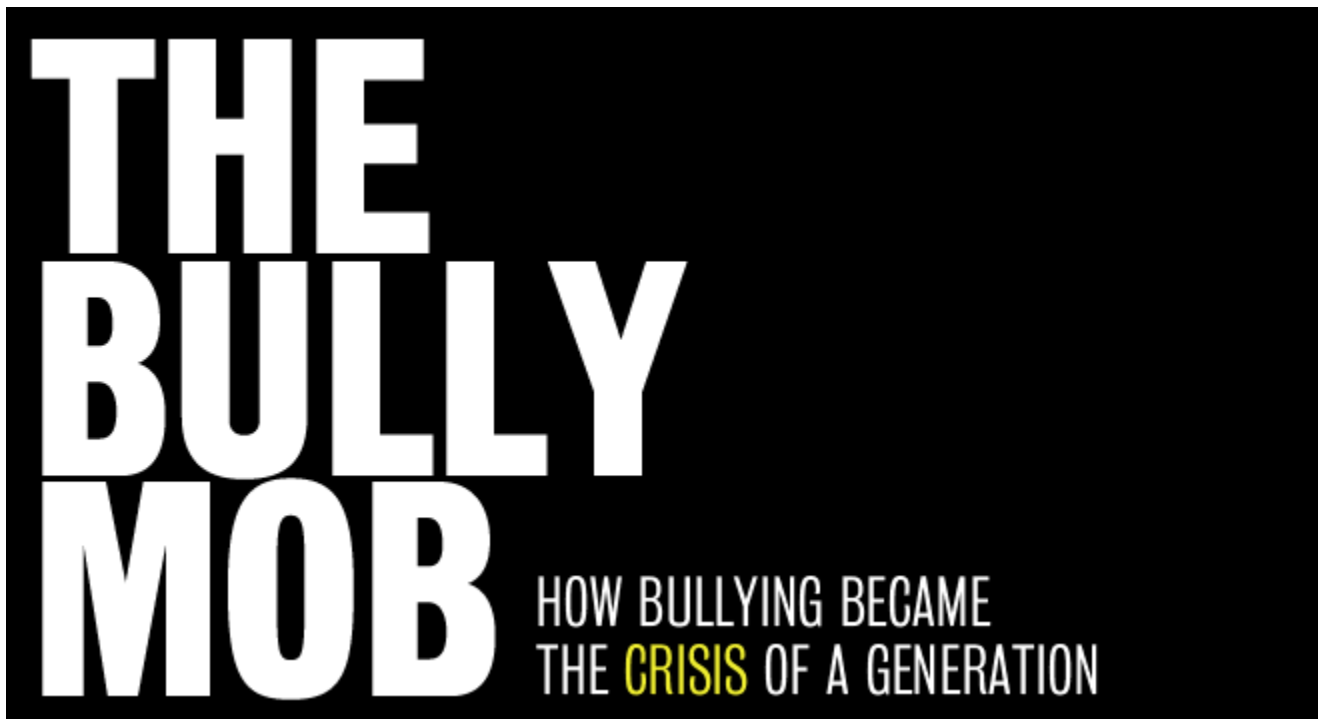


How bullying became the crisis of a generation

Kids are committing suicide, parents are in a panic, and schools that neglect to protect students are lawsuit targets

By Denise Balkissoon



Mitchell Wilson had a short life. He was born in March 2000 at Markham-Stouffville Hospital to Craig and Shelley Wilson. From the age of three, he had trouble running and jumping. He climbed stairs slowly, putting both feet on each step before moving up. He fell often, and sometimes he couldn't get up on his own. His doctors thought he had hypermobility syndrome—joints that extend and bend more than normal.

When Mitchell was seven, his mother was diagnosed with an aggressive melanoma. Her treatments left her distant, sometimes testy and mean, and in so much pain that she rarely left her bedroom. "I sort of kept Mitchell away," Craig Wilson told me.

"He basically didn't talk to his mother during the last four months of her life." Wilson often left his son to his own devices while he took care of his dying wife and ran his family's industrial knife business. Mitchell spent most of his time in his bedroom, playing video games. He comforted himself with food, and by the time he was four feet tall he weighed 167 pounds. Once, in a Walmart, he fell to the ground and his grandmother had to ask store employees to help her lift him.

