

Greater vigilance, supervision will help boost school safety Education Q&A

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Are schools safe? Why does it seem like there are so many lockdowns? What can students or parents do? Expert **Stu Auty**, president of the Canadian Safe School Network and a former teacher, counsellor and administrator, was our expert in this week's online education forum. This is an edited transcript.

For a full transcript, go to thestar.blogs.com/education.

Q There was a recent case of a child being sexually assaulted in her elementary school washroom. This is not the first time I've heard of such a thing happening. How do these people get into schools? Aren't doors locked? Why don't all schools have washroom escorts?

A Incidents that you have cited happen periodically during the school year. Fortunately, they are not common, but when they happen, it is traumatizing to children and parents in the community. Most doors are locked during the school day, except the main entrances.

Some schools have installed entrance cameras where visitors can be observed and access restricted. Others engage parent volunteers to supervise. Sadly, there is no perfect solution. But increased vigilance and supervision is a high priority, particularly when there has been an occurrence and the intruder has not been apprehended. It is important to establish a positive balance and maintain a safe, comfortable learning environment, with a minimum of intrusive security measures.

Q My son was born premature and is small for his age. He is teased and bullied at school all the time, and always comes home upset. Teachers know, the principal knows, and no one wants to do anything. What can I do?

A When you describe your son's situation, you mention he is bullied all the time, and comes home upset all the time. As a parent, I am sure you will agree that plenty of misbehaviour can occur right under our noses.

When reporting bullying, it helps if you can provide accurate written details about a specific incident. Ask your son to tell you exactly what, where and when it happened, who saw it and how they reacted to it. Include how your son responded, whether he was frightened, injured, or if his belongings were damaged or stolen. The teacher or administrator will have a better chance of responding to a written report with details. Participate in devising a plan to keep your son safe and request follow-up meetings to ensure the plan is still working. Keep a record of what action takes place, and follow up with the principal and/or your superintendent if the problem continues. Don't ignore what is happening to your son and insist that other adults responsible for his safety do not ignore it.

Q I am a teacher candidate at Trent University (I was a teacher in Egypt for six years). I was upset by the news a Grade 2 girl was sexually assaulted in the bathroom. If you enter any school, the principal will pull out a big book of rules and regulations to promote safety. I don't think the rules are enough or are enforced! Why don't teachers and students wear name tags?

A No one would argue every child needs to feel safe at school. Creating a flawless security system is a very important, but difficult, task. Many security devices, including name tags have been considered. However, it is the one child who isn't wearing the tag, or the attacker who devises a way around security measures, that may threaten safety. Creating and maintaining a safe school environment requires a well-understood, workable plan that includes different strategies and the commitment and support of the school community.

Q This is a "safe kids" question. I read we should no longer teach our kids about "stranger danger" because most sexual abuse/abductions are by people they know. Is that the case? If so, what do we teach our kids?

A In Ontario, curriculums require children will be able to recognize advances or suggestions that threaten their safety or well being, whether involving strangers or people they know. Children learn strategies such as seeking help from a teacher.

Q We need to evaluate school environments for potential environmental exposure. As a parent in the public system, I advocate for more protective standards in public health due to electromagnetic field exposure. Do you feel these risks should be evaluated and communicated?

A I agree environmental risks to the health of children should be evaluated in areas that could be potentially harmful. Research is of particular importance. Where it can be shown there is a risk to health, it would be incumbent upon governments to act. Exposure to electromagnetic fields could warrant further examination.

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