



The best anti-bullying policy? Parental involvement

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A Texas parent filed a bullying complaint after a high school football team trounced his son's team 91 to 0. The full force of state laws required school administration to investigate the complaint and produce a written report.

This misuse of anti-bullying policy to level the playing field makes a mockery of the policy. It also confuses the issue of bullying. It's difficult to compare a lost football game to the bullying-related suicides that motivate this type of legislation.

Despite the best intentions, the effectiveness of laws and anti-bullying programs is largely unknown.

The recent throne speech promised to "create a new criminal offence prohibiting the non-consensual distribution of intimate images."¹ The criminal code already contains provisions against harassment, but in a number of cases, child pornography laws have been awkwardly applied to young cyberbullies.

New legislation could bring clarity, or further confusion.

The criminal code is a particular tool, reserved for exceptional cases. For most children and young people, the criminal code will bring no relief.

The effectiveness of the plethora of anti-bullying campaigns is anything but certain.

An unexpected outcome

A recently released study in the *Journal of Criminology* looked at variables involved in bullying at schools.

The authors concluded, "Contrary to our hypothesis, students attending schools with bullying prevention programs were more likely to have experienced peer victimization."²

They speculate that while bullies engage the material, they fail to appropriate the lessons. The researchers suggest anti-bullying programs show mixed results at best and “the effectiveness of bullying prevention has yet to be proven.”³

There is hope. The purveyor of youth culture, MTV, has just released a survey on digital abuse with its partner the AP-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research. The good news is that digital abuse, including sending mean messages and exposing private information about another person on the internet, is down 7 percentage points since the survey was last conducted in 2011.⁴

Kids turning to parents – who are getting better at helping

While many young people simply ignore their digital harasser, a growing number are turning to their parents and family members. What’s more, **66 percent of respondents who turn to parents say it made the situation better – up from 49 percent in 2011.**⁵

The authors of the *Journal of Criminology* article confirm earlier studies suggesting that healthy parenting offers protection against victimization. They also note that **lack of parental support “is likely to increase the risk of bullying victimization.”**⁶

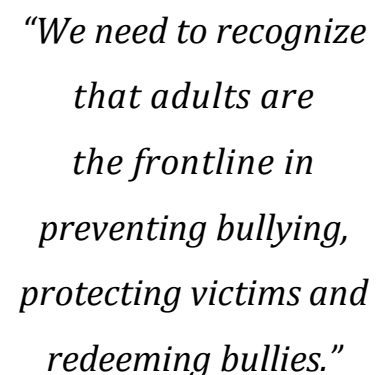
In a recent *Wall Street Journal* article, author and physician Leonard Sax argues that with all the monitoring software available, parents are without excuse when it comes to taking the lead in protecting their children online. He notes that many parents still seem reluctant to encroach on their children’s perceived online privacy.⁷

Of course, it is appropriate to have thoughtful school protocols and awareness measures. But the MTV poll shows that some highly touted policy initiatives have little pull with young people. About half of respondents who experienced digital abuse simply asked the perpetrator to stop or changed their online habits, including passwords, emails or cell numbers.⁸

At a time when Canadians are considering increasing criminal code provisions against digital abuse, the MTV poll reports only 6 percent of respondents called police.⁹

Even fewer (5 percent) contacted online help forums or called helplines¹⁰ – a measure several provinces are funding as part of anti-bullying initiatives.

We should be cautious about dismissing all initiatives as ineffective without proper evaluation. At the same time, we need to recognize that adults are the frontline in preventing bullying, protecting victims and redeeming bullies.



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Adult intervention the key

Adult intervention is the key to responding to bullying. Parents are naturally positioned in partnership with educators and other adult mentors to be confidants, protectors, advocates and role models.

The MTV poll suggests that parents play a central role. It illustrates that young people who are victims of digital abuse turn to adults they know and trust. **Our most effective response to bullying must engage trusted adults.**

Sadly, many students feel disconnected from the adults in their schools.¹¹ Our school system is not designed to facilitate strong adult-child relationships.¹²

Parents must take the lead in protecting kids and not defer to schools. Educators must create school climates where adult-child relationships flourish.

Peter Jon Mitchell is a senior researcher at the Institute of Marriage and Family Canada. He is the author of *Family responses to bullying: Why governments won't stop bullying until families step up*

¹Seizing Canada's moment: prosperity and opportunity in an uncertain world: speech from the Throne, October 16, 2013, p. 13.

² Jeong, S. & Hyun Lee, B. (2013). A multilevel examination of peer victimization and bullying preventions in schools. *Journal of Criminology* vol. 2013. p. 7.

³ Jeong & Hyun Lee, 2013, p. 8.

⁴ Tompson, T., Benz, J. & Agiesta, J. (2013, October). The digital abuse study: Experiences of teens and young adults. AP-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research. p. 1.

⁵ Tompson, Benz & Agiesta, *The digital abuse study*, pp. 2, 4.

⁶ Jeong & Hyun Lee, *A multilevel examination*, p. 7.

⁷ Sax, L. (2013, Oct. 24) Blame parents, not kids, for sexting. *Wall Street Journal*. Retrieved from <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052702303902404579147353596877282>

⁸ Tompson, Benz & Agiesta, *The digital abuse study*, p. 4.

⁹ Tompson, Benz & Agiesta, *The digital abuse study*, p. 4.

¹⁰ Tompson, Benz & Agiesta, *The digital abuse study*, p. 4.

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

¹² 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.

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