



## **Want fewer bullies? Expert calls for actively engaged parents**

*Why bullying legislation is on the wrong track*

By Peter Jon Mitchell

Cyberbullying is a nationally recognized problem. For all the recognition of the problem, however, legislators are creating wrongheaded solutions. Take for example Alberta, where on November 19, 2012, they adopted new education legislation, leaving it to kids to manage bullying. How so? For one, the bill states that students who witness bullying but do not report it to the school are liable for suspension, even when the bullying occurs online and after school hours.<sup>1</sup>

By leaving adults, particularly parents, out of the solution, some experts suggest kids may be exposed to more bullying, rather than helping to curtail the problem.

Threatening students to “out” bullies might seem reasonable, but when children are ordered to police the internet, adults are effectively admitting they have no presence on the social media playground. Unfortunately, bullies know it.

The internet gives bullies anonymity and a long reach with little supervision. Bullied children have few safe places to turn and worse, they often walk unguided right into the hands of bullies as Amanda Todd did when she exposed herself online. Adults may use the same social media tools, but they are often absent in the online social lives of children and teens.

Social media isn't the problem, it only magnifies the reality that adults and children live separate lives by design. Too often, parents and their children cross paths for only an hour or two in the evening as the lives of children are increasingly programmed from daycare through to weekend sports programs.

It wasn't always this way. Throughout much of history, parents led their children into adulthood by modeling social cues and passing along cherished values and traditions. Today, however, kids increasingly take their social cues from one another.<sup>2</sup> Over a decade ago, author Patricia Hersch described teens as "a tribe apart."<sup>3</sup> She noted youth culture's distinct values and codes, observable in the music, clothing, speech and symbols young people adopt. When adults feel panicky about problems like bullying, they call in the cultural interpreters—experts and educators—to translate and offer tips, tactics and techniques.

The bottom line is that bullying requires less emphasis on refereeing and more focus on authentic relationships between kids and adults. Canadian clinical and developmental psychologist Gordon Neufeld argues that the human need to attach—to care for another and be cared for—is our primary instinct. Children crave bonds with parents and adults; this even aids brain development.

If the attachment is not solidified with an adult, children and teens will seek less secure primary attachments with their peers. Dr. Neufeld argues in his book *Hold on to Your Kids* that immature peer to peer attachment can increase child aggression.<sup>4</sup>

Diagnosing the bully problem, Dr. Neufeld writes, "The underlying problem is not the behaviour itself but the loss of the natural attachment hierarchy with adults in charge."<sup>5</sup>

Speaking last month to educators in Montreal, Dr. Neufeld explained that the bully instinct arises when the dominant, or alpha attachment instinct, goes awry. A healthy alpha instinct drives us to *take care* of others, but the instinct can be corrupted and become a compulsion to dominate. Dr. Neufeld argues that the alpha attachment instinct should be fluid and responsive but can become "stuck," becoming the defining aspect of a personality. If the stuck alpha attachment instinct is not moderated by the drive to take responsibility and care for others, then the bully instinct emerges.<sup>6</sup>

Dr. Neufeld argues that emotional overload or trauma can cause the brain to defend against feelings of vulnerability – the kinds of feelings needed to care for others. A healthy alpha attachment instinct drives an individual to respond compassionately to another’s vulnerability, but bullies, numbed by emotional overload, see only an opportunity to dominate through the exploitation of another’s vulnerability.

Many schools foster primary attachments between children, says Dr. Neufeld, where emotional wounding and overload flourish, creating a breeding ground for bullies.<sup>7</sup> Case in point; an anti-bullying specialist speaking about her conversations with students recently told the *Vancouver Sun*, “A lot of kids felt disconnected from the adults in their building...Many kids talked about feeling more connected to the physical space than the adults in the building.”<sup>8</sup>

Dr. Neufeld challenges adults to “unmake” bullies by carefully regaining the alpha role while winning over the trust of bullies, showing genuine concern for their lives. It takes time and patience. He warned that many anti-bullying programs work against human nature and the instinct to form healthy hierarchical relationships.<sup>9</sup> Anti-bullying programs often focus on muting bullying behaviour rather than tackling the root of the problem.

If Dr. Neufeld’s paradigm is correct, adults need to win kids back by appealing to human instinct. Adults and parents in particular need to be firm on their expectations while at the same time intentionally establishing themselves as their child’s primary attachment figure. Threatening to suspend virtual bystanders misses the mark and reinforces just how far outside the playground we are.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Education Act 2012, 1<sup>st</sup> session, 28<sup>th</sup> legislature, Alberta. (2012). Retrieved from [http://www.assembly.ab.ca/ISYS/LADDAR\\_files/docs/bills/bill/legislature\\_28/session\\_1/20120523\\_bill-003.pdf](http://www.assembly.ab.ca/ISYS/LADDAR_files/docs/bills/bill/legislature_28/session_1/20120523_bill-003.pdf)  
See Section 31 “student responsibilities” and section 36 “suspension.”

<sup>2</sup> For an extended treatment of this theme, see Neufeld, G. and Maté, G. (2005). *Hold on to Your Kids*. Toronto: Vintage Canada.

<sup>3</sup> Hersch, P. (1999). *A tribe apart: A journey into the heart of American adolescence*. New York: Ballantine Books.

<sup>4</sup> Neufeld, G. and Maté, G. (2005). *Hold on to Your Kids*. Toronto: Vintage Canada, p. 130.

<sup>5</sup> Neufeld and Maté, *Hold on to Your Kids*, p. 141.

<sup>6</sup> Neufeld, G. (2012, Oct. 24). Bullies: Their making and unmaking. A presentation for the Centre of Excellence for Behavioural Management of the Riverside School Board, Montreal.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Steffenhagen, J. (2012, November 13). B.C. students now able to report bullying anonymously (updated) [Web log post]. Retrieved from <http://blogs.vancouversun.com/2012/11/13/b-c-students-now-able-to-report-bullying-anonymously/>

<sup>9</sup> Neufeld, G. (2012, Oct. 24). Bullies: Their making and unmaking. A presentation for the Centre of Excellence for Behavioural Management of the Riverside School Board, Montreal.