In 2010, Craig Wilson remarried, to a woman named Tiffany Usher. After a campy Las Vegas ceremony during which they both wore flip-flops, the couple moved with Mitchell and Usher's two preteen daughters into a four-bedroom house just east of Rouge Park. Usher had worked as a special education teacher, and she suspected that Mitchell's hypermobility syndrome diagnosis wasn't right. She took him to SickKids, where doctors determined he had a type of muscular dystrophy called limb girdle, a genetic disease that eats away at the muscle tissue in the shoulders and hips. Mitchell's parents didn't tell him that he'd probably die in his mid-20s, and that he'd spend his last couple of years in bed, breathing with the help of a respirator.

Muscular dystrophy usually brings with it cognitive limitations. Mitchell was labelled gifted in math but severely learning disabled in languages. This, along with his weight and his bright red hair, made him a target for teasing at Pickering's William Dunbar P.S. Mitchell was ridiculed when he fell, and he was sometimes knocked down to be laughed at as he struggled to his feet. Other students would step on him, then give each other high-fives.

The Wilsons transferred Mitchell to Westcreek P.S. for Grade 5, and he seemed happier. He became known as a goof, even a troublemaker—he was regularly kicked out of French class for encouraging other students to tease the teacher by making silly sounds and faces. He found a group of friends, including a skateboarder named Max, who was in Grade 8. Having an older friend gave him confidence. Once, Max taught Mitchell how to jam the school elevator so that he'd have an excuse to skip his second-floor classes.

THE BULLIED
THE DEATHS
AND LAWSUITS
THAT BROUGHT
BULLYING INTO
THE HEADLINES

AZMI JUBRAN, 16
Awarded \$4,500 after he complained to the B.C. Human Rights Commission that his North Vancouver school hadn't protected him from homophobic bullying

REENA VIRK, 14
Was forcibly drowned after a beating by eight teens in 1997 in Saanich, B.C.

The only therapy to slow Mitchell's muscle loss was exercise. He swam at the Pickering rec centre and spent hours walking around his subdivision. When he sat he wore leg braces to help his muscles stretch. In the fall of 2010, he borrowed his dad's iPhone to listen to music on one of his walks.

His stepmom was driving through a nearby housing complex when she spotted Mitchell. She also saw two older, bigger kids approach him. One of the boys, now known to the court system as J. S., pushed him to the ground and snatched the iPhone. Mitchell chipped two of his front teeth and was bleeding from scraped knees but was otherwise okay. Usher called the police, then took Mitchell to the hospital. J. S. was arrested two days later.



The incident made Mitchell anxious and self-conscious. He cut down on his walks and swims. His dad took him to sessions with counsellors to help him cope with his health problems, his mom's death and his attack, but he

stubbornly refused to talk. He also refused when his parents suggested he sign up for a summer camp where he could mingle with other kids who have mobility restrictions.

Last summer, Mitchell told his parents he wasn't looking forward to Grade 6. His friend Max had graduated, and he knew he'd be lonely. "I'll kill myself if I have to go back to school," he said during a trip to the family cottage. "He said that every year," said Wilson. "He said it last year, and the year before that. We never thought for a minute that he would act on it." A subpoena for Mitchell to testify against J. S. in court arrived on Labour Day. Mitchell would have to face his attacker and relive the experience in a room full of strangers. His dad sent him to bed that night with encouraging words about a new year of school and a fresh start.

Sometime in the middle of the night, Mitchell tied a plastic bag over his head. When Craig went to wake his son up for school the next morning, he found Mitchell's lifeless body and screamed so loud the rest of the family came running. Usher called 911.

What stunned Mitchell's parents most about his suicide was how determined he must have been. "There was no hesitation, no 'I want another hug,' "Wilson said of his son's last night. "there was no extra 'I love yous.' " Mitchell didn't leave a note.

		
MYLES NEUTS, 10 Suffocated and died in 1998 when a group of students in his Chatham, Ontario, school hung him on a washroom coat hook	DAWN-MARIE WESLEY, 14 Committed suicide in Mission, B.C., in 2000 after she was repeatedly bullied by three girls	DAVID KNIGHT, 17 Sued his Burlington school board for \$500,000 in 2002, alleging the school didn't intervene when he was a cyber-bullying target

A peculiar thing happened to Mitchell Wilson in the weeks that followed his death: he became famous. Not famous as a kid who suffered from muscular dystrophy. Not famous as a kid who was mugged for an iPhone. He became known as the 11-year-old who was so afraid of the bullies at school that he took his own life.

On September 22, Mitchell's photo appeared on the front page of the *Sun* under the headline "Bullied to Death." Similar stories followed in the *Star*, in the *Post* and on TV news. Mitchell's parents were frustrated by what they saw as an oversimplification of his death. "What happened to Mitchell—being assaulted and robbed— that's not bullying, that's a criminal act," says Usher. The attack had taken place off school property, yet the news stories portrayed the case as an example of out-of-control schoolyard bullying. Wilson has a theory on why the media latched on to the bullying aspect of his son's story: "When an 11-year-old takes their own life, it leaves you with a lot of questions," he says. "People want a simple label and a simple answer. Putting the word 'suicide' out in the open creates a lot of fear."

