

Adults key in battle against childhood bullying, say experts, advocates

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Nico Archambault celebrates his winning the first edition of So You Think You Can Dance Canada. After being bullied as a child, Archambault has become a passionate advocate speaking out against the practice.

Nico Archambault shot to stardom as the inaugural winner of So You Think You Can Dance Canada. But there was a time during his childhood when some of his peers saw his artistic pursuit as something to scrutinize and scorn rather than celebrate.

Introduced to dance at age seven, the Montreal-born Archambault says he was first subjected to bullying in his early teens. While the abuse was verbal, it also got physical. Archambault said he was beaten up a couple of times and also had his belongings stolen.

"Being a young guy growing up and doing dance in high school wasn't a very common thing," Archambault said in a phone interview while en route to a recent conference on bullying in Hamilton.

"It led to a lot of mockery and bullying ... but also a lot of homophobia because, of course, I was dancing, people assumed I was also gay," he added. "So a lot of homophobia came along with it at the same time, which is another form of bullying."

The 25-year-old says the bullying continued for about four to five years, but throughout it all he remained undeterred and "never stopped dancing."

"People also started to grow up and their minds started opening a little bit and they started to see what I was doing, and some of them started to like it, and the situation just flipped around on itself," he said.

"By the end of high school, the after-prom party was at my place."

Archambault has become a passionate advocate on the issue. He partnered with the Stand Up Rise Above bullying prevention campaign,

teaming up with TXT Carbon to design a limited-edition T-shirt with a portion of proceeds going towards the Promoting Relationships and Eliminating Violence Network, or PREVNet.

"It is a very serious issue but it has a very simple solution.

"All it takes is for information to be spread," he said. "People need to know how to recognize, first of all, a bullying situation and then how to react and how to fix the problem ... the most important part being communication."

The conference Archambault attended at McMaster University was co-hosted by PREVNet and the Community-University Research Alliance for the Prevention of Bullying.

At the two-day event, experts gathered to discuss bullying as well as potential future steps in the area of violence prevention.

It's an issue that clearly shows no immediate signs of receding, and Canada in particular has reason to take notice.

In Canadian schools, bullying occurs every seven-and-half-minutes in the playgrounds and every 25 minutes in the classroom, according to PREVNet.

The World Health Organization recently ranked Canada in the bottom third of the 40 developed nations studied in its latest survey on Health Behaviours of School-Aged Children, based on children's reports of bullying and victimization.

The widespread use of the Internet has also given rise to bullying in the online world. Just this week, a case involving a 15-year-old Nova Scotia girl allegedly bullied on Facebook was back before the court.

Wendy Craig, scientific co-director of PREVNet, said research they've done in early 2004 that was repeated last year found the prevalence of cyberbullying has nearly doubled.

"Not only is there a high prevalence of it, but it's becoming more and more common as a way to bully against other kids," she said.

Craig, a psychology professor at Queen's University in Kingston, Ont., said children who experience chronic peer victimization have significant mental health issues.

A study that followed a group of children from Grade 5 until the end of high school found those who experienced bullying more than once or twice a week were much more likely to have high levels of depression and anxiety, she said.

"These kids who are engaged or involved in bullying, what happens to them is they become very isolated and unsupported and marginalized from the mainstream peer groups, but they also tend to be isolated from community activities," said Craig.

"What we need to do is create circles of support and build healthy relationships around these kids because we know once they move into these healthy relationships their problems really start to diminish."

Also key is engaging parents by providing a community of support and positive role modelling, she said.

"I have a student who did a study and found that what made a huge difference in creating positive parenting was parents' exposure to other parents and learning and having an opportunity to talk and be supported about how to parent better," she said.

"It's the same thing we need to create for these children that we need to create for the parents. We need to take it seriously in the sense that it's all the adults in the community's responsibility."

Debra Pepler, scientific co-director of PREVNet, said healthy development of children and youth depends on relationships. In the end, it falls to adults to have healthy relationships with their kids or to ensure the kids are engaging in such relationships with others, she said.

Part of what's needed to help socialize kids is for adults to be self-aware and mindful of the behaviour they're modelling to their children, she added.

"If an adult is dismissive and rolls their eyes or turns a shoulder or stonewalls, doesn't talk, excludes, says hurtful things, does hurtful things, children will learn how to do that," said Pepler, a psychology professor at York University in Toronto.

Pepler said parents should also encourage kids to talk if things are happening at school or with friends that they're feeling uncomfortable about, and to keep lines of communication open.

"In the larger system, too, we live in a world where children are bombarded with violent media through video games and movies and television and we need to help them deal with that and think about it critically and constructively."

Craig said ultimately the lesson kids should be learning is that relationships should be safe and that they have a right to keep speaking out until they reach a point where they feel at ease.

"You don't want them to get to a place where they feel adults can't help them or there's nothing they can do about it, because what's their world going to be like when they grow up?"