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February 2007

Binoculars on bullying: a new solution to protect and connect children

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Introduction

Many schools have implemented bullying prevention programs. Parents are on high alert to detect signs and symptoms of bullying, and the media are rife with stories of bullying and how to stop it. But are we really doing everything we can to solve the problem of bullying?

There is considerable work to be done to promote safe and healthy relationships for Canadian children and youth according to Debra Pepler and Wendy Craig, the two experts leading PREVNet, a new Canadian network to address bullying in all of the places where children live, work, and play. They have found that while awareness of the pervasiveness of bullying in Canada has been growing slowly over the past two decades, our country's "bullying rates," which are dismally high relative to other countries, have not improved.

They cite a recent World Health Organization (WHO) Health Behaviours in School-aged Children (HBSC) survey, on which Canada ranked a worrisome 26th and 27th out of 35 countries on measures of bullying and victimization, respectively.¹ The survey also found that while other countries were improving their performance, Canada's ranking had actually dropped.

*It's time for all of us—and not just children, parents, and teachers—to look at the problem and the solutions in a smarter, more effective manner. We require more coordinated, consistent, and broad-based efforts to promote safe and healthy relationships for Canadian children and youth. In *Binoculars on Bullying: A new solution to protect and connect children*, the authors give us approaches that not only focus on the children involved in bullying, but also on the relationships and social contexts that may contribute to or alleviate bullying problems. Debra Pepler and Wendy Craig offer insights and practical strategies that all of us can use to address this troubling issue.*

Why worry about bullying in Canada?

Bullying is a problem that touches most children and youth at some point in their school years. Children are commonly understood to be involved in bullying as those who bully others, are victimized, or serve as the passive or participatory audience for this destructive play for power. (Note that we avoid labelling children as “bullies” or “victims” because these labels constrain thinking of the problem as solely a characteristic of the individual, rather than emerging from complex social dynamics.)

Recent data from the World Health Organization's (WHO) Health Behaviours in School-aged Children (HBSC) survey reveal that Canada does not fare well on the world stage in addressing bullying problems. As Figure 1 shows below, Canada ranked a worrisome 26th and 27th out of 35 countries on measures of bullying and victimization, respectively.²

Across all categories of bullying and victimization, Canadian students consistently reported rates of bullying and victimization that ranked at or below the middle of the international group. This situation is even more discouraging because Canada's rates have stayed approximately the same over the past decade, but Canada's ranking in the WHO surveys has dropped over the same time period. Other countries are making inroads in addressing bullying problems, while our efforts seem to be stalled.

We recognize that we need to view our bullying problem through a different lens for a more effective way of addressing the issue—and bullying *is* an important issue—one that has serious implications far beyond the doors of our schools.

