Bullying: A Phenomenon that Adults and Communities Must Take Seriously

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The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (United Nations, 1998) identifies adults as responsible to protect children from all forms of physical and mental violence, injury or abuse. A fundamental aspect of Canadian society is its commitment to promoting and protecting human rights. A common schoolyard phenomenon, bullying is a predictable, “accepted” and often unspoken albeit painful part of childhood and indeed, is one of the most pervasive forms of aggression in the educational system. Bullying and harassment constitute abuse at the hands of peers and violate the rights of children and youth—the widespread victimization of Canadian children and youth threatens this core value and compromises their development.

Bullying has customarily been tolerated in Western society (Oliver, Oaks, & Hoover, 1994; Smith & Brain, 2000) and historically, was either not acknowledged or was considered a ‘normal’ childhood experience, one that may even help to build character. This view continues today and may even be fueled by the very pervasiveness of victimization (Astor, 1995; Smith & Brain, 2000). Currently however, there is growing recognition that the commonness, seriousness and effects of bullying make this destructive phenomenon a public health issue that must be addressed (David-Ferdon & Hertz, 2007; Feder, 2007).

Bullying is a serious and common problem in many countries around the world (e.g., Craig & Harel, 2004; Nansel et al., 2001). Research on bullying has been conducted in countries throughout the world. According to a 2001/2002 survey on Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC), conducted with youth aged 11, 13 and 15 years, conducted in 35 countries by the World Health Organization, bullying and harassment constitute abuse at the hands of peers and violate the rights of children and youth—the widespread victimization of Canadian children and youth threatens this core value and compromises their development. Bullying is a serious and common problem in many countries around the world (e.g., Craig & Harel, 2004; Nansel et al., 2001). Research on bullying has been conducted in countries throughout the world. According to a 2001/2002 survey on Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC), conducted with youth aged 11, 13 and 15 years, conducted in 35 countries by the World Health Organization,
Bullying: A Phenomenon that Adults and Communities Must Take Seriously (Continued from page 1)

approximately 34 percent of the youth reported being bullied at least one during the previous two months, and about 35 percent reported bullying others on at least one occasion in the previous two months. There is quite a bit of variation across countries (Craig & Harel, 2004).

Serious forms of bullying, motivated by intolerance towards others based on actual or perceived membership in a particular group, such as gender, race, religion, sexual orientation, ability and socio-economic status, are known as “bias-based bullying” (Greene, 2006; Rigby, 2002a; Stein, 2003). Bias-based bullying both results from and reinforces discrimination towards minorities and marginalized groups within society, based on certain characteristics (Government of Canada, 2004; Greene, 2006; Rigby, 2002). Bias-based bullying occurs very frequently, and children and youth who belong to a large number of marginalized groups or minorities are generally more vulnerable to be victimized by their peers. It is necessary to attend to the underlying motivation of these behaviors in order to intervene effectively (Greene, 2006; Rigby, 2002; Stein, 2003).

The phenomenon of bullying is made even more complex and confusing by the overlap of bullying with harassment and the fact that in some cases bullying may come under the jurisdiction of the law and of human rights legislation (Greene, 2006).

Bullying refers to a form of aggression which can be direct or indirect and includes physical, verbal or psychological and relational acts, that is intentional and occurs in an interpersonal relationship characterized by a power imbalance, and is repeated over time (e.g., Craig, Pepler, & Blais, 2007; Olweus, 1991, 1997). Even those behaviours that appear “minor” are considered bullying and can have devastating effects on the victimized children or youth.

A central aspect of bullying dynamics is that the victimized child finds it increasingly difficult to defend him or herself (Craig et al., 2007; Pepler, 2006). It follows from this, given the belief that protection from abuse is a fundamental human right, that others most particularly adults, have an obligation to intervene (Finkelhor, 1995; Olweus, 1991, 1997). An issue of concern is that teachers and parents are often unaware that a child has been bullied because many children do not admit to being victimized for various reasons including fear that telling adults won’t help or might even worsen the situation (Mishna, 2004; O’Moore, 2000).

Bullying occurs through a number of forms of aggression, all of which can damage a child or adolescent’s sense of self and relationships within their peer group (Craig et al., 2007). Research has found that the majority of children and adolescents are involved in either overt/direct or covert/indirect forms (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995).

More recently, the Internet and other forms of electronic based communication have provided new means through which children can bully and be bullied by their peers. Cyber bullying constitutes a relatively new form of bullying and includes the use of email, cell phones and Internet sites to threaten, harass, embarrass, exclude, or damage reputations and friendships. The rapid increase of Internet use and other forms of communication technology has enabled children and youth to engage in a vast array of experiences beyond the confines of their homes, schools and local communities. While it must be remembered that most of these online interactions are neutral or positive (Finkelhor, Mitchell, & Wolak, 2000), the accessibility and anonymity of electronic technology may place children and youth at heightened risk for victimization.