Wilson might be right, but there are other factors at play, too. Parents, teachers and bureaucrats see bullying everywhere. What was once a term to describe a playground fight now applies to all manner of harassment, from homophobic and racist taunts to nasty Facebook comments. Today, kids are taught that it's their responsibility to immediately report the faintest hint of bullying behaviour. Researchers at Queen's University who track the health of Canadian children for the World Health Organization found, in a 2006 study, that 21 per cent of boys and 24 per cent of girls in Grade 8 said they had been bullied at least once in the past week.

A series of highly publicized deaths turned bullying into the hot-button issue it is today. In 1997, Reena Virk, the 14-year-old daughter of Indian immigrants, was beaten by eight teens in Saanich, B.C., then forcibly drowned. The next year, Myles Neuts, a 10-year-old from Chatham, Ontario, suffocated and died after he was hung by other students on a coat hook in the washroom of his school. In 2000, Dawn-Marie Wesley, a 14-year-old from Mission, B.C., committed suicide and left a note blaming three female students who regularly bullied her. Since then, a number of suicides across the country have been attributed to bullying, including those of Joshua Melo, a 15-year-old from Strathroy, Ontario, in 2004, Brendan Deleary, a 15-year-old from London, Ontario, in 2010, and Jenna Bowers-Bryanton, a 15-year-old from Belmont, Nova Scotia, in 2011.

Just two weeks after Mitchell Wilson killed himself, a 15-year-old Ottawa student named Jamie Hubley, who had endured years of cruel homophobic taunts at school and online, committed suicide. The CBC comedian Rick Mercer, commenting on Hubley's death, implored prominent Canadians to lead by example by coming out of the closet.

The concern with bullying has spawned an entire industry of school programs, television specials, radio documentaries and pundits eager to discuss how to protect kids. In 1997, a former vice-principal named Stu Auty brought together a group of educators, police officers and parents to form the Canadian Safe School Network, which bills itself as an arm's-length research and advocacy group for reducing school violence. Since 2003, schools across the country have taken part in an annual bullying awareness week in November, and a one-off anti-bullying day that started in Nova Scotia (students wore pink T-shirts to protest homophobic intimidation) has grown into a tradition across the country.



Whether or not schools perceive a problem, they have no choice but to embrace anti-bullying measures to guard against legal liability. In 1996, a B.C. teenager named Azmi Jubran filed a complaint with the B.C. Human Rights Commission, alleging that teachers and principals at Handsworth Secondary hadn't done enough to protect him from five years of homophobic bullying. Although the tribunal awarded him only \$4,500, the North Vancouver

school board appealed the decision on the grounds that Jubran wasn't, in fact, gay. The case reached B.C.'s Court of Appeal in 2005, which upheld the original tribunal decision. The court also found that the bullies had violated the dignity and equality statutes of the Human Rights Code, and that the school board had failed to provide Jubran with a learning environment free from discriminatory harassment.

Jubran's lawsuit was precedent-setting. Schools prepared for a flood of suits, and they came. In 2002, a Burlington teen named David Knight filed a \$500,000 suit after classmates set up a website to taunt him and his family. Knight claimed that educators at his school knew about the site (which described him as a pedophile, among other things) and failed to act. Aside from the money, he wanted a public apology and a commitment from the board to taking a tougher stance on bullying in the future. The case settled out of court for an undisclosed sum.

A Toronto-based personal injury lawyer named Daniela Cervini is currently handling eight bullying lawsuits against Ontario school boards, including two against the TDSB. Her firm, Grillo Barristers, receives calls on a weekly basis from parents wanting to take legal action against bullies and the school officials who didn't do enough to stop them. Cervini is asking for an average of \$8.5 million in damages for each case. "The children need counselling to get back on track," she says, "and that's expensive." She's representing kids ranging from kindergarten age to high school level in claims that run the gamut from teasing to sexual assault. One student in the Halton Catholic School Board was beaten by a group of classmates, a video of the assault posted on YouTube. When Cervini's cases make it to court, she'll argue bullying incidents that happen off school property are still the school's responsibility, because bullies whose behaviour is ignored in class become emboldened after the bell rings. In her experience, many teachers and principals aren't following the anti-bullying rules that school boards are so eager to tout. In one instance, a student was beaten with sticks in the school playground and the principal didn't notify the police.

