

Thunder Bay Police put faces on bullying

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Bullying is a problem that many kids come in contact with.

But while it may be tempting to look the other way, if nothing is done it can escalate to violence on the scale of the school shootings in Columbine, Taber and Dawson College, police say.

"None of these were secrets. Everybody knew this was going to happen. But nobody stood up" to help prevent it, Const. Sherry Heyder said.

"You see something," added Sgt. Jim Glena, "you have to report it. Tell a teacher, tell a parent, call the police."

Heyder, Glena and Det. Const. Shannon Muller are making presentations to Thunder Bay high school students as part of Bullying Awareness Week.

Since 2003, bullying.org and the Family Channel have promoted Bullying Awareness Week to lift the veil off the problem and suggest solutions.

Thursday afternoon, the officers were at Hammarskjold high school to provide information on aggressive behaviour and dating violence.

Bullying, they told Jaime Calonego's 30-or-some drama students, is broken into three categories: physical aggression, verbal aggression and social alienation. The examples are names linked in tragedy: Reena Virk, David Knight, Dawn-Marie Wesley.

The latter, a 14-year-old girl from Mission, B.C., was part of a group that turned on her. After unrelenting intimidation, she went into a closet and hanged herself.

"Dawn felt this was the only way out for her," Heyder related.

Three girls were charged and two were convicted of harassment and uttering threats.

The Hammarskjold students were then asked whether they would tell someone if they were being bullied.

"I would tell, but it depends on how bad it is," replied one Grade 9 student, seemingly downplaying the seriousness of verbal abuse. "If they start hitting or beating me, I'd obviously tell."

Then there's the story of Myles Neuts, a seemingly well-liked 10-year-old who was accosted in a boy's washroom in Chatham, Ont. His assailants thought it would be funny to watch him squirm from a coat hook. By the time another boy got a teacher to stop the abuse, he had strangled and was pronounced dead.

"Myles lost his life from the joke," Heyder said. "That's why it's so important if you see something going on, stand up and do something."

Added Muller, "Being a bully is about power and controlling the victim."

A new form of bullying comes through the Internet, where kids post their thoughts to harm others, whether a Columbine-style killing spree or libelous attacks on schoolmates.

Police have been getting tough on the latter, said Glena.

"There's no warnings anymore. As soon as something is posted and we find out, charges will be laid," he said. "It's zero tolerance and we need your help."

The second part of the presentation focused on dating violence. According to statistics, one-in-three teens said they've experienced some kind of abuse in a dating situation.

Further, half of all sexual assaults occur before the age of 18, and 22 per cent occur before age 12.

"The scary thing is, only five per cent of all sexual assaults are reported" to police, Heyder said.

Those who suspect they are victims of bullying or dating violence can call police or seek help through Kids Help Phone, and on the Web at bullying.org or teamheroes.ca, among others.

Thunder Bay Police will be making nearly 50 presentations into mid-December.