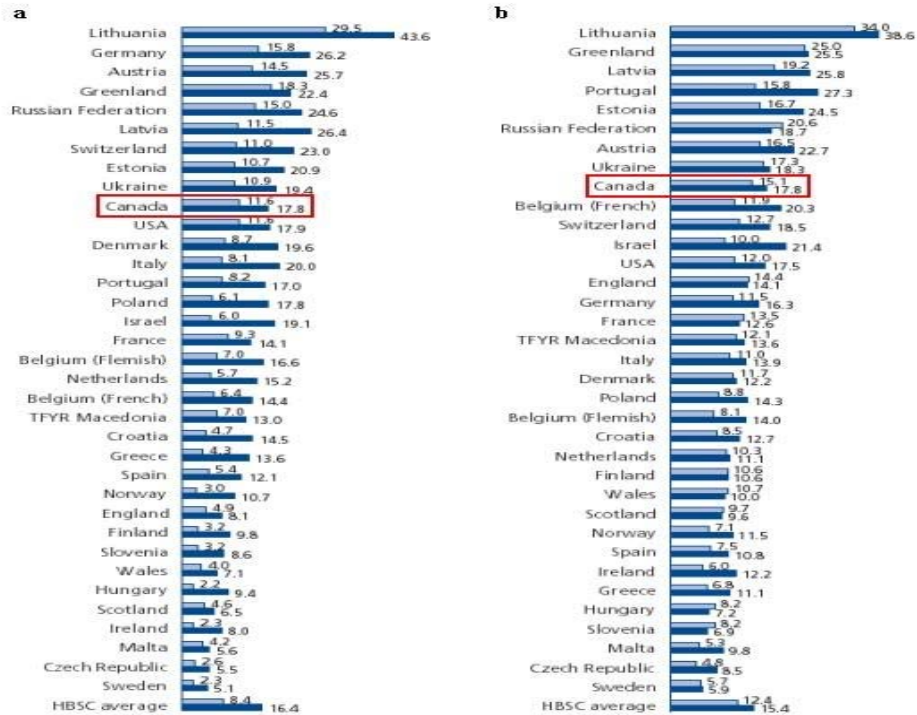


Figure 1. World Health Organization Health Behaviour in School-aged Children 2001/2002 survey data for bullying in 13 year old girls (■) and boys (■). (a) Percentage of children who bullied others 2 or more times in previous months; (b) Percentage of children who were victimized 2 or more times in previous months. (Source: Craig and Harel, 2004)

Why worry about bullying—now and in the future?

- **It is every child’s right to be safe** and it is the responsibility of adults to ensure that children and youth have that safety, and opportunities to develop in the context of healthy relationships.
- **Bullying is a real concern for children and youth.** For every one child concerned about being sexually abused by adults, there are *three* children concerned about abuse by peers.³
- **Bullying is a significant health issue:** involvement in bullying is linked with numerous health problems including anxiety, depression, and physical complaints, such as headaches and eating problems, for both children who are victimized and those who bully.⁴

- **Bullying is a warm-up for long-term relationship problems.** Bullying and victimization can start in early childhood and persist through the school years, peaking during the school transitions.⁵
 - From early adolescence, new forms of aggression, carried out from a position of power, emerge. With developing cognitive and social skills, children become aware of others' vulnerabilities and of their power relative to others. Bullying then diversifies into more sophisticated forms of verbal, social, electronic, sexually, and racially-based aggression.
 - The lessons of power and aggression learned in playground bullying can transfer to sexual harassment, dating aggression and may extend to workplace harassment, as well as marital, child, and elder abuse.⁶
 - In our own research, we have found that both girls and boys who bully in elementary school are at high risk for being physically aggressive with their boy/girlfriends in high school – clear evidence that bullying is a relationship problem.

Understanding and addressing bullying requires a “Binocular” view

Generally, we have defined bullying as repeated aggression in which there is a power differential between the child who is bullying and the child being victimized.⁷ The traditional focus of research has been on the aggressive behaviour of the child who was bullying and the need to protect the victimized child, with some attention to the bystanders.

Our research over the past 18 years has taught us that to understand and effectively address bullying, we need a “binocular” view. With only one lens, the focus is limited to the individual needs of children involved in all roles within bullying: those being aggressive, those being victimized, and those who are bystanders.

This singular view, however, falls short in providing a thorough understanding of the problem. By adding a second lens, as with binoculars, we expand the focus to include children's relationships. This second perspective takes into account the social dynamics in children's peer groups—and the roles that adults play in shaping children's experiences. Together, these two lenses offer a more comprehensive perspective on bullying problems. This deeper understanding of the complexity of the issues will lead us to recognize the multiple approaches required to address bullying problems.

A new view: Bullying is a *relationship* problem that requires *relationship* solutions

Through our research, we have come to understand bullying as a relationship problem that requires relationship solutions.⁸ So how does this work?

When children are involved in bullying as the aggressors, they are experiencing regular lessons in the use of power and aggression to control and distress others. Children who are victimized become trapped in a disrespectful relationship in which they become increasingly powerless and unable to defend themselves. Children who are bystanders are also learning about the use of power and aggression in relationships. Most often, they align with the child who has power and is bullying.⁹ Occasionally, these children have the courage to step in to support the victimized child and stop the bullying.

