

Richmond Hill
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BY Kim Zarzour

"Oh! Oh! Can I hurt her too? It's my favourite thing!"

Giggle. Giggle.

It's recess time and these little girls just can't wait to resume their favourite playtime activity.

There is a video camera recording it all, but it doesn't seem to matter.

The girls drag the other girl to a playground tree.

"Kiss it!" one of them demands in a cold voice, shoving her up against the trunk.

The victim tries to pull away. She has a nervous smile on her face, but she's whimpering. "Stop it! Leave me alone!"

They don't leave her alone. They pull her by the arm, past hundreds of other school kids and a few oblivious adults, from one place of torment to another, until the girl finally breaks free and wanders off on her own. "I'll tell," she heaves the words out, but no one is left to hear.

The videotape ends.

Parents and teachers in the audience sit still, stunned.

Real-life recess. So this is what happens.

Dr. Debra Pepler waits a minute for the adults to digest what they've just seen. The distinguished York University professor - known as one of the world's leading scholars on bullying - has shown this video to countless groups besides the Richmond Hill audience who watched it May 5 - but it shocks her still.

"I find it so chilling that a child who has made it to the age of 10 can say that: 'Can I hurt her? It's my favourite thing!' How can this girl have reached this age and not have developed a moral compass? These kids are just so morally disengaged!"

For 20 years, Dr. Pepler has been trying to figure out how children can be so cruel.

She tried to explain what she's learned to parents and teachers who gathered at Windham Public School in Richmond Hill.

It was part of a series of evening presentations organized by Windham's parent council; this week there's a workshop on listening skills, and later in May, a multicultural presentation.

But this recent lecture by Dr. Pepler was a major coup and attracted an audience from across York Region. The professor's research is internationally acclaimed.

And it's troubling.

"Canadians think of themselves as really, really nice, but that's not how it is," Dr. Pepler says.

Academically, she says, Canadian children score well. But surveys by the World Health Organization put this country at the bottom of the scale when it comes to bullying. Canada shares that dismal ranking with primarily eastern block countries.

It took three suicides as a result of bullying to mobilize Norway to eliminate bullying. But while there have been countless "bullicides" here in Canada, the problem continues here.

"Our kids are being very hurtful to one another," says Dr. Pepler.

A dad in the audience asks why we should care. Aren't kids going to have to learn to deal with mean people at some point in their lives?

Dr. Pepler rattles off research to answer that question: studies show school bullying leads to dating and marital violence, gang involvement, workplace harassment and child and elder abuse. Kids who learn how to use aggression in one relationship simply extend it to others. They're also more likely to end up involved in drugs, delinquency, sexual harassment, criminal records and have kids who bully.

And it's not just about one bully and one victim, she says.

"It's a relationship problem. They're learning how to use power and aggression to get attention and status."

There are often "mitigating factors" to consider, she says, pointing out the problems that occurred in Keswick recently when a bullied child fought back and then faced charges and possible expulsion.

And to further complicate the bully dilemma, she adds, "there is always an audience."

Bullying is like a magnet, she says; other children swoop in and stick around for the entertainment - which just pumps it up even more. It's not just about having power, it's about showing your power.

And it's sometimes even perpetuated by the victim, who just wants to belong. As one Grade 7 boy explained, "it's like prostitution. You're doing something you don't want to do because the payback is so strong. You put up with a lot just for the chance to hang out with the cool kids."

The parents and teachers watch another of Dr. Pepler's recess videotapes, this one showing a small boy excluded in the playground, his toy snatched away again and again until he tries to bury it in the sand, which just prompts more kids to kick sand in his face. It's like he's wearing a neon vest saying "pick on me" that only other children can see.

The video leaves many grown-ups in the room teary-eyed.

Dr. Pepler explains that this boy has gone through weeks of social skills training to help him make friends - but while he's got the skills now, it hasn't changed the playground dynamics.

He's the kind of kid with "ants in his pants", the type teachers hope will burn off energy playing at recess so he's calm enough to focus in the classroom.

"Instead, four boys spend the time bullying him."

That's what makes it so complicated. You can't just teach a kid social skills and hope the problem's solved, she says. Everyone needs to change.

A teacher who may be understandably wiped out from a high-energy child can blurt out "I've told you a hundred times! Don't you have a brain in your head?!" That teacher has just given the other students permission to repeat the no-brain remark in the playground.

Or high school teachers who overhear the incessant between-student sexual harassment in the hallway and simply walks past, which gives everyone implicit permission. If the teachers don't think it's wrong, it must be okay.

"I don't think it's just a school problem. We have to have parents engaged, hockey coaches, everyone in the child's life ... We need the whole country to change."