

Online Q&A with Stu Auty, Canadian Safe School Network

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 today's guest expert for our education Q&A.

We're no longer taking questions, but will take [comments](#) for the next 24 hours.

Q: How to deal with bullying in schools? My son, who was born premature and is small for his age, is teased and bullied at school ALL THE TIME. Teachers know, and the principal knows and nobody wants to do anything about it. They've tried to teach my son to speak up for himself but really that doesn't work. He comes home upset all the time, it's worst at recess.

I've spoken to the teacher and the principal but they don't seem to be doing anything more about it. Why won't teachers and principals do more about bullying? They are the eyes in the classroom and in the playground and I can't believe they can't see what's going on, they choose to ignore it.

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 and 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 much better chance of responding to the written report with concrete details rather than a general report of bullying.

Participate fully in devising a plan to keep your son safe at school and request periodic follow up meetings to ensure that the plan is still working. Keep a record of what action takes place, and follow-up with the school principal and/or your superintendent if the problem continues. Don't ignore what is happening to your son and insist that it is not ignored by other adults responsible for his safety.

Q: This isn't really a "safe schools" question but a safe kids question. I read somewhere that we should no longer be teaching our kids about "stranger danger" because most sexual abuse/abductions are

done by people they know. If that is the case, then what do we teach our children?

A: This really isn't an "either/or" question. In Ontario schools, the curriculum requires that children at primary school age will be able to recognize, in situations involving others, advances or suggestions that threaten their safety or well being, whether they involve strangers or people they know. Inappropriate touching, invitations to accompany strangers, or other exploitative behaviours are examples of actions that are explained. It is expected that children will master simple strategies to assist them, like seeking assistance from a teacher.

Q: At what age is it okay for children to walk to school without their parents? Is it okay for them to walk to school alone ever?

A: Children mature at different ages and some are able to handle independence at a much earlier age. Many factors come into play, however, that can influence parents' decisions about allowing their children to walk to school without adult accompaniment. Incidents in the neighborhood, traffic density, safe walking pathways, friends to walk with, etc., all can influence a decision.

At some point parents have to let go and nurture their child's independence. Children have to be prepared for this independence, however, with guidelines clearly explained and understood. It is important that unnecessary parental anxiety not be imparted to the child when the big day finally arrives.

Q: Dear Mr. Auty, How are you today? I am so happy this article has been published. I am a teacher candidate at Trent University (have been a teacher in Egypt for six years) and I was very disturbed by the news (CBC) last week when I heard a girl in Grade 2 was sexually assaulted in the bathroom on her way to recess. I called the Toronto Star asking them to write an article about the safety of schools (not looking for recognition - however I am so happy this has been done). People need more awareness however what I feel needs to be done is some kind of follow-up. If you enter any school the principal will pull out a big book of rules and regulation to promote safety in schools. I don't think these rules are good enough or being enforced!

Another thing I noticed is if I Google "Safety in Schools" all I get are articles on bullying. Bullying is an issue, however being protected by predators, criminals and people trying to hurt our children should be the priority. We cannot control the minds of these disturbed

individuals however we can certainly frighten them away by having tighter security measures.

Some of the rules that I question are:

- * Locked doors during recess**
- * Monitoring the halls and the bathrooms**
- * Code words for strangers in the building (this makes me laugh actually, if there was a stranger in the building, someone like my little girl who is in junior kindergarten would never know the difference between that person and a high school teacher!)**

Another point is someone who is trying to hurt the students would not walk around the halls where students and teachers can see.

Why don't teacher and students wear names tags? I have an excellent idea which certainly helps the situation. There are companies that produce alarm systems which students can wear around their necks. Senior citizens use them in the form of bracelets in case they fall down and no one is around. This might be expensive but so is 1.2 billion dollars on infrastructure!

I would appreciate if you do not mention my name (for safety reasons) when writing your reponses. I do appreciate your time and effort to see tighter security measures in schools today.

A: Although thousands of children, many as young as three years of age, attend schools safely every day, there are a few incidents where a child is victimized. No one would argue that every child needs to feel safe at school. Creating a flawless security system for schools is a very important, but difficult task. There are many security devices including the safety alert bracelets you suggest, that have been considered by school boards in an effort to ensure the safety of the children.

After all the measures are in place, however, it is the one child who isn't wearing the bracelet, or the attacker who cunningly devises a way around the security measures, that may threaten the child's safety.

Creating and maintaining a safe school environment requires a well understood and workable plan, which includes many different strategies and the commitment and support of everyone in the school community to carry it out.

Q: There was a case recently of a child being sexually assaulted in her elementary school washroom when she left class to go to the

washroom, alone. This is not the first time I've heard of such a thing happening in a school.

How do these people get into schools? Aren't doors locked? Is there no security? What are schools policy on children going to the washroom alone during class, ie when hallways are empty. Why don't all schools do washroom escorts?

A: Incidents that you have cited happen periodically during the school year. Fortunately, they are not a common occurrence but when they do happen it is particularly traumatizing to children and parents in the community.

It is common practice that most doors are locked during the school day with the exception of the main entrances to the building. Some schools have installed entrance cameras that act much like the concierge in a condo where visitors can be observed and restricted access where necessary. Other schools have engaged parent volunteers who supervise on a rotational basis.

Sadly there is no perfect solution but increased vigilance/supervision on everybody's part 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 and comfortable learning environment for children, hopefully with a minimum of intrusive security measures.

Q: The question "are schools safe?" is subject to personal interpretation by the student, staff, parent it is posed to. A safety audit would compile a magnitude of concerns including a variety of concerns and characteristics. I do believe this is a responsibility for all of society which requires taking all steps in ensuring that both the physical, emotional safety for children in school settings is a priority, as well as examining the environmental aspects that ensure safe learning environments exists.

I would like to raise awareness of the Safe Schools Act, which doesn't pay particular attention to environmental threats to youths from labelled carcinogenic agents which can affect their health while learning at school. Much of the focus in the media has been surrounding the ease intruders may have to schools, the implications with this and lockdown policies. These are legitimate concerns that require emergency preparedness plans and procedures to follow in consultation with the parental community. They need to be followed and enforced to be successful.

We do also need to evaluate our school environments and assess the potential for environmental exposures which could be threatening the health of children.

My example is children's exposures to electromagnetic fields. As a parent in the public school system I have learned some hard lessons of how this concept is not being applied responsibly as I advocate for more protective standards in public health due to EMF exposures from sources within a school environment. They do exist and children are being affected. Our government, school boards and child protection agencies lack the leadership to provide the necessary support needed in this matter.

The science researchers and health authorities have agreed and acknowledged the risks to children for electromagnetic field exposure and its link to leukemia. There is a societal benefit in prevention for public health and public safety. We need to take an educated role in public safety for our schools and for our children.

I would like to see further involvement in these discussions from those in the educational sector and why they fail to act when these settings are reported to them and it is known that these exposures compromise the health of children?

Do you feel these risks should be evaluated and communicated to students, staff, parents?

A: I would agree that environmental risks to the health of our children should be evaluated in all areas that could be potentially harmful. Definitive research is of particular importance and where it can be shown that there is a risk to health it would be incumbent upon governments to take action.

Raising awareness to issues of this kind is a valuable contribution and is often the kick start needed by government for further study and action. Exposure to electromagnetic fields is one environmental example that could warrant further examination.