Relationship Problems

Our program of research has been founded on observations of children on school playgrounds, using video cameras and remote microphones.¹⁰ Watching first-hand the relationship dynamics in bullying has helped us understand the complex challenges that children face in their daily interactions with peers.¹¹ The dynamics in bullying interactions are imbalanced in reinforcing the power of children who are bullying and leaving victimized children increasingly vulnerable. Here's one example from our playground research that illustrates the complexity of the power dynamics of all those involved in bullying.

Mary: a multi-role player in a bullying situation

On a bright spring day, we were observing a Grade 5 girl, whom we'll call Mary, on the school playground at recess. From questionnaires completed by Mary herself, her teacher, and her classmates, we learned that this girl was experiencing a number of difficulties in getting along with others: Mary was involved in both bullying others *and* being victimized.

As we filmed, a girl approached Mary and began bullying her by saying: "If you are going to do that, can I kill you?" A second girl quickly joined and the two of them led Mary along by grasping her neck. Bullying is a "high arousal" event on the school playground; therefore, it took only seconds for an audience to gather to watch and join in the bullying. **The girls who were doing the bullying immediately became the centre of attention.**

Bullying is first and foremost about power and those who bully are frequently rewarded for their use of power and aggression. **Peers spend 75 percent of their time watching the child who is bullying.** This child receives the attention necessary to establish power and gain status with peers. In this way, children who bully are continually learning to use power and aggression to control and distress others.

The opposite dynamics occur for **children who are being victimized—they become increasingly powerless to defend themselves.** Mary was teased and harassed by many peers who joined in the action. They asked her to do humiliating things, such as kiss a tree, and invited others to join in her “payback day.”

There is an imbalance of power in the disrespectful relationship that results from bullying. The power arises from within the relationship (the girls who started the bullying had more power than Mary, who tried to go along with it but could not escape), as well as from the peer bystanders. Our observations reveal that **peers who form the audience for bullying only spend 25 percent of their time paying attention to or helping the child being victimized.**¹²

The peer group wields considerable power to promote or stop bullying. Most children report that they feel uncomfortable when they observe bullying. When they do intervene, however, peers can be highly effective. Again, our observations revealed that **when a peer has the courage to intervene, bullying stops 57 percent of the time within 10 seconds.**¹³

From our observations of hundreds of bullying episodes such as this one with Mary, we have come to understand that bullying is a problem that resides in the ways that children are relating to others or being related to. When bullying problems arise, there is an important opportunity to address these relationship problems by finding opportunities to promote healthy relationship dynamics for all children.

Relationship Solutions

When we understand bullying as a relationship problem, we come to recognize that it requires relationship solutions. With this positive perspective, we avoid labelling children as “victims” or “bullies,” but take a broader perspective on children’s strengths and challenges, not only in terms of their own needs, but also in terms of their important relationships within the family, peer group, school, and broader community. Children need consistent messages and responses to bullying across all of these contexts. We need to interrupt and redefine these interactions to move children out of their entrenched roles in a bullying situation.

To promote positive relationships, **all** children involved in bullying incidents – the children who bully, those who are victimized, as well as bystanders, must be included in bullying interventions. By extension, we can expand that group to include all the children who hear about the incident, for example, those in the class, or on the Internet.

Children who bully need support in understanding:

- the impact of their behaviours
- the importance of relating positively to others; they need to find ways of achieving power and status through positive leadership

Children who are victimized require:

- protection from bullying
- support in developing social confidence and positive friendships

Children who are bystanders need:

- support in recognizing that their behaviour is part of the problem
- information on what they can do to stop bullying and to support vulnerable peers

For children, the subtle behaviours and insights essential for skilled social interaction and positive relationships may be more complex and challenging to learn than how to read and how to count. Support for healthy social development, therefore, should begin early in children's lives and continue throughout adolescence when they are still in school and attending extracurricular activities. That support is not a "one size fits all" solution: it must be tailored to their different needs and capacities that vary by age, gender, skills and background. ¹⁴

Regardless of how these supports are put in place, one overarching principle is clear: **children depend on adults to help them understand bullying problems and to promote the development of essential social skills, social perceptions, and social responsibility.**

Adults are essential for children's healthy relationships

Regardless of the setting, adults are responsible for creating positive environments that promote children's ability to create and maintain healthy relationships. They are also responsible for minimizing opportunities for negative peer interactions. By observing the interpersonal dynamics in children's lives, adults can construct social experiences in ways that protect and support their developing relationships and minimize the likelihood of bullying and harassment. There are several strategies all adults can use to help children build healthy relationships and prevent bullying opportunities.

