



Enlisting parent power

BULLYING AWARENESS WEEK

By JENNIFER O'BRIEN, The London Free Press

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It's National Bullying Awareness Week and to mark the occasion, students at Banting Secondary dressed in pink to take a stand against bullying.

Parents have heard, and shared, the horror stories for years. Too many have seen their children suffer the devastating effects of bullying. Now they're being dealt into the equation, as problem-solvers with not only their own kids but with the broader community.

In a unique forum — which some say breaks new ground in North America — the Thames Valley District school board's anti-bullying task force is asking for parent input at conferences taking place in London, St. Thomas and Woodstock Thursday night.

"One of the things that is really impressive, is that this is being set up as a community consultation," said Dr. Claire Crooks, of the Canadian Addiction and Mental Health Centre for Prevention Science, who will be speaking at the event.

"I'm going to give some ideas about the roles adults can play. It's unfair to expect the schools to solve all bullying problems when your kids see you berate the Tim Hortons guy for messing up your order, or see your (bad) behaviour at a peewee hockey game," she said. "People always say, 'why don't schools do this?' Schools say, 'why don't police do their job?' Police say, 'where is Children's Aid?' . . . It is critical that we move away from finger-pointing."

Thames Valley district school board director Bill Tucker launched the task force earlier this year, after the death of 13-year-old Bryten Brown. The premise of the task force — which has members from London and St. Thomas police, the Children's Aid Society and Centre for Children and Families in the Justice System — is to get entire communities involved in fighting bullying.

"It's a good idea, because bullying is an issue that affects us all and if we are committed to our children and young people we've got to stand together," said Barbara Coloroso, the U.S.-based, bestselling author and bullying expert. "If this isn't a one-shot deal, if you can light a fire under people and groups, it could be an amazing thing." Coloroso said she has heard of concerted community efforts to combat bullying in England and France, but few on this continent.

“Efforts like this are in their infancy in North America,” she said. “It’s important to include all these groups, but if you don’t include children in these conversations it’s a big gap.”

Tucker said students are “absolutely” invited to attend Thursday’s symposium which is being held simultaneously in three different spots, but will be connected by having speakers live-streamed so that all participants — 600 were registered this week — see the same thing.

The conferences will include skits performed by secondary school students as well as brainstorming sessions, in which groups of parents and various community representatives will come up with responses to four different bullying scenarios.

Tucker said staff will be on hand at each location to hear individual complaints and ensure they will be dealt with.

Organizers hope the conference not only combat bullies but also bystanders.

“If you are just an average, concerned citizen, how do you motivate your kid?” asked Crooks. “Your kids know what you expect of them in terms of marks, they know athletically what you expect. Do they know you expect them to take a leadership role if someone is being bullied?”

The symposia have the support of Mike Neuts, who has been speaking out against bullying since 1998, when his son Myles died after he was left hanging from a hook at an elementary school in Chatham.

“The Thames Valley school board is one of the leaders in the province, maybe in the country, when it comes to bullying,” said Neuts. “The more attention we can bring to the subject, and the more we can have people thinking outside of a presumed box, the more we can do.”

Tucker said that’s exactly what he wants as well.

“Hopefully at the end of the night we’ll have some recommendations on how we can improve bullying prevention across our district as a community,” he said.

IF YOU GO:

When: Thursday 5:30 p.m. to 9 p.m.

Where:

* **London:** (FULL) Thames Valley District School Board Office – 1250 Dundas St., London

* **St. Thomas:** Parkside Collegiate Institute – 241 Sunset Dr., St. Thomas

* **Woodstock:** College Avenue Secondary School – 700 College Ave., Woodstock

How: You can register at www.tvdsb.on.ca or calling 519-452-2000 ext. 20210.