for bullying," says Laura, who remembers Peter's Grade 4 teacher shrugging off their grave concerns with, "Oh, well, it's just part of growing up."

Peter has become a statistic in a disturbing trend. A recent survey of bullying behaviour among Ontario youth by the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health found that one-quarter of 4,211 surveyed students between Grades 7 and OAC reported being bullied - and 31.8 per cent were bullies themselves.

Bullying is a problem to which no one is immune, says **Stu Auty**, president of the Canadian Safe School Network, a non-profit organization based in Mississauga. Among the services that CSSN offers are speaker's bureaus and consulting with school boards, governments and youth organizations on youth violence issues.

"Victims can be too tall, too short, too goodlooking - whatever circumstance sets them apart," says Auty, adding that victims are often sensitive, quiet kids who have trouble asserting themselves.

Bullies also come in all shapes and sizes. Males tend to bully with physical violence; females often do it psychologically - "which can be more damaging," he says - with teasing and by exclusion from their social group.

Bullies are drawn to the anonymity of groups, Auty says. "Since no one takes responsibility in a group, they can say, 'That's not my fault ... everyone else was doing it.'"

It's important that students who witness bullying tell someone in authority - and not be afraid to be labelled a "tattletale" - since bullies count on students being quiet, says Scott Graham, who runs a children's leadership program in schools around the GTA.

"You have to make kids understand that by watching bullying, they're also contributing to it," says Graham, 40, who has a background in social work.

Since he started his program, Kids 4 Kids, 10 years ago, Graham says he's never seen a school that doesn't have bullying. However, he's talked to a lot of principals and vice-principals who insist they don't have a problem with bullies.

Graham says he knows of three 12-year-old boys in the GTA who have committed suicide over the last decade as a result of bullying.

What is needed is a concerted effort among educators, parents and children to control bullying, he believes. "They (educators) have to start teaching kids things that work."

Popular wisdom suggests children should ignore a bully and walk away. But Graham disagrees, since the teaser is likely to follow the child. Instead, he tells children to look the bully in the eye, assert their feelings then walk away to a safe zone. If the bully does follow them, repeat their statement and continue to walk.

One of the worst times for bullying is during lunch breaks, which Graham says is a consequence of too much unstructured time that leaves kids bored and bullies looking for victims. He recommends educators have more structured play, perhaps through something such as a lunch games club.

Graham says no-tolerance policies and school manuals that list specific steps for schools to take for bullying are a good idea, but only if they're consistently enforced over a long period. And what is punishment for one child may be a reward for another. One student may look forward to suspension "so that he can play Nintendo and hang out at the mall."

A better solution might be a community-based project around the school, such as picking up garbage. "But that also means having someone supervise the student," Graham adds.

Some bullies come from disruptive situations or they can get away with certain types of behaviour at home. They may be angry about a stressful family event and might be taking out their anger on others. Or, they may just be aggressive kids, says Elaine Slavens, consultant of guidance and social/personal skills for the Toronto District School Board.

Slavens, who is finishing a booklet on bullying guidelines for the TDSB that she hopes to be in place this September, says the board has a safe school policy in place, which has certain guidelines for particular levels of bullying, from mild to severe.

If a student is suspended for violent behaviour, for example, there's often "some sort of restoration of justice," when that student returns. This can involve community work, or in the case of graffiti being written on the walls, the student would be required to wash it off, she says. © 2002 Torstar Corporation