

Bully for you

As Ontario ponders legislation to get tough on bullies in schools, researchers know more than ever about why kids behave like mini Machiavellis — and what can be done about it, writes Joanne Laucius.

THE OTTAWA CITIZEN DECEMBER 16, 2011



Nelson of The Simpsons is a 'life course' bully.

Psychologist and researcher Dr. Tracy Vaillancourt has conducted assessments of bullying at dozens of schools. But even before she crunches the numbers for a school, her gut usually tells her how it will fare from the moment she walks through the door.

The attitude of the school secretary is often the first tip-off, she says. If the secretary is friendly and welcoming, then the school is probably healthy. A secretary who is rude or dismissive is often an indicator bullying is rampant in the school.

The reason? If the secretary is rude to visitors within the principal's hearing, it's usually a sign that the climate in the school allows the staff to be disrespectful to each other and the students, she says. And that gives the students permission to undermine each other.

Vaillancourt has seen large variables in the amount of bullying in schools, with some as low as three per cent and others as high as 60 per cent.

“If schools are to be successful in tackling bullying, they have to model appropriate behaviour on the part of adults,” says Vaillancourt, the Canada Research Chair in children’s mental health and violence prevention at the University of Ottawa. “And there are many schools where teachers are not respectful of each other, and are not respectful of students.”

At issue is moral disengagement, the ability to justify treating others badly and not feel guilty about it. Psychologists already know bullies feel morally disengaged. Now they want to know if bystanders who observe bullying and do nothing about it have the same attitude,

“If the collective is morally disengaged, kids get bullied,” says Vaillancourt.

In 2006, a network of researchers and governmental and non-governmental agencies launched PREVNet, to look at ways of preventing bullying. David Smith, a professor of education at the University of Ottawa who has analysed anti-bullying initiatives in Canada and abroad, says there’s a growing body of evidence about what works.

According to the Ontario Ministry of Education’s definition, bullying involves an intent to hurt, an abuse of power and it occurs repeatedly over time, says Smith.

Bill 157, the Keeping Our Kids Safe at School Act, which became law in 2010, makes it mandatory for school staff to report to the principal when they see an incident that could result in a student suspended or expelled. Staff must also respond if they see behaviour that might have an impact on the climate of the school.

School programs that succeed in reducing bullying have one thing in common: they are comprehensive and involve the whole school in a coordinated and systematic way, says Smith.

“It instils in the school community a common language for talking about bullying and identifying it.”

What is most important is the social climate. Students understand that bullying is not accepted, and when staff see it, they do something about it. Adults need to take the lead and the principal in particular needs to take a strong leadership role.

“You need to generate a critical mass of enthusiasm and energy,” says Smith. “It takes a lot of work to get everyone on board. Everyone has to make it part of their business.”

One of the programs that has proven effective is WITS, which encourages students who are bullied to Walk Away, Ignore, Talk It Out and Seek Help. Developed by University of Victoria psychologist Dr. Bonnie Leadbeater, WITS is being used in a pilot program in partnership with the RCMP to prevent bullying in elementary schools.

But there are other programs that have no proof of effectiveness, says Smith. One program, for example, teaches victims to stand up to bullies.

“That completely misses the point. Victims can’t stand up to bullies. They need adult help.”

There are two types of bullies. The first is the “popular aggressor” — usually a high-status student who is socially motivated to hang on or climb the power structure.

“Most kids are popular bullies, but they don’t get caught,” says Vaillancourt. “Bullying makes some kids popular and helps them maintain popularity. They are competing for hegemony.”

The second type is the “life course” bully. This is the classic bully, like Nelson Muntz, the resident elementary school tormentor on the *The Simpsons*. These bullies are often the product of poverty, dysfunctional families, neglect or abuse. Nelson occasionally shows flashes of intelligence and kindness, but these overtures are treated with suspicion by his fellow students and dismissed by adults.

Life course bullies are the least likely to benefit from zero tolerance programs because suspending them for bullying simply gives them time off, says Vaillancourt.

“Suspension puts these kids at risk. These kids are not without redeeming qualities. Zero tolerance doesn’t work.”

Children play different roles in the bullying spectrum, and the roles can be fluid, says Smith. In the space of one recess, a child can be both a bully and a victim. “People see kids associated with a situation and that kid will be pigeonholed as a bully or a victim,” he says. “But it can change from one minute to the next.”

Bullying also decreases with age as children are better able to self-regulate, says Vaillancourt. “There is a developmental component to this that needs to be recognized.”

She believes bullying is rooted in our evolutionary past, but that doesn’t mean it is impossible to prevent. “We just have to work a little harder on what we’re doing.”