Cervini believes that perhaps "bullying" is too mild a word for what some of these kids have gone through, but she says the term has gained enough traction in recent years to make it useful. "Bullying finally has widespread attention," she says. "People are standing up to the schools."

Both Durham District schools Mitchell Wilson attended have an elaborate anti-bullying policy. Like other Ontario boards, Durham has developed a detailed safety policy to address bullying, which is defined by the Ministry of Education as "a form of repeated, persistent and aggressive behaviour directed at an individual or individuals that is intended to cause (or should be known to cause) fear and distress and/or harm to another person's body, feelings, self-esteem or reputation." Ontario schools practise a so-called progressive discipline process that emphasizes rehabilitation. It was legislated into existence by the province in 2008 to replace the Harris government's punitive "zero tolerance" policy—which was criticized for encouraging a rash of expulsions.

Between 2004 and 2012, the Ministry of Education distributed \$30 million to Ontario school boards to combat bullying. The province maintains a registry for teachers and principals of 129 recommended anti-bullying workshops, professional speakers and programs. The options are wide-ranging: there's a \$15 anti-Islamophobia kit from a Muslim outreach group called Mentors; a two-day, \$2,400 Red Cross workshop called "Beyond the Hurt"; and sessions on gangs, life with a military parent and homophobia. The non-profit Ontario Physical and Health Education Association is paid (\$15,000 in the last year) to assess whether the programs suit current curriculum objectives, but the sessions are not formally evaluated by the government.

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More than ever, schools are taking responsibility for nurturing the emotional health of their students. The newest anti-bullying programs focus on “character development,” or what Lisa Millar, Pickering’s superintendent of education, describes as “producing good citizens.” In Durham, students from kindergarten through Grade 12 are now taught 10 character traits they’re meant to cultivate throughout their public school years: teamwork, responsibility, respect, perseverance, optimism, kindness, integrity, honesty, empathy and courage. The TDSB promises students “ongoing support and professional growth in emotional intelligence.” Private schools such as Branksome Hall and Upper Canada College have similar goals. Branksome instituted a new anti-bullying policy that reminds students that what happens online—Facebook was found to be overrun with bullying behaviour—has consequences in the real world.

One of the most popular programs on the province’s registry is called Roots of Empathy. A former educator named Mary Gordon founded the program and has held sessions for 200,000 Toronto children since 1996. The province spent \$2 million from 2009 to 2011 to bring Roots of Empathy to Ontario students. The program has earned many accolades: Gordon has met with the Dalai Lama three times, and she has won, among other awards, the Queen’s Golden Jubilee Medal for commitment to education. Her program has spread throughout the U.K. and Ireland, as well as to New Zealand and the U.S. She was skeptical of anti-bullying approaches that focused exclusively on punishing the perpetrator. “Humiliating children never works,” she tells me. “Pretty much every approach before now hasn’t been effective.”

At the core of Roots of Empathy is a baby. Gordon recruits moms to bring their new offspring into classrooms in order to teach students about vulnerability and feelings. She believes that observing and interacting with the baby will teach children how to identify and articulate their feelings and those of others around them. They will learn that other people can also feel sad, or lonely—which Gordon says is often a revelation for them—and that while it’s okay to be angry or frustrated, there are acceptable and unacceptable ways to deal with unpleasant feelings.

The TDSB doesn’t collect data on whether Roots has reduced fights or suspensions, but Gordon is attempting to do so herself. Her program has commissioned surveys of students and teachers about classroom behaviour before and after the sessions—one 2001 finding from Manitoba showed that 27 sessions resulted in a 39 per cent decrease in aggression and a 65 per cent increase in sharing. Gordon also believes she can prove her program changes the very structure and functioning of a child’s brain, effectively altering emotional development. This school year, with the help of York University, she’s conducting a new round of research with a foray into neuroscience. Researchers will use a non-invasive technique to study the emotional response centres of students’ brains before and after the Roots of Empathy program.

There is some proof anti-bullying campaigns that focus on character development and strategic discipline have an impact. After a series of youth suicides in Norway in the early 1980s, a University of Bergen psychology professor named Dan Olweus surveyed thousands of students about bullying, then developed his eponymous anti-bullying program. He now works in the U.S., where the Olweus program is rabidly popular. Part of the approach involves setting out clear rules about bullying, making sure they are communicated often to students and staff, and sticking to a discipline plan. The rest involves “reducing antisocial behaviour” and “improving the school climate”; in other words, pursuing the ambitious and abstract goal of fertilizing emotional intelligence at a tender age in order to eradicate bullying in the future. The Olweus program boasts staggering numbers—in a study of 2,500 students over two and a half years, it was shown to reduce bullying by 50 per cent at 42 different schools.

