

Students use their WITS to deal with bullies

By [Staff Writer - Saanich News](#)

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November 13-19 is bullying awareness week in Canada, a reminder the issue remains a prominent one in schools across the country.

But a program which started in Greater Victoria in the late '90s is teaching young children how to deal with bullies, and research shows it's having a positive impact.

It's known as WITS (Walk Away, Ignore, Talk it out, Seek help), and it's aimed at students from kindergarten to Grade 3. A sister program, called WITS Leads, targets students in Grades 4 to 6, teaching them how to help younger kids deal with bullying.

Researchers at the University of Victoria have conducted a pair of three-year evaluations since WITS was introduced. They've found that incidents of peer victimization at schools that employ WITS have decreased since the program was introduced.

"I've seen how it can help kids learn to be a little more socially adept, and how to do some problem solving on their own and not just rely on parents and teachers to help them," said Dr. Josephine MacIntosh, a WITS research associate. "It also helps them recognize when they should seek help."

One of the key principles of WITS is that it takes a holistic approach to bullying.

"We bring in community leaders, emergency service personnel, athletes – people kids will look up to," said MacIntosh. "This way they know that not only are their families there for them and their teachers are there for them, they know the community will look out for them as well."

In Greater Victoria, WITS is funded in part by the Rock Solid Foundation, which provides resources to participating schools. The organization's executive director has seen firsthand how the program's impact can reach beyond the school environment.

"When my daughters are having a spat, I say, 'You have to use your WITS,'" said Dorian Brown, whose kids attend Macaulay school in Esquimalt. "That reminds them, 'I have to strategize here, what can I do? I can walk away, I can talk it out, I can ignore it.' There's a nice balance with the

WITS strategy.”

There are currently 37 schools on the South Island that are enrolled in the WITS program, which has expanded across Canada and even to the U.S., New Zealand and Saudi Arabia since it was first introduced.

For more information on the program, visit www.witsprogram.ca

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