

THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR

Canada's bullying ranking 'surprising'

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CARMELA FRAGOMENI

Canada's ranking as the 12th worst country for bullying among 40 wealthy nations is an eye-opener, say the organizers of a childhood bullying prevention conference held at McMaster University.

"It's surprising for people to hear that," said Cathy Loblaw with conference co-host PREVNet, a network of 62 researchers and 49 organizations promoting bullying prevention and examining vulnerable populations, aggression in sports and workplace harassment.

"On the one hand, Canada has a reputation for being such a nice place, and yet our ranking doesn't show that."

We need to ask ourselves if Canada is such a nice place to grow up in after all, she said.

The ranking, by the World Health Organization, had delegates at the two-day national conference deliberating ways to turn it around. The event wrapped up yesterday.

Bullying in Canadian school playgrounds happens every 7.5 minutes and in the classroom, every 25 minutes according to PREVNet.

York University psychology professor Debra Pepler, a PREVNet co-director, said people don't understand the level of the problem.

"Canadians see ourselves as nice ... (but) our children are not doing well."

Crucial to preventing youth bullying and violence is for parents and other adults to show and teach healthy relationships, said Pepler.

"Parents need to help kids think critically about their behaviour and how to treat people respectfully."

If Canadian children are to do well despite all the media and societal exposure to violence and aggression, then they require a lot of guidance and exemplary behaviour from adults, she added.

"What children observe is far more important than what they're rewarded and punished for. We need to be much more mindful of what we teach them through our own behaviour as we get excited over hockey and ultimate fight clubs when they hear us say 'kill them.'"

Teaching children relationship literacy is just as important as teaching them reading, math and science, she said.

Wendy Craig, also a PREVNet co-director and a Queen's University psychology professor, said much of the reason has to do with our lifestyles and how -- between work, commuting, engaging our children in too many structured activities, and not having family dinners anymore -- parents don't spend the time required to teach children effectively.

"Relationships really matter," said Craig. "And the most important thing we can do is spend time and be healthy role models, and know they are learning from everything we do."

University of Ottawa bullying expert Tracy Vaillancourt touched on her research findings in Hamilton while previously working at McMaster.

Among them: school anti-bullying programs need to be designed with scientific rather than anecdotal evidence; students prefer peer-mediated programs for bullying prevention; healthy kids become ill from negative peer interactions at school; and physically aggressive kids have the worst mental health while social aggressors have more sophistication and better mental health.

Vaillancourt also found Hamilton's city-wide initiative to reduce bullying had under-reported bullying because kids define it as a physical act only; and that school bullying happens in places with little or no adult supervision.