

Community Herald

DARTMOUTH

A solution for bullying everyone's responsibility

By BRENDA MacDONALD | TWO CENTS' WORTH

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THERE HAVE BEEN so many articles and editorials aired and / or published on the subject of bullying in recent months that it has become impossible for me, as a mother and a writer, to avoid commenting on it any longer.

"Cyberbullying" in particular has become a hot topic, as it has been linked to multiple cases of teen suicide in the province.

This particularly insidious teenage method of techno-abuse has also hit a wee bit too close to home recently, as reports of nasty student texting behaviour at Auburn Drive High School (the school my own kids are destined to attend)

made the rounds in local media.

At the beginning of April, the Nova Scotia government announced that it is setting up a task force on cyberbullying. At that time, Education Minister Ramona Jennex claimed the decision was made in reaction to two recent cases where grieving parents blamed online bullying for their children's suicides.

In general, I've noticed that the parents of bullied children often have a lot to say.

They are often seen in the media, crying out for help, opening up their lives, sharing their stories, and risking public scrutiny in an attempt to force change and prompt action on the issue of bullying in any form.

We, the public, learn their names and, often, the names of their children (the victims). We hear their parental pleas for justice, and their heartfelt requests for help in keeping their children safe.

But we never learn the names of the bullies and we rarely, if ever, hear from, see, or read about their parents. All too often, it seems it is the bullies and their families, rather than the victims and their families, who are being protected.

Am I wrong to feel this way, or to feel it is unfair?

I support the development of a task force, simply because this cyberbullying trend is so obviously well on its way to getting completely out of hand. I also acknowledge that government and schools will have a huge role to play in any programs or policies created by such a unit.

As I hear people cry out for the government and schools to take the lead on this issue, however, I find myself getting frustrated. The government can, and I certainly hope they do, establish tough penalties for teens caught terrorizing unfortunate peers.

(Oh, if I had my way, they'd be out on the local sidewalks in bright neon jumpsuits picking up garbage!) Government can also enact policies that make it mandatory and easier for both bullies (and their parents!) and the victims of bullies (and their parents!) to receive counselling and help.

Schools boards can establish effective disciplinary measures against bullying and create policies that restrict the use of electronics, and I think that we can count on our teachers to do the best they can to implement them. But let's face it, parents can't expect that this problem will be fixed for them.

The government, and the education system, can only do so much.

The government is a hands-off and impersonal beast at the best of times. And really, our educators already have so many other things to do — like educating, perhaps!

They can't possibly be expected to be cellphone police and wireless weapon inspectors, as well. Not to mention that a teacher's guidance and supervisory influence ends the moment a student leaves the school grounds.

In truth, nothing the new government task force learns, plans, or implements will be worth a thing if parents aren't willing to pay attention, help out, and back it up.

And all of the work educators do to fight the problem of cyberbullying within the boundaries of our schools — the monitoring, the disciplining, and the educating — will mean absolutely zilch if parents aren't willing to do the same within the walls of their own homes.

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