

## Researcher explains the anti-bully mindset

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**GET UP, STAND UP** Psychologist Shelagh Dunn presented her results from interviewing junior high students who stood up and confronted bullies

Destructive and inappropriate behaviours like sexual harassment and racism aren't that different from junior high bullying, according to a University of Alberta psychologist who says we can learn from students who stand up for their peers.

Last Thursday, Shelagh Dunn, an educational psychologist at the U of A, presented her findings from her interviews with nine junior high students who have stood up to bullies, called upstanders, as opposed to bystanders, to discover how they handle this prevalent problem.

"In Canadian studies, at school, about a third of students have experienced bullying, with 90 to 98 per cent saying they've witnessed bullying," Dunn said.

She noted that this problem ranges from the stereotypical physical assault to gossip and cyber bullying, which can include threatening messages, non-consensual forwarding of personal emails, and the creation of false profiles including false information about a certain student.

Dunn spoke to students who reported the use of a variety of strategies for handling these problems, such as supporting the target, confronting the bully, and seeking external help.

"It was not just knowing what to do, but also how to do it. These students had good social judgment. Most of them know when things are serious enough to get involved or too serious so they need more help," Dunn said. Dunn said the concept of appropriate social judgment is a common reason to why other students and even teachers have trouble identifying bullying and taking action.

"They told me that a lot of the time, the school played the role of the bystander," she said.

Dunn cited a number of risks associated with interfering with bullying. First, upstanders can be physically hurt, replacing the target being bullied. They may also risk social injury — intervening can tarnish their reputation. The situation may also be too ambiguous, and potential upstanders are afraid of being embarrassed if the situation was not as serious as they had believed. Lastly, even if there was no fear of risk, sometimes they simply do not know what to do.

Although the strategies the junior high students employed seem straightforward, they were at times quite sophisticated. For example, confrontation of the bully could involve an extensive process of befriending the person to earn their trust before explaining to them the emotional consequences of their actions.

"There was a confidence in these students. They came from all different peer groups, not just the student council types. They had confidence in not being afraid to be different and confidence in their decision making," Dunn said. Unfortunately, some of these students were also ambivalent about the effectiveness of their actions.

"It was frustrating [for them] to stand up for someone just to come back to school the next day and see it happen again and again," Dunn added.

Support from staff such as anti-bullying campaigns was viewed positively, and students could reportedly see the impact of those programs. Dunn stressed the importance of assessment in order to implement change in an environment. Once people know what they are dealing with, they can handle the situation appropriately.

Beyond the microcosm of the junior high, Dunn believed that other "social evils" in the form of sexual harassment and inequality can be handled similarly. Bullying appears wherever people get together, Dunn notes, and it spans all age groups, even found in retirement homes. She encouraged the education of upstanders, showing people how to intervene, as a way to motivate change in the community.