

# Bullied to death

## Will you stand by or stand up?

October 14<sup>th</sup>, 2010

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Bullies are everywhere, from our schools to our halls of power. They are destructive forces that tear down rather than build.

Dr. Tracey Vaillancourt knows all about bullying. She's an expert in the field.

The Canada Research Chair in Children's Mental Health and Violence Prevention at the University of Ottawa was in Renfrew Sept. 29 to speak to two groups.



**Anti-bullying workshops in Renfrew.** Dr. Tracey Jamieson speaks to a gathering at Our Lady of Fatima School in Renfrew. *Lucy Hass*

Her visit was sponsored by the Renfrew detachment of the OPP and Renfrew's Police Services Board.

Dr. Vaillancourt spoke to senior students at Renfrew Collegiate Institute in the afternoon, then a small group at an evening public meeting at Our Lady of Fatima School.

Her presentation, *Why Does Being Bullied Hurt So Much?*, gave insights from neuroscience.

Dr. Vaillancourt's address opened with images of four young people who committed suicide after being bullied.

There are three criteria to bullying: repetition over time, imbalance of power and intentional abuse.

It often stems from hierarchies found in all social structures, from families and workplaces to school communities and groups of friends.

"I've heard children tell me they don't want to live anymore," Dr. Vaillancourt said.

That's because the hurt is very real.

In fact, an old saying might best be rephrased to say, sticks and stones may break your bones but words will always hurt you.

"Verbal bullying is pervasive in many Canadian schools," said Dr. Vaillancourt, troubled that it seems normal to so many.

Why does bullying hurt so much?

Studies have shown that humans need to feel part of a group or they suffer. That's why the United Nations Convention Against Torture identifies solitary confinement as torture.

"Solitary confinement is toxic," Dr. Vaillancourt said. "The need to belong is part of being human."

And shunning can be just as painful.

"Social ties are not a luxury. You need them to live," she said.

The doctor explained neuroimaging studies show actual brain size decreases when people are bullied or neglected.

“Physical and social pain share similar neural structures,” she said.

Bullying can be physical, verbal, social, cyber, racial or sexual.

The consequences of bullying at school include academic difficulties, low self-esteem, school truancy/avoidance, increased absenteeism, trouble sleeping, social withdrawal, sound anxiety, stress-related incidents, physical health problems, sometimes aggressive behaviour, loneliness and suicide.

The said reality is that students are mandated by law to attend school and then are not protected.

“They (bullied students) are well (when they first attend school) and you make them unwell,” she said of school environments that tolerate bullies.

“For many of you, your life is your peer group,” Dr. Vaillancourt told the students. That’s why their acceptance is so important.

But now the threat goes beyond social contact to include social media.

“You text like maniacs,” Dr. Vaillancourt said, urging teens to be cautious of what they text as well as say.

She meanwhile encouraged teachers to be involved beyond academics.

Studies show Canadian students rank third in the world in science, fourth in reading and seventh in math.

“Our teachers know how to teach reading, writing and ‘rithmetic,” Dr. Vaillancourt said.

But when it comes to caring for others, Canadian students fail the grade. According to one study, Canada is the fourth worst offender in the world for bullying.

So for some children, the ABCs mean A is for anxious, B is for bullied and C is for confused.

Speaking later to about 30 people at Fatima school, Dr. Vaillancourt repeated her clarion call for everyone to stop bullies.

And she urged educators to look beyond the stereotypes of bullies.

“The most popular kids in the school are often the most inappropriate. That is the group to tap into,” she said.

A new term has been coined – bullycide – for those who commit suicide to escape abuse.

“We shouldn’t have a term like this,” Dr. Vaillancourt said.

Yet statistics show seven to 10 per cent of kids are bullied at school every day.

To adults who say, “We don’t have a bullying problem” she replies, “No, you have a denial issue.”

She said preventative efforts to end bullying in schools must be accelerated and repeated the message she also stressed to the RCI students that people are morally obligated to stand up for others.

“Every citizen has to act,” she said. “If we want to see a cultural shift we have to call people to that mat on this.”

As one anti-bullying campaign succinctly states - Stand Up, Don’t Stand By.