



The Society for Safe & Caring Schools & Communities (SACSC) is an organization that seeks to prevent bullying and violence by supporting the development of positive social, emotional and moral development among children, youth and the adult role models in their lives. It was started in 1996 as a joint project between Alberta Education and the Alberta Teachers Association, and in 2002 it evolved into a foundation with registered charity status.

we promote include respect, responsibility, inclusiveness, caring and compassion. These are values that are accepted by all cultural and religious groups. In promoting these values, we take a problem-solving approach that allows youngsters to fix the wrongs they have caused, thus letting them learn from their mistakes.”

KidSafe recently spoke with Nicole Pakan, the Communications Manager for SACSC, and with Will Simpson, the Society’s Executive Director of Education. Nicole says that “the values that



Will Simpson



Nicole Pakan

Conflicting Messages

Kids get a lot of conflicting messages from parents, teachers and role models when it comes to the issue of bullying. Some parents might see bullying as a rite of passage, so they tell their kids they simply have to learn to put up with it. Other parents might advise their youngsters to *"toughen up and hit the guy if he bugs you."*

Many of the schoolyard "bullies" are kids who feel victimized themselves in some way. Perhaps their grades are poor or they feel excluded from groups because of their weight or appearance. They use their own hurt to justify the way they treat others -it's a coping mechanism that they feel empowers them.

Kids who emigrate to Canada from war-torn countries often grew up in fairly violent environments where they needed to act aggressively to survive, so bullying may seem almost normal to them.



"In all of these instances, we need to let kids know that bullying is not an acceptable option," says Will. "It's important to set the ground rules in a classroom so kids know how they are expected to behave. This helps to create an environment that promotes respect, self-esteem and inclusion. Obviously, we can't control how kids **feel** when they are interacting with others. They might get angry and upset, and that's okay - they have a right to be angry if a situation bothers them. But they have to learn to deal with their emotions in a positive way. They have to act in ways that support others, rather than threatening or demeaning them."



In most cases, bullying occurs because people **let it occur**. When people stand idly by and watch others being bullied, it is like they are complicit in the behaviour. But if there is no social support for bullying, and if bystanders intervene when they see someone being bullied, the behaviour stops almost immediately. Once their peer group supports positive behaviour, then that is the behaviour kids will adopt.

Creating Empathy

Will tells us that "the single most effective way to prevent bullying is by creating a sense of empathy within youths. If they understand what it feels like to be bullied, or to be excluded from a group, they are much less likely to act this way towards others."



There are a number of ways this sense of empathy can be promoted to students in a classroom setting. In an English class, for example, teachers might deal with a novel where the protagonist is exposed to bullying and this can evolve into a class discussion on the issue. The ability to vicariously experience the victim's perspective forces potential bullies to think twice about how they interact with others.

In a social studies class, students might learn about the constant threat of starvation faced by kids in developing nations. This can lead to a discussion of the issue of hunger in their own community, and youths might be in-

- Hitting or pushing
- Excluding from groups
- Having rumors spread about others

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spired to work for a local food bank. They learn a sense of compassion towards people who might not have the same advantages as them.

Phys Ed classes teach the importance of fair play and following the established rules, and this translates very well into a number of real-life settings. Nicole points out that "even science classes can help address this issue by creating a sense of respect for the environment. When touching on subjects like global warming, for example, teachers can reinforce the idea that we all have a responsibility towards other people on the planet."

Relational Aggression

One of the most difficult types of bullying to spot, and to deal with, is relational aggression. Will notes that "this type of bullying is more common among girls. It's fairly pervasive, but it's also fairly difficult to see from the outside, because the girls typically belong to the same social group. They are the worst of enemies and the best of friends."

It's hard enough to be bullied by people you don't like and don't respect - but when the bullies are your best friends, that can completely destroy your sense of self-esteem. Girls affected by this can engage in some fairly destructive behaviours, and some even go so far as to attempt suicide, because they don't feel they have anyone they can turn to for help. After all, it's their own support group that is causing the problems.

- Name-calling
- Insulting
- Teasing
- Threatening

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"This kind of behaviour almost becomes a social norm, and we become desensitized to it," adds Will. "But we can't allow ourselves to become complacent. We need to pay attention to how youths are interacting with each other in order to nip this relational aggression in the bud. Bullying is a learned behaviour, so it's important to help kids learn healthier coping mechanisms."

Restorative Justice

Perhaps Gandhi put it best when he said that *'an eye for an eye leaves the whole world blind.'* If we simply punish people who are responsible for bullying others, they don't learn the error of their ways. Nicole notes that "when bullies are punished, they often see themselves as victims. They start to resent authority and feel that they are being picked on." They may try to get revenge on the people they feel are responsible, and this simply perpetuates the cycle of violence.

- Making others feel uncomfortable or scared
- Forcing others to hand over money or possession

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Many Alberta schools are now beginning to adopt the concept of restorative justice to deal with bullying. This approach is inspired by the healing circles Aboriginal communities have used for centuries. When someone committed a crime within these communities, they had to appear before the healing circle. The intent wasn't to punish the offender, but to "heal" them by showing them how their actions had hurt other members of their community. The ultimate goal was to have that person interacting with their community in a positive and healthy way.

Restorative justice might be carried out in schools by having a facilitator meet with the "bullies" and "victims" to discuss what happened. The facilitators try to find appropriate consequences that fit the behaviour and heal all the people the situation addresses. Will points out that "restorative justice acts as both intervention and prevention because it helps ensure that incidents of bullying don't recur. We talked earlier about how important it is to establish a sense of empathy. Nothing can create empathy more effectively than facing the person you victimized and hearing from them personally just how you've hurt them. Facilitators I've spoke with tell me that it is often a slow and laborious process getting "bullies" to understand what they've done wrong. But when they finally make that connection, it's like a light suddenly going on. They realize how they are hurting others, and they choose not to behave that way in the future."



The website www.sacsc.ca
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