Three key principles about bullying have been developed1 by PREVNet (Promoting Relationships and Eliminating Violence), a Canadian New Initiative of the Network Centres of Excellence (NCE), funded by NSERC, SSHRC and CIHR. The Scientific Co-Directors are Dr. Wendy Craig and Dr. Debra Pepler.

First, bullying is wrong and hurtful. The widespread victimization of children and youth by their peers, through a variety of means, interferes with their development and threatens the core value of the fundamental human right of protection from abuse, which means that others have an obligation to intervene (Atlas & Pepler, 1998; Finkelhor, 1995; Olweus, 1991, 1997). Bullying constitutes abuse and threatens children’s human rights by compromising their safety, inclusion and welfare.

Second, bullying is a relationship problem. Craig and Pepler (2007) write that lessons learned by children involved in bullying about power and aggression can be carried into their adult relationships, and includes engaging in other forms of abuse such as sexual harassment, dating aggression, workplace harassment, and marital, child, and elder abuse. Moreover, the hurt and fear of victimized children are known to have long-standing effects on the adjustment and mental health of these individuals and on their adult relationships. Thus, bullying requires relationship solutions.

Third, promoting relationships and eliminating violence is everybody’s responsibility. Bullying takes place across the whole social ecology of society. Although schools are obviously central in needing to reduce bullying precisely because of their major socialization role, all of the systems in which children live and function must be involved in addressing bullying and providing consistent messages and support (Craig & Pepler, 2007).

To date there has been very limited research on program development and research regarding bullying within and towards Aboriginal communities in order to inform culturally based solutions. There is agreement in the literature that anti-bullying programs to be effective, it is critical to tailor interventions to particular schools, communities and children and youth, in order to take into account relevant developmental and cultural characteristics (Stevens, De Bourdeaudhuij, & Van Oost, 2000). PREVNet recently formed a working group that is focused on aboriginal issues, co-led by Shelley Cardinal, National Aboriginal consultant to the Canadian Red Cross RespectED: Violence and Abuse Prevention program, and Susan Dion, Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Education, York University. One task of this working group will be to evaluate “Walking the Prevention Circle,” which is a program for Aboriginal Communities that addresses bullying and abuse, developed by the Canadian Red Cross (http://www.redcross.ca/article.asp?id=006941&tid=030).

References


1 The NCE fosters powerful partnerships among universities, government and industry to develop Canada’s economy and improve the quality of life of Canadians. PREVNet brings together researchers from universities and national nongovernmental organizations to promote safe and healthy relationships for Canadian children and youth. According to PREVNet’s co-scientific directors, Dr. Wendy Craig and Dr. Debra Pepler (2007), “PREVNet’s mandate is to identify university, government, and community partners, develop relationships, and create a viable and effective working network for social innovation. PREVNet’s vision is to stop the use of power and aggression in bullying and to promote safe and healthy relationships for children and youth. …PREVNet includes 36 researchers from universities across Canada, and 38 national non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that work with children and youth” (p. 86). Craig and Pepler “contend that knowledge about bullying problems and strategies to promote healthy relationships are required in every place where Canadian children and youth live, work, and play” (p. 86).
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**Congratulations**

Congratulations to Dr. John Loxley for receiving the CAUT Distinguished Academic Award for 2008. This Award is the highest honour given by the Canadian Association of University Teachers. The Award recognizes academics who excel in each of the principal aspects of academic life - teaching, research, service to the institution and to the community - and whose teaching, research and service have contributed significantly to the lives of their students, to their institution, to their field of study, and to their communities. The CAUT Award will be presented to Dr. Loxley in Ottawa in the Spring 2008.

The staff, management and board of the Caring Society would like to extend our warmest and collective congratulations to Dr. John Loxley in a public way by acknowledging the enormous contribution he has made to improve the lives of First Nations children, families and communities across Canada - Congratulations John Loxley!

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The Yellowhead Tribal Services Agency is pleased to announce the 9th annual national First Nation Child & Family Services Conference to be held May 19-23, 2008 at the Mayfield Inn and Suites located in Edmonton, Alberta. The conference theme "Connecting with our most Precious Resources: Our Children, Our Communities and Ourselves," reflects the First Peoples’ resolve to ensure that everyone benefits from a healthy, nurturing environment. The conference will also focus on the need to promote safe, holistic communities. For more information please visit [www.ytsa.ca](http://www.ytsa.ca)