But not every child has the power to be a bully, says Vaillancourt. In the high school clique system there are cliques with varying degrees of power. Those at the top of the status hierarchy — the “populars” — have the most power. But every clique has its own hierarchy.

“You can be in a lower-status group, but you can be the top dog of that group,” she says.

“The science supports that we are all not bullies. But we all experience bullying because we witness it.”

It is very difficult for bystanders to summon the gumption to defend someone who is being bullied because they know it’s social suicide.

“Kids have a fundamental need to belong. It goes against their agenda,” says Vaillancourt.

The key is to make it possible for as many bystanders as possible to stand up to bullies so it takes the pressure off the few who are willing to stick their necks out to defend the victims. “We have to create schools where it’s cool to care,” she says.

A simple way to reduce bullying would be to increase adult supervision. One study of 16,000 students in the Hamilton area showed that children were more likely to be bullied if there was no adult present. There is a problem with this solution, however. Under their collective agreements, teachers are limited

in terms of the amount of time they must spend outside at recess and lunchtime.

“We can’t have kids fending for themselves,” says Vaillancourt. “The more eyes on the playground, the better it will be.”

Danielle Quigley, a PhD student in development psychology at Carleton University, has studied social aggression and the desire for status and power in elementary schools in rural Eastern Ontario. She also prepared a unit about social relationships for the Girl Guides of Canada, which has programs for girls between the ages of five to 18. The requirements range from talking to a new person for a five-year-old to exploring the depiction of girls on television and in the movies to writing a “friendship bill of rights” about the parameters of rights and responsibilities in a friendship.

The children who are the least likely to be bullied are those with larger, looser social networks.

“If you have lots of different friends, then you have lots of different options,” Quigley says.

Although girls are often considered downright Machiavellian about “mean girls” aggressiveness, Quigley’s research on children in Grades 4 to 7 looked at social aggression in both boys and girls. The girls were only marginally more socially aggressive than the boys.

In her study, she offered both boys and girls a scenario: they have made plans to do something with their best friend, but the best friend invites another boy or girl.

Quigley found that many elementary schoolchildren were willing to turn on their best friend if they felt justified by jealousy or anger.

Those who admitted that they were jealous were more likely to say they would engage in relational aggression, seeking revenge by doing something like spreading rumours. Those who described their feelings as anger were most likely to say they would do something physically aggressive, such as punching their best friend in the arm.

“Jealousy predicted relational aggression. The same was true to a lesser extent of boys,” says Quigley.

She notes that girl-to-girl social violence has become more celebrated in popular culture in TV shows such as *The Bachelor* and *Gossip Girl*, which show attractive young women undermining each other.

Quigley believes the proposed legislation, which would encourage the creation of organizations like gay-straight alliances, would help create a celebration of diversity.

As for expelling bullies, that would allow incidents to be tracked. But on the other hand, it would take bullies away from the help and support they get from peers and teachers. Expelling students does not teach them coping strategies, she says.

“I don’t know that there’s a whole lot we teach children about emotional regulation. We need to help kids understand that it’s not OK to do these things.”

Bullying by the numbers

20 per cent: On average, the proportion of students who are chronically bullied in an elementary school, says David Smith, a professor of education at the University of Ottawa, who has studied the effectiveness of anti-bullying programs in schools. By high school, the proportion of chronically bullied students drops to about 10 per cent. In the adult population, about five or six per cent of the population remain chronic bullies in their work and personal relationships. “You don’t learn how to be aggressive. You learn how not to be aggressive,” says Smith.

Grade 7: The grade when bullying peaks, says Danielle Quigley, a PhD candidate in psychology and a researcher at Carleton University’s Heathy Relationships Lab. Bullying drops as students figure out their place in the social structure, she says.

12 per cent of Canadian girls and 18 per cent of boys: The percentage of children who reported bullying others at least twice in previous months, according to research published in 2004. These figures suggest that in a classroom of 35 students, between four and six children are bullying and/or are being bullied, according to PREVNet, a network of Canadian researchers and governmental and non-governmental agencies working together to prevent bullying. Many more children observe bullying and know it is going on. At some point, the majority of children will engage in some form of bullying and experience some form of victimization, says PREVNet. A small minority of children will have long-lasting, serious, and pervasive involvement in bullying.

26th and 27th: Where Canada ranked out of 35 countries in a World Health Organization Health Behaviours report on 13-year-olds and bullying in 2001-2002. This was a decline compared to Canada’s ranking in a 1993-1994 report. PREVNet says this “suggests other countries have been preventing bullying problems more effectively than Canada.”

© Copyright (c) The Ottawa Citizen

[Previous](#)

[Next](#)



Leighton Meester uses bullying to get what she want in Gossip Girl.
