



Schools teaching anti-bullying

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Safety: WITS program gives kids strategies

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SAINT JOHN - An anti-bullying program that teaches kids how to better deal with conflict is a positive step towards curbing the ever evolving issue, said the principal who helped introduce the curriculum at three west Saint John elementary schools this fall.

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Ray Bourgeois-Telegraph Journal

Cynthia Freeman-King, the principal at Havelock School helped bring in a new anti-bullying program to three elementary schools.

"All schools are doing something to deal with bullying issues," said Cynthia Freeman-King, principal of Havelock School. "It's still early, but we're already seeing some positive changes in the kids."

Freeman-King is responsible for getting the WITS program started in her school, as well at Seawood and St. Patrick's School.

The program was initially developed in B.C. in 1993 and has since spread to over 150 schools.

WITS is an acronym for: Walk away; Ignore; Talk it out; Seek help. Those are the four core concepts of the program that is designed to help kids deal with bullying and peer victimization. The name also factors prominently in the most commonly used catchphrase for the program: "Have you used your WITS?"

The program has two stages: WITS primary is for kindergarten to Grade 3 and WITS Leads is for Grades 4 to 6.

Freeman-King said the program, which combines resource material taught in the school with parent and community involvement, was appealing because of its broad scope and the way it involved the adults that play influential roles in children's lives.

"It teaches coping methods, but it also changes the environment where kids can be the ones to step up and deal with bullying," she said.

Community leaders - in Saint John there is a paramedic, a fireman, and a police officer involved - act as leaders and role models to the kids in the program as well, an important factor when actively changing the environment for children, said Freeman-King.

Freeman-King, who has been an educator for nearly 25 years, said the program also has a strong research component as well, which she said is very important in trying to understand whether the campaign is getting positive outcomes.

The principal researcher for the WITS program is Bonnie Leadbeater, a psychology professor at the University of Victoria in B.C.

Alison Lynch Richard, the WITS research coordinator in New Brunswick, said the goal of the program is to increase positive behaviours.

"We're hoping that the programs are having a positive impact in reducing bullying," she said. "And getting schools, parents and the community involved makes that a lot easier.

"What we're trying to do is build responsive communities."

Lynch Richard said data is collected from teachers, parents and children through questionnaires, and then analyzed to determine the success of the program. Two control schools, Centennial and Brown's Flat Elementary School, are provided with the resource material, but do not teach the curriculum.

"Then we can do a comparative analysis between the schools," said Lynch Richard.

Freeman-King said while bullying is getting a lot of media attention recently, it has always existed. She said the difference is how it happens, especially when you take new technologies into account.

"People haven't changed, just the venues," she said.

The schools have signed on for a two year commitment, after which there will be a full evaluation of the success of the program.