

Today's Parent

School Age Bully Patrol

Why don't schools do more to stop bullying? Here's one that did Marcia Kaye

Whether by phone or meetings, Lambert and Evans did indeed make sure that each bully's parents were informed of what was happening. Others flat-out denied their child's involvement. "I know my kid, and she would never write something like that," one insisted, even when shown a printout of the postings linked to the child's name, and even after the child had owned up. One parent kept arguing that the targeted girls must have "deserved it."

Some of the culprits were given stern lectures; some were suspended. Lambert and Evans sent a letter home with every student saying that derogatory and threatening comments had been discovered on the Bathroom Stall app and were having a devastating effect on the school climate. "Cyberbullying not only transgresses moral obligations, but also could violate the Youth Criminal Justice Act," it read. "The administration at our school has spent the past few weeks investigating this problem at the school, and we are very concerned!"

The letter emphasized that police were involved, that children under age 13 aren't supposed to be on Facebook, and that those who are 13 must have parents' permission. It spelled out the school's next steps: continued investigation by police; a sensitivity workshop for students about Facebook; a mandatory assembly in which police and Microsoft representatives show how easy it is to identify "anonymous" users and discuss legal consequences of Internet misuse; and an evening presentation for parents. Parents had to sign the letter, confirming they had read it and discussed it with their children.

It became the talk of the community. "At a soccer game, a few parents said to me, 'I don't understand how the school can even get involved in this, since it didn't happen at school,'" says a mother of one of the targeted girls. "But I said that we're fortunate. Our principals did an unbelievable job of getting to the bottom of the bullying."

Lambert and Evans are still working hard to restore the school's previous relaxed, friendly and respectful atmosphere. They followed through with every program promised in the letter. They spent hundreds of hours dealing with the issue. "When I went into administration, I swore that I would do everything in my power to always protect every student in my school," Lambert says. "This has been one of the most difficult times in my 17 years as a principal." Evans says, "I want parents to know that there are people in schools working to protect kids from bullying."

But elsewhere, other parents are complaining that schools don't do enough. One mother is suing the Toronto District School Board, alleging that she complained more than 100 times to staff and administrators that her eight-year-old daughter was being physically and verbally bullied at school. She claims nothing was done. She belongs to one of more than 400 families represented jointly by the London Anti-Bullying Coalition and the York Region Anti-Bullying Coalition (YRABC), who are calling for an ombudsman to deal with what they call the "ping-pong" method of accountability, where parents are shunted from teacher to principal to superintendent to trustee, with no one taking action. Says one frustrated parent, a trained anti-bullying facilitator who experienced a runaround when her own daughter was bullied: "We are not getting the message to the school officials or parents that bullying is a life-and-death serious issue." The two groups estimate that 140,000 children in Ontario alone are victims of bullying.

While some schools handle bullying well and others poorly, all of them could do better if everyone — students, parents, teachers, administration and the community in general — worked together to remove the obstacles. Here are the biggest ones:

The kids won't talk

Schools may remain unaware of bullying if victims don't come forward. Kids don't want to rat out their schoolmates, upset their families, be ridiculed for getting their moms or dads to fight their battles, risk an escalation of attacks from the bullies or, in the case of cyberbullying attacks, lose their computer privileges.

Daniel Sebben, 19, of Holland Landing, Ont., was physically and verbally assaulted at school for almost his entire grade eight year before finally telling his family. "I didn't know," says Daniel's mother, Karen. (Both she and Daniel co-founded the YRABC.) "I kept asking Daniel, who was acting more and more withdrawn, if everything was OK at school." Only eight percent of kids bullied online tell their parents about it, according to the Media Awareness Network, an Ottawa-based online source of media and Internet education resources for parents and teachers.

Parents don't believe it

Lambert and Evans say the vast majority of parents in their school's community were "phenomenal." Evans, a former social worker, says she understands how difficult it must be for a bully's parents to accept that their child is capable of hurting someone. But, she says, "what I found personally appalling was how some parents reacted in complete denial at first."

It's essential for parents to understand that any child is a potential target or bully. While bullies have traditionally been the bigger, tougher boys or the more socially connected girls, cyberbullying has allowed shy, insecure kids to jealously or frivolously attack others they might never confront in person. As one boy said in a Media Awareness Network survey: "You don't really see their face or they see yours, and you don't have to look in their eyes and see they're hurt."

People think supervision means spying

Knowing about your child's online activities is not an invasion of privacy, says Lambert. It's a parental duty. "I say to parents, 'If you don't have access to your kids' passwords, you're doing them a disservice.'" Jane Tallim, co-executive director of the Media Awareness Network, agrees, adding that parents need to keep their technology skills current. "That doesn't necessarily mean that you're going to be snooping. But if a situation happens, the parent can help the child — for example, by knowing how to find a record of a chat log."

It can be tough for parents to keep up with ever-changing technology. While Bathroom Stall was shut down months ago, other similar sites and apps appeared almost immediately. And some canny kids have been known to set up a PG-rated Facebook account as a decoy to cover another, secret, account. On an online discussion board about bullying, one parent wrote, "Hidden Facebook accounts? Total cellphone privacy at 13? My 13-year-old is not allowed on Facebook or any other social networking site. I routinely read his text messages [and the 16-year-old's too] because I pay the bill."

The rules keep changing

Education ministry mandates and policies around bullying are often revised and updated, leaving administrators scrambling to keep up with new rules and staff training. Not too long ago, the Toronto District School Board and many other jurisdictions across Canada had a zero-tolerance approach to bullying, which is now scrapped. "Basically, it didn't work," acknowledges Uton Robinson, assistant superintendent for the Toronto board's Safe and Caring Schools initiative. "It didn't consider mitigating circumstances, and it was punitive." There was also confusion about whether bullying that didn't happen on school property or during school hours was a school responsibility. Plus, schools

weren't allowed to tell a victim's parents what discipline the bully received, only that "the board has responded."

Beginning this year, the rules in Ontario are much clearer. All staff are mandated to report a serious incident of bullying, and they must share information with victims' parents (unless the victim asks for this not to happen). Even if it happens away from the school, the school is obligated to deal with bullying if it compromises the school climate in any way. And parents of victims can now be told exactly what steps the school took, such as suspension, expulsion or professional counselling. Robinson says that administrators continue to need professional development on dealing with bullying, especially since every situation is different. "There's no exact playbook on this," he says.

It takes a community

Principals can set a tone of compassion and mutual respect in a school, but they need all their staff onside. "Everybody, including janitors, secretaries and crossing guards, needs to know what bullying looks like," says journalist Kim Zarzour, author of *The Schoolyard Bully: How to Cope with Conflict and Raise an Assertive Child*. "So much goes on in the playground, cafeteria or hallway."

And parents need to be on the same page. Zarzour, who was the target of bullying as a child, says that when she conducts workshops on bullying, she knows she's preaching to the converted — mainly former victims or parents of victims. She rarely sees parents whose children are bullies. "Those are the parents I would really like to talk to," she says. "But they're the ones who don't show up."