

Stemming the tide of bullying

Incidents of bullying continue to make headlines. Canada has the 9th highest rate of bullying among 13-year-olds out of 35 countries and suicide of teenage girls has reached epidemic proportions. There are many calls to stem the tide and foster schools and communities that are safe, equitable and inclusive. The question is, how do we do it?

Bullying is about power ? power over others, loss of personal power, power imbalances, and the abuse of power. Providing information, skills, and adult support are key ways to redress power imbalances at the heart of bullying and all forms of aggression. When young people feel knowledgeable, equipped, confident, and supported, they don't feel the need to impose their will on others. They feel courageous enough to stand up for themselves, and for others. The simple act of helping them identify and strengthen their own and others' abilities fosters healthy and equal relationships.

Recently, COPA launched new, innovative multimedia resources for students, teachers and parents with the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario. The resources take a unique approach to preventing bullying and discrimination based on a human rights perspective.

In one of COPA's documentaries on bullying, a student recounts how she told a tormented classmate, how lovely she really is. The classmate replied that this was the most wonderful thing she had ever heard. Another student tells how he stumbled on two others mocking a student with learning disabilities and said, "Hey that's not cool." They stopped and walked away. These are simple yet effective ways for young people to change the dial on bullying ? those who bully others, are bullied, and those who witness it. (Consider too that many children who bully others are themselves bullied and at higher risk for suicide.)

Both parents and educators have a key role to play. Modeling appropriate behaviour, and ensuring that our daily interactions with youth foster acceptance and respect for themselves and others is an important part of that work.

Healthy schools are places where students can express their concerns, and feel safe and supported by their peers and the adults around them. These are places to learn vocabulary and have discussions about racism, or why phrases such as "That's so gay" are hurtful, or how females are devalued when they are subjected to sexist language and sexual harassment.

Fortunately, Ontario has institutions, laws and educational policies working to foster a culture of human rights. Under our Human Rights Code, everyone has the right to be free from discrimination and harassment on the basis of race, colour, ethnic origin, sex, disability, sexual orientation, gender expression and gender identity, and other grounds. Laws including the Safe Schools Act and the Accepting Schools Act promote standards of respect and dignity in schools. The government's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy sets out what is taught in schools to ensure students, teachers and staff learn and work in an environment that is respectful, supportive and welcoming to all.

Speaking at the launch of COPA's latest resources, Barbara Hall, Chief Commissioner of the Ontario Human Rights Commission, said that we have a shared responsibility to help young people realize that they can change the world through their actions.

For all of us, a good place to start is to realize that we all belong ? and that we all play a key role in changing the world.

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