

Bullying linked to troubled families

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Improving family relationships could be one way to prevent children from turning into persistent bullies, according to new research reported last week in the *Globe and Mail*.

The study led by Dr. [Debra Pepler](#), a psychology professor at Toronto's York University, found that close to 10 per cent of children who bully other kids in late elementary school continue to act as bullies through high school.

"These are the highest-risk youths in our society," Pepler told the *Globe and Mail*. "They haven't learned the essential lesson of how to get along with others in relationships. . . . They persistently use power and aggression to control and distress others."

The study concluded that behind this aggression, as a [news release](#) pointed out, children who bully often lack "a moral compass" and "experience a great deal of conflict in their relationships with their parents."

Pepler told the *Toronto Star* that she believes the answer lies in early-intervention counselling – and not just for the bullies, but for their parents as well.

"Focusing on the child alone is not enough," she said. "You can't just provide support at school and hope that the behaviour changes or that the learning transfers to other contexts. These are problems parents need to deal with."

Involving parents "is a good idea, and not done nearly enough," Stu Auty, the founding president of the [Canadian Safe School Network](#), told the *Star*. "But often you can't get the parent to agree [to take part in counselling]. That's part of the problem."

Pepler insists she is not suggesting that parents are to blame if their children develop into bullies, noting that bullying can also "start in the peer group. Youth get a lot of power by victimizing each other." But she said parents still need to assess their own relationships to see if they might be role-modelling aggressive behaviour to their children.

Auty said that schools can also be part of the solution by providing "a focus on character education, on

values, the difference between right and wrong.”

“Let’s not have [bullies] sit on a bench for an hour to teach them not to bully,” said Pepler. “An hour on the bench is not going to teach them how to relate better next time.”

The seven-year study by York and Queen’s University researchers involved 871 children and adolescents, starting in 1995.

They found that 9.9 per cent had “engaged in consistently high levels of bullying from elementary through high school” and 35.1 per cent had bullied consistently “at moderate levels.” A further 13.4 per cent said their “relatively high levels” of bullying in elementary school had virtually ended by the end of high school, and 41.6 per cent said they had “almost never” bullied anyone.

Elementary schoolchildren who had problems in their relationships with parents were also found to be two to four times more likely to engage in high levels of bullying.

The study is published in the current edition of the journal *Child Development*.