

## Time to turn the focus on bullies

March 31, 2011

The issue of bullying has reached a new low, thanks to a viral video that was posted on the Internet of two Australian students earlier this month. If you haven't seen the video, it's roughly 30 seconds of a taller, heavy-set, 16-year-old, Grade 10 student being taunted and punched in the face and stomach by a much smaller, wiry 12-year-old Grade 7 student.

There are at least three other students witnessing this exchange, not including the one recording the incident. Finally the larger boy steps forward, grabs the smaller boy, and body slams him into the concrete ground. The smaller boy gets up, is visibly injured and the larger one turns and walks away.

While many people are hailing the larger boy, Casey Heynes, a hero for ending his torment, and vilifying the smaller boy, Ritchard Gale, as the poster child for all bullies, the cold hard truth is, bullying impacts this generation of young people.

What makes bullying even more terrifying is the idea that your darkest moments can be posted online for the world to view, thanks to peers who video and upload degrading and dangerous exchanges.

Currently, schools and school boards advocate a "Zero Tolerance" policy on bullying. There is also a movement to empower bystanders to help snuff out episodes of bullying before they start. Simply put, this does not work. Why? Because the issue of the bully's agenda and taking responsibility for their actions is not being addressed sufficiently.

Expecting children to rise to the occasion when adults themselves would feel discomfort in the same situation is nothing less than unrealistic. In this case, Gale claims he too was being bullied and decided to strike out at the larger boy because he was trying to impress his friends. In subsequent statements, he claims Heynes made a comment to him that justified the punches to his face and torso. Heynes, who has been the victim of bullying most of his life, agrees he hit a breaking point when he slammed Gale into the ground. Was it overkill? Yes. Was he wrong? Not entirely.

Psychologists are looking at this issue, and studies on bullying are now emerging, perhaps in light of this incident, that victims of bullying have a greater chance of stopping an episode if they stand up for themselves. Ironically, this flies in the face of current theories advocated by educators and policy makers, which state that turning the other cheek, or walking away, are the better routes. Evidently, that is not the case.

The Centre for Prevention Science in London, ON has proved that childhood bullying can have a profound impact on the mental health of the victim, including post-traumatic stress disorder. This does not end when the victim leaves the school environment. It can impact the individual's self esteem in such a way that relationships with others, specifically marriage and employment.

The lack of self worth can also lead to other damaging decisions, such as drug and alcohol abuse. Society has witnessed the brutal repercussions of students who reach the breaking point and decide to express their frustration by ending their own life, and possibly take the lives of others, usually their abusers.

According to PREVNet (Promoting Relationships and Ending Violence) a Canadian organization looking to reduce incidents of bullying, results from the World Health Organization provided in 2001-2002 15% of girls and 17% of boys experience more than two episodes of bullying a month. This dropped Canada's standing within the international community and prompted WHO to declare that Canada needs to address this growing issue.

There was a time when an altercation on the playground could resolve a matter. There was no need to involve adults in the situation and at the end of the matter, both parties left with some degree of self-respect for standing up for themselves.

The current philosophy robs the victim of that closure. They become the walking target. As Heynes admitted, students came to know that he wouldn't do anything to stand up for himself, which is why a 12-year-old felt confident enough to strike a student as tall as his father.

There would be no consequence to his actions. While most would agree the injury inflicted on Gale was excessive, it could have ended even worse. Yet another reason why that issue needs attention.

Perhaps the time has come to turn the focus on the bullies, who for some reason are treated as faceless entities, and get to the source of their anger and motive. Otherwise, the result is an entire generation of young people who are sentenced to being victims for the rest of their lives.