Practical strategies to build healthy relationships and prevent bullying

Protect and connect children who are bullied

We must protect children who are victimized at the hands of their peers and find ways to help them develop positive connections with their peers. We can help promote positive relationships through establishing buddies, circles of support, and by highlighting the victimized child's talents for others to see.

Turn children who bully from negative into positive leaders

Children who bully their peers require formative, rather than punitive consequences – interventions that not only provide a clear message that bullying is unacceptable, but also build awareness, skills, empathy, and insights, and provide youth with alternatives to bullying.

These children could be encouraged to read a story, watch a film and write about how hurtful bullying can be; they might help out with children in younger grades. The key for children who are bullying is to turn their use of power from negative to positive leadership.

For example, some schools have encouraged students involved in bullying to take leadership in various activities, such as conflict mediation and buddying with younger children. It is important to monitor these activities to ensure that these children are, in fact, using their power positively, rather than negatively.

Change bystanders into heroes

Whether they realize it or not, bystanders hold significant power when it comes to promoting—or stopping—bullying. Most children say they don't like to see others bullied, even though, as with Mary, children form the audience for 85 percent of episodes that we have observed. (In fact, no one stepped in for Mary, and her peers joined in the bullying, accelerating it.)

Bystanders are also affected in a negative manner because they are learning from the bullying behaviour how intimidation is rewarded with power. But bystanders can be changed into heroes, with some support from adults. When peers do have the courage to step in, bullying behaviour stops 57 percent of the time within 10 seconds.

Children need help understanding their social responsibility to do something when they know that bullying is going on. They can be coached in collectively taking a stand and stepping in. Children may need scripts for what to say and do to intervene in a positive way. When more than one child steps in, it helps to shift the power imbalance. Even if children are not comfortable standing up themselves, to those who bully, they must be encouraged to tell a responsible adult about this form of abuse at the hands of peers.

Change group dynamics—stop bullying before it starts

To address the dynamics of bullying, it is essential that *adults* look at the social dynamics—the relationships—within children’s groups.

Adults must create social contexts that promote positive peer interactions and dissipate those that encourage negative interactions. If teachers or recreation leaders are not aware of the dynamics in children’s peer groups, the following is bound to happen: children who are like each other will come together while others will be shunned and publicly humiliated through overt rejection and exclusion, a form of victimization. A new synthesis of research reveals how critical it is to ensure that children who are aggressive do not have the opportunity to associate in groups.¹⁵ When these children are together they reinforce each other for the very deviant behaviours that we are trying to prevent.

Use “social architecture” to organize groups

Our own data show that children who bully have friends who bully and they reinforce each other with these behaviours. Adults must pay attention to the relationships in children’s groups and take responsibility for ensuring that all children are included and that troubling behaviours are not given a forum to flourish. We call this form of intervention to organize children’s social groupings *social architecture*.¹⁶ For example, when teachers assign a group project and ask children to form their own groups, they allow the natural grouping processes to occur. Inevitably, this leaves less-skilled children (who might have a learning disability or speak English as a second language) in the humiliating position of not being chosen and then forced into a group. With a social architecture approach, a teacher can choose a random or planned strategy to create balanced groups in which all children are included and respected.

In this way, we engage children in positive interactions with a diverse mix of peers, providing the opportunity to promote the development of social skills, empathy, social responsibility, and citizenship.

Stop bullying in the moment

When a parent, teacher, or coach hears the beginnings of a hurtful comment or bullying behaviour, it is important for them to stop and address the problem in the very moment it occurs. Unless we speak up to teach children in the moment, those involved in bullying others or those children who are victimized will walk away with the message that we condone and accept the behaviour.

