

VIEW FROM QUEEN'S PARK: Bullying

Everyone pays when bullying isn't addressed

By Chris Ballard, MPP

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I'd forgotten about him until a visit this week from Bessie Vlasis and Gwyneth Anderson, co-founders of Bully Free Community Alliance of York Region.

Robert (not his real name) was my first significant experience with a bully. I was in Grade 6 and he was a terror ? fighting anyone who didn't bend to his will.

Fortunately, I was a big kid and when it was my turn for a thrashing, Robert misjudged, I tripped and we both went down, with me on top knocking the wind from him. Thankfully our teacher was nearby and we were both pulled to our feet, Robert gasping for air and me acting braver than I was.

From that point on, Robert decided we were best of friends and left me and my real friends alone.

I got thinking about Robert.

He would often come to school with black eyes and bruises on his body. It was common knowledge among us kids that he got beaten at home. Perhaps that's why we tolerated his outrageous behaviour.

We know bullying is bad. But, it's more than unfair. Research has shown kids who are bullied experience real negative physical, school and mental health issues. In fact, kids who are bullied are more likely to experience depression and anxiety, increased feelings of sadness and loneliness, changes in sleep and eating patterns, and loss of interest in activities they used to enjoy.

They can develop lasting health issues. Kids who are bullied often begin to do worse at school. Experts tell us they are more likely to miss, skip, or drop out of school.

According to the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, ?a very small number of bullied children might retaliate through extremely violent measures. In 12 of 15 school shooting cases in the 1990s, the shooters had a history of being bullied.?

Research has also shown kids who bully are more likely to engage in violent and other risky behaviour into adulthood. They are more likely to abuse alcohol and other drugs in adolescence and as adults, get into fights, drop out of school, engage in early sexual activity, have criminal convictions and traffic citations as adults, and, as adults, be abusive toward their romantic partners, spouses or children.

And it's not just the bullied children who suffer. Researchers have also discovered that children who witness bullying are more likely to have increased use of tobacco, alcohol or other drugs, have increased mental health problems and miss or skip school.

Clearly, even if our children are not being bullied they can still be affected by virtue of being a witness.

The Ontario Legislative Assembly has passed a resolution to recognize Bully Awareness and Prevention Week. The first event was in 2010. This year, it's November 16 to 22.

With the knowledge that students who feel their schools are safe and accepting generally do better academically, Ontario's Ministry of Education is leading the way to create this environment in all Ontario schools.

The Ministry writes: ?Building a positive and inclusive school climate requires a focused effort on developing healthy and respectful relationships throughout the whole school and surrounding community, among and between students and adults. This involves a sustained long-term commitment to put this into practice and change school culture.?

In 2012, the province passed the Accepting Schools Act, that requires all school boards take preventative measures against bullying, issue tough consequences for bullying, and support students who want to promote understanding and respect for all.

The legislation builds on the work the province is doing to help make Ontario schools safe, inclusive and accepting places to learn. It's part of a broader, comprehensive action plan that includes new mental health workers in schools, strengthening bully prevention strategies across the education curriculum, a public awareness campaign that stresses all Ontarians have a role in preventing and ending bullying.

But back to the visit by Bessie and Gwyneth, of the Bully Free Community Alliance of York Region.

These volunteers are residents of our riding. Both are parents with children in the school system, and are very involved in promoting a bully-free York Region. In June, they were invited to testify before the federal government's Committee of Justice and Human Rights.

After working with police, educators and youth workers, to name a few, the group has had time to look for gaps in addressing bullying.

They think they've found the largest gap ? youth mental health. It's where they're focused now.
At our meeting, the two talked about the need to address the mental health needs of children who bully, but also the needs of those who are bullied or witness bullying.

We have committed to meeting further with the organization to see what role we can play in reducing the level of bullying in our community. I'll keep you updated.

And Robert, wherever you are, I hope your life is happier than when we last knew each other in Grade 6.

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