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Sports are rife with bullying, but parents are key to a solution: researchers

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TORONTO — Schoolchildren may soon be free of their teachers' dirty looks, but as summer rolls closer, parents shouldn't assume it'll be all fun and games for youngsters playing outside and at camp.

It's up to adults to not only protect children from the bullying that can go hand-in-hand with sports, but to also recognize adults can be part of the problem, an anti-bullying conference heard Thursday.

"Sports is more than a game, but less than a war," said Samantha Yamada, a researcher for Promoting Relationships and Eliminating Violence (PREVNet).

"Every sport has rules intended to prevent personal injury and intended to promote fairness, but it also has unwritten rules.

"Coaches might teach their players to bend the rules, so that they have an advantage."

That's when the line between competition and aggression begins to blur, Yamada said. It means that while sports can be valuable in a child's development, they also present opportunities for victimization that are often invisible to adults.

"A coach may not pick up on signals young people give each other," said PREVNet co-director Debra Pepler. "Once established, it simply takes a stare to reinforce."

More than a decade ago, Pepler wired children with remote microphones and recorded them with a video camera at play. In one case, she found a child who was called names and had a tennis ball whipped at him was victimized a second time when the real bully tattled to a teacher that he swore. As punishment, the boy was forced to stand against a wall, while the bully gained more power than before.

Those findings are still relevant, Pepler said, because while five million children are playing organized sports - under 325,000 recognized coaches - Canada has no measure of the extent to which bullying, harassment and abuse occur.

"Inadvertently, as adults, we give more power to the kid who was exerting his power," she said.

"It helps to see how out of it we are as adults."

It's not just children who are to blame. Rink-raging parents, who promote winning at all costs, can worsen the situation.

Preliminary research from Brock University, for example, shows the best predictor of girls becoming bullies or being bullied is whether their parents nurtured good sportsmanship.

"If they encouraged their daughters to play fair, they were bullies less often and victims less often," said Brock professor Anthony Volk, who attended the conference.

He said one possible explanation is that girls carry the aggressiveness of sports into school.

Adults can empower young people by changing their own off-the-field attitudes and behaviour to reflect how they want their children to act, Yamada said. But that doesn't include creating more rules, she added.

"Parents should think about bullying as a human rights issue," Yamada said. "Encourage

children to speak up."

Coaches, parents and other adult caretakers can find strategies to prevent bullying at www.respectinsport.com.

Respect in Sport is an organization co-founded by Sheldon Kennedy, a former NHL player who was sexually abused as a teen by his coach.

Respect in Sport's goal is to train every coach in Canada to create a safe and healthy environment, free of bullying.

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