Be a role model

It is not only through our active interventions and moment-to-moment coaching that we can support children’s social development. All adults are models for children and must lead by example and refrain from using their power aggressively. When a parent, teacher, or coach puts down a child or insults and bullies a vulnerable child, children have a first-hand lesson in the use of power and aggression. Unfortunately, what they learn is how effective it can be in that

moment to gain attention and power over another. Adults have to show that they are part of the solution and not the problem.

Practical strategies especially for teachers

Establish a code of conduct

Involve students in developing a code of conduct about what they consider to be acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. If children are responsible for creating a class policy around bullying, they are more likely to follow and enforce it with their friends. Post the code of conduct to remind children (and adults) about what will and will not be tolerated at school.

Develop formative consequences

These are consequences that are designed to send the message that bullying is unacceptable while also providing support for children who bully to learn the skills and acquire the insights they may lack. For example, a child who bullies may have to sit out of an activity but uses that time to write a letter of apology, draw a picture or read a story about what it feels like to be bullied. Children who bully need help understanding the impact their behaviour has on others.

Encourage children to report

Convey the message that it is the teacher's job to deal with bullying and that all incidents should be reported. Clarify the difference between tattling and telling: tattling is what you do to get someone into trouble; telling is what you do to get someone out of trouble. Providing alternative ways to report bullying at school, such as an anonymous bullying box, can help reduce the discomfort children feel around reporting bullying. It is essential that adults be prepared and open to hearing disclosures about bullying, recognizing that it takes courage for children to come forward and report.

Acknowledge positive behaviours

Encourage positive connections among children by praising respectful and cooperative behaviour whenever it happens. Children love praise and they will work hard to get it. Try and focus on the positive behaviours of all students, even when they need correcting. Remember, children are works in progress—they can't always get it right—in fact, they learn through trial and error.

Minimize opportunities for bullying

Organize activities so that the child who is being bullied is always surrounded by children who will stand up for him/her. Teachers should always select children's teams, groups and seating arrangements (social architecture). If children are allowed to make these decisions, those students who are bullied will be left out and humiliated. Break up groups of children who tend to act aggressively together.

Teach the social skills children lack

Children who are bullied often have difficulties standing up for themselves. Teachers can help them practice this skill through role plays and modeling assertive behaviour.

Children who bully need help learning different problem-solving skills and resisting peer pressure to bully. Give them frequent reminders of these strategies and share optimism so that they'll successfully stop bullying and find positive ways to be leaders.

Build on children's strengths

Children who are bullied often have low self-esteem. Encouraging them to participate in activities they enjoy can help these children feel good about themselves. Highlighting their talents for other children to see can change their reputation in the peer group. For children who bully, provide opportunities for them to use their natural leadership skills in a positive way (e.g., teaching younger students a new sport or skill).

Trust your instincts

If you suspect that a student is being bullied, you're probably right. Children will often deny bullying out of shame or fear. If it looks like bullying and feels like bullying, it most likely is, even if students deny it. Trust your instincts and intervene.

Be ready to listen and help

If a student reports being bullied, be ready to listen right away. Don't put it off. Thank the child for having the courage to come forward and explain that it is his/her right to feel safe. Ask for details about the incident and convey your concern. Be willing to respond to all reports, even the seemingly trivial ones such as name-calling. Consistency matters!

Bullying is a community problem, not a school problem

Bullying does not unfold alone in isolated islands of peers, families, or even schools. It exists in a much larger context. We have come to understand bullying as a community problem because bullying occurs in all contexts where people—not just children—come together to work and play. Bullying can happen at home, at the mall, in the hockey arena, and at the park.

As the primary institution and a major socialization force in children's lives, schools, however, do play a leadership role in addressing bullying problems. There are many examples around the world of effective bullying prevention programs;¹⁷ the most notable being the one developed by Olweus (1993)¹⁸ and colleagues in Norway. Schools, however, cannot be expected to address this social problem alone. In efforts to reduce bullying, schools need the supportive

attitudes and responses of all systems in which children live: at home, in sports and extracurricular activities, in recreation centres, in the neighbourhood and in the larger society, including the media.

