

Bullying can be stopped

By [Dr. Bonnie Leadbeater - 100 Mile House Free Press](#)

Published: **November 16, 2011 8:00 AM**

Updated: **November 16, 2011 8:46 AM**

When it comes to bullying, students in rural areas are more at risk than their urban peers.

This is what our University of Victoria research team uncovered, using publicly available data from the annual BC School Satisfaction Survey, which polls students in Grades 4 to 7. We compared answers from rural students with those of their urban peers.

We found students in rural school districts reported feeling safe at school less than their urban counterparts. In addition, more rural children reported being bullied, teased or picked on "all the time" or "many times" at school than their urban peers.

These results are alarming, but not set in stone. As a community, we can take action to prevent bullying and peer victimization among children wherever it occurs.

That's the core of the WITS Programs.

The programs bring together schools, families and communities to help elementary-school children make positive choices when faced with peer conflict and to help adults respond effectively when they ask for help.

The WITS acronym - Walk away, Ignore, Talk it out and Seek help - provides a common language children and the adults around them can use to discuss and respond to peer victimization.

This community collaboration is essential because bullying isn't just a parent's problem or a school's problem. It's a community problem.

The WITS Programs are implemented in school, but supported in the community by involving community leaders, such as emergency services personnel or athletes. These community leaders launch the programs with a swearing-in ceremony, where children are deputized as WITS Special Constables. They then make follow-up classroom visits, demonstrating to children how they use

their WITS and reminding them there are adults outside the school who can help if they're in trouble.

Parents play a crucial role as well. WITS Programs resources offer parents advice on how to get their children talking about bullying, how to use WITS strategies to deal with sibling conflict and how to tell the difference between normal and potentially harmful peer conflict. WITS book lists suggest children's books, often available in school or community libraries, that can help launch a conversation about peer conflict and strategies to deal with it.

Research suggests it's working. Since 2000, we've completed two studies in Greater Victoria elementary schools. Both indicate the programs' effectiveness in lowering rates of physical and relational victimization. A third national study is underway.

Meanwhile, the British Columbia-born programs have spread to more than 150 schools across Canada and beyond. Our team is working to ensure the programs' continued growth, particularly in rural areas.

Typically, children and families living in rural areas not only experience higher risks but also face greater challenges in accessing programs and services than their urban counterparts. Costs are often prohibitive.

With funding from the Public Health Agency of Canada, our research team is working to ensure this does not prevent any community from adopting the WITS Programs. We've developed a new interactive website, www.witsprogram.ca, that gives parents, children, teachers, and community leaders free, unlimited access to the WITS Programs - no matter where they live.

Preventing bullying is everyone's job. Together, we can make a difference.

Dr. Bonnie Leadbeater is a professor of developmental psychology at the University of Victoria and lead researcher for the WITS Programs.

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