

BULLYING PREVENTION

AN INTERVIEW WITH MPP LIZ SANDALS (GUELPH-WELLINGTON)



In her role as parliamentary assistant to the Minister of Community Safety and Correctional Services and as chair of the government's Safe Schools Action Team, Liz Sandals has been extensively involved in the process of community consultation regarding the issue of bullying. One of her committee's mandates was to identify best practices in response to bullying as well as a number of other school safety issues.

Bullying and aggressive behaviour in schools is a growing concern. In recent years a number of extreme cases of bullying have come to light, cases that have had tragic outcomes. Except for degree, these are not exceptions. The problem is more common than frequently understood, even by educators. The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health indicates that one-quarter of students are being bullied in school and one-third of students reported having bullied others.

Most people are aware of physical bullying. We often picture the stereotype of a physically bigger and stronger person, usually male, exerting power over and aggressive behaviour toward someone who is smaller or weaker. However, many do not think of verbal bullying, emotional bullying and social bullying (bullying by exclusion). These types of bullying can be equally traumatic and are more likely to be perpetrated by girls than boys, especially in the pre-teen and early teen years.

Recently a concern around cyber-bullying has emerged. Cyber-bullying involves the use of computers, text messaging and cell phones to send messages and/or pictures intended to be hurtful or intimidating.

Well-enforced procedures around Internet use in schools and vigilant parental involvement play an important role in keeping communities protected from cyber-bullying. Due to school restrictions around the inappropriate use of technology, cyber-bullying typically does not take place at school but from home or other places within the community. However, the "fallout, clearly happens at school. This makes the problem more complicated.

Cyber-bullying is not just a school problem but a community problem in which parents must be engaged. Some suggestions for parents include placing the computer in a central location within the home, rather than in a student's room, so monitoring by adults can be ongoing. Some parents are concerned about infringing on their child's privacy but the police remind parents that they have a right – some would say an obligation – to monitor what their children are doing. With the rapid expansion of the World Wide Web, cyber-bullying has the potential to take on enormous proportions with many legal implications. A great deal of education needs to be done both inside and outside of the school regarding cyber-bullying and other forms of bullying.

When Liz Sandals and her team met with educators, police and community groups recently in nine regional consultations about bullying prevention, a number of themes emerged. The strongest feedback focussed on the role of the principal. He or she is a critical person in addressing the problem of bullying in the school community.

This is particularly true in the important first step of creating an awareness of the problem, not only with the students but with staff and the wider community. Principals need to have a way of collecting reliable information on the incidence of bullying from the perspective of students and parents, not just staff.

Students don't always report bullying and sometimes staff are truly unaware there is a problem. "It becomes a vicious circle," Liz Sandals warns. "They don't want to be seen as 'ratting' on other students. There is also a perception that nobody will make it better or, if they do report, the situation will only become worse." Climate surveys confirm that kids often feel uncomfortable about reporting bullying.

"You need to have a cultural shift," advises Liz Sandals, because there is a gulf between what kids see going on and what their parents or teachers think is going on.

While the details and recommendations around bullying are still being drafted, there are some themes supported by research for principals to consider in the meantime.

- *Addressing the problem of bullying must be deliberate and must be imbedded in the curriculum. For Catholic schools this topic is most easily addressed in the Religion or Family Life program but can be incorporated in other curriculum areas as well.*
- *There must be thoughtful responses from everyone. These are complex issues. For example, there are questions about the role of the bystander who observes bullying of others. How do bystanders safely intervene? What does the school do to support them?*
- *Education needs to be done not only with students but also with staff, and it needs to be done systematically. It must be ongoing and part of the curriculum - not just a one-shot speaker at an assembly.*
- *Consistency of responses to bullying is important. Clear expectations have to be set for all school staff and students.*
- *There must be interventions for those who bully and those who are victimized; and there must be a distinction between routine interventions and intensive interventions.*

Liz Sandals offered some suggestions for circumventing the problem of students not reporting incidents of bullying. Sometimes peer mentors can take on the role of a filter for the information and can talk to the principal on behalf of other students. In fact, students, not staff, are the best identifiers of "hot spots" for bullying in a school community.



Anonymous reporting raises some interesting questions and should not be dismissed automatically. Traditionally, principals do not respond to anonymous reports but sometimes these reports are useful in identifying a bullying problem or hot spots.

E-mail can be a non-conventional way of reporting as it is much less public than an individual coming to the principal's office. For example, a local e-mail hotline could be monitored by a guidance counsellor or other professionals.

Sandals advises staff to look at transitions as a time when bullying is more likely to occur - transitions between classes, during lunch hour and recesses, after school – and she encourages school staff to be particularly vigilant at those times. Research shows that bullying behaviours peak when students make the transition from one school to the next.

CPCO is preparing a workshop on bullying that will be available to members in the near future. Currently plans are underway for a provincewide anti-bullying hotline for students to report bullying incidents and get support. Parents and educators will have easy access to information and prevention strategies as part of the government's plan to address the safety of students in our schools.

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