PREVNet: a new network that reaches into every community

PREVNet (Promoting Relationships and Eliminating Violence Network) is a new partnership funded by the Networks of Centres of Excellence – New Initiative program. PREVNet brings together leading Canadian researchers and over 40 national organizations with a focus on children and youth.

Our goal is to bring Canadians together in a concerted effort to raise awareness of bullying problems and to promote safe and healthy relationships for all Canadian children and youth.

From a hockey rink in Victoria, to a kitchen table in Iqaluit and a school playground in St. John's, we are committed to moving knowledge and effective strategies related to bullying into the hands of the Canadians who need them. PREVNet envisions safe and healthy relationships for all children regardless of gender, ethno-racial-cultural background, sexual orientation, disability or economic status.

Through PREVNet partnerships with organizations that reach into every Canadian community, we hope to transform the way adults support children and youth in their relationships wherever they live, play and work.

PREVNet success stories so far

There are many examples of exciting developments to promote healthy relationships in Ontario and Canada.

- Waterloo, ON – public health professionals have collaborated with schools to develop the “Imagine ... A School Without Bullying” Program.
- London, ON – The Fourth R program, started by the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) focuses on promoting healthy relationships for adolescents.
- Across Canada – Many municipalities are mobilizing through the Make All Recreation Safe (M.A.R.S) program, developed by the Canadian Association of Parks and Recreation.

One of the keys to PREVNet's approach is consistency in its messages, assessments, interventions, and policies to address bullying problems. It is a link

that will connect us all together to promote healthy relationships for all children and youth in Canada.

Conclusion

Canadian children are not safe from bullying. From an international standpoint, the WHO health behaviours survey tells us clearly that we are failing to protect our children. But more important, children all across Canada show and tell us that bullying not only robs self-confidence, affects physical health and leaves behind a long-term legacy for both victims and those who bully, it can also destroy lives and futures.

Unless adults support the development of healthy relationships, social responsibility, and citizenship for our children and youth, they will not be prepared to be the partners, parents, employees, and leaders of tomorrow. We need to mobilize parents, teachers, recreational and community leaders—all adults and children working together to create an environment where healthy relationships are encouraged to grow. We also need an alliance like PREVNet that will connect knowledge with the organizations and individuals who need it the most. Together, we will send consistent, connected, and positive messages and help to change attitudes about our approach to raising healthy, happy children.

Resources



Note: Resources for children and youth, parents, and educators are available on the Canadian Initiative for the Prevention of Bullying website (www.cipb.ca). For information on PREVNet, visit the website (www.prevnet.ca), which will be launched in March 2007.

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Author Bios

Dr. Pepler and Dr. Craig are currently co-leading a national network, PREVNet (Promoting Relationships and Eliminating Violence Network), a Networks of Centres of Excellence – New Initiative. With 42 national non-government organizations and 35 Canadian research partners, PREVNet’s mission is to promote safe and healthy relationships for all Canadian children and youth (www.prevnet.ca).

Dr. Debra J. Pepler

Dr. Debra Pepler is Professor of Psychology at York University and a Senior Executive Member of the LaMarsh Centre for Research on Violence and Conflict Resolution. At the Hospital for Sick Children, Dr. Pepler holds the title of Senior Associate Scientist where she conducts research on children at risk. Dr. Pepler is currently serving on the Ontario Ministry of Education Safe Schools Action Team and on several other advisory committees related to parenting, antisocial behaviour, and school violence. She has been honoured for this research with the Contribution to Knowledge Award from the Psychology Foundation of Canada and the Educator of the Year Award from Phi Delta Kappa (Toronto).

Dr. Wendy Craig

Dr. Craig is a Professor in the Department of Psychology at Queen’s University. She received her Ph.D. in 1993 from York University. Dr. Craig regularly speaks to parents, educators and the media on bullying issues. She has published widely in the area including topics of bullying and victimization, peer processes, sexual harassment and aggression in girls. Dr. Craig has co-authored two books as well as over 75 book chapters and articles. She works with the World Health Organization and UNICEF conducting research and promoting healthy relationships.