The influential Harvard psychology professor Steven Pinker has proposed that the need for anti-bullying programs is exaggerated—because there’s less bullying happening today than ever before. Last fall, Pinker published *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, a provocative and controversial book that combines psychological studies with his readings of history and neuroscience to make a solid argument that we live in the least violent era in all of human history. There are fewer wars and fewer deaths in the wars that do happen, and by all accounts, rates of everything from homicide to domestic violence to, yes, bullying are drastically lower than ever before, especially in the developed world. Pinker cites school statistics from the U.S. departments of justice and education, which revealed that less than 10 per cent of youths reported crimes or feeling fear at school in 2003. A 2007 statistical survey by the same departments showed that the rate had dropped even further, to five per cent.

MORE THAN EVER, SCHOOLS ARE TAKING RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE EMOTIONAL HEALTH OF THEIR STUDENTS. ONE ANTI-BULLYING PROGRAM ATTEMPTS TO FOSTER EMPATHY BY INTRODUCING STUDENTS TO A BABY

Pinker uses his findings to criticize what he calls the “empathy craze.” He points to the dozens of self-help bestsellers of recent years that focus on the subject, including Gordon’s own *Roots of Empathy: Changing the World Child by Child*, which he mocks for its jacket promise to strive for “no less than world peace.” Pinker believes we need more than empathy to snuff out violence. He cites various experiments and studies he claims show that person-to-person empathy will always, no matter what, be at least partially dependent on considerations like good looks, similarity and communal solidarity. Instinctive knowledge of this might be why it’s hard for bystanders to stand up to bullying, since adolescence is a time when we especially crave fitting in. Empathy has a role to play in violence reduction, Pinker says, but more important in his mind has been the rise in recognition of basic human rights, and societies’ commitment to defending those rights. In Pinker’s opinion, the drop in school bullying in the U.S. is due far more to the recognition of children’s right to live without violence, and the willingness of schools to enforce it. In other words, the most effective way to stop bullying is with old-fashioned law and order.

To the parents of a bullied kid, schools can’t do enough to prevent or punish bullying. What they don’t want to hear is that bullying is ignored or tolerated. And what they never want to see is another bullying death.

About a month after Mitchell Wilson's suicide, Craig Wilson and Tiffany Usher received a call from a booker for *Dr. Phil*. The show wanted them to come to L.A. to tell Mitchell's story, which would make Dr. Phil's audience coo and gasp in heartbreak and outrage. A day or so later, Dr. Phil's people sent an email. The lineup for the bullying show had grown, and there wasn't time to interview the couple live. Instead, the show would send over a video camera and a list of printed questions. Wilson was instructed to give heartfelt answers about Mitchell's suicide to the camera. It was obvious they wanted to milk his tragedy. "They wanted me to cry," Wilson says, "so I told them to go fuck themselves."

After Mitchell's death, Westcreek P.S. was scrutinized as a hotbed of prejudice and neglect. Pickering parents seemed to believe that, despite all the anti-bullying campaigns and empathy instruction, the school hadn't done enough to create a safe environment for a vulnerable kid, and they demanded that Westcreek's principal, Tony Rizzuto, be held accountable. Why, people asked, aren't Mitchell's parents suing the school? Usher and Wilson were surprised by the backlash: they had no plans to sue Rizzuto or the school. They say that Mitchell was deeply fond of Rizzuto, who looked out for him. The day after Mitchell was assaulted, J. S. was taken out of the public school system. And a week later, when one of J. S.'s friends, in a vengeful mood, taunted Mitchell, Wilson and Usher reported to Rizzuto what happened and he immediately called the harassing student's parents. Rizzuto had also given Mitchell's friend Max permission to hang out with him indoors during recess (Mitchell avoided the playground). He delivered a eulogy at Mitchell's funeral at the Pickering Village United Church.

A few weeks later, Wilson stood in front of the Durham school board to register his support of Rizzuto and ask that trustees ignore the unfounded complaints. The board decided Rizzuto didn't require discipline.

Yes, Mitchell was bullied, and it hurt, but his school didn't neglect him. Mitchell was surrounded by empathy: he had friends and a family who loved him. What he didn't have was peace with the fact that he'd never be an average kid. Wilson and Usher suspect their son Googled his disease. He'd have discovered that his rapidly approaching end would be miserable. After the loss of his mother, after years of humiliation for his disability, his prognosis might have been one too many heartbreaks for an 11-year-old to take.