



THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Bullies push their victims to suicide

The cases of two B.C. 14-year-olds show school harassment can become a matter of life and death, CAROLINE ALPHONSO writes

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VANCOUVER -- Dawn-Marie Wesley was so afraid of being beaten up that suicide seemed like her only escape.

"If I try to get help, it will get worse," she wrote in her suicide note to her family. "They are always looking for a new person to beat up and they are the toughest girls. If I ratted, they would get suspended and there would be no stopping them. I love you all so much."

Dawn-Marie killed herself on Nov. 10. Her death is not an isolated incident. Bullying has always been prevalent, but now researchers say children harassing each other is getting more extreme across the country.

Bullying in school playgrounds used to be looked on as a rite of passage, said Debra Pepler, director of the LaMarsh Centre for Research on Violence and Conflict Resolution at York University in Toronto.

Now, it has become a matter of life and death.

It used to be that when a child was down, the beating would stop. Not any more.

These days, the fighting and teasing just keeps going. Children mimic the extreme behaviour they see adults exhibiting, whether it's road rage or speech laced with swear words.

Dawn-Marie, a pretty and friendly teenager, was described by those who knew her as a typical 14-year-old, who occasionally had disagreements with her parents.

But she had to deal with more. She was the target of incessant harassment by bullying schoolmates, whom she called the "toughest girls" in the school.

Victimized children are afraid to ask for help, and, in most cases, they successfully mask their problems from their families and schools.

Dawn-Marie's family say they saw no signs of the abuse their daughter endured at the hands

of three girls at her school. It was Dawn-Marie's younger brother who found her in her bedroom of their Mission, B.C., home, just east of Vancouver. She had hung herself with a dog leash.

"Every student in this nation is entitled to an education They're entitled to that education hassle free," Cindy Wesley, Dawn-Marie's mother, said on the Vicki Gabereau television show last week.

Ms. Wesley has found some comfort with another mother who lost her 14-year-old son in March. Nasima Nastoh's son, Hamed, jumped off the Pattullo Bridge linking New Westminster and Surrey, B.C. He wrote in his seven-page letter that he could no longer endure the bullying at his school.

"Every day I cry. There's no second that I won't think of Hamed," Ms. Nastoh said. "They shouldn't ignore [the bullying]. It's very serious."

There's little data on violence in schools, but researchers agree that name calling and taunting have become more pronounced in the past few years.

In an 1997 article published in the Canadian Journal of School Psychology, Ms. Pepler, with colleague Wendy Craig of Queen's University in Kingston, documented instances of playground bullying once every seven minutes for at least 38 seconds in duration.

Students tend to watch as the bully attacks a victim for fear of getting hurt themselves. They need to be taught by teachers about empathy, Ms. Pepler said.

"We need to educate children right when it starts, not when it blows up and becomes illegal."

Researchers say bullying is learned even before a child arrives in school.

Cindi Seddon, a principal at Seaview Community School in Port Moody, B.C., and an author of two books on bullying, said children watch their primary caregivers try to get their way, and they, in turn, tend to use that manipulative behaviour with their schoolmates.

"We say to parents that if you think there's something wrong with your child, you're dead right," Ms. Seddon said.

Parents shouldn't try to immediately solve their bullied child's problem because, in most cases, they make it worse by going public with it. Instead, Ms. Seddon said parents should provide a safety net for their children by asking the school or school board for a policy on keeping their child safe when they report bullying.

The B.C. government has recently announced that it is spending millions of dollars in antibullying initiatives. Schools across the country also have zero-tolerance policies, suspending students who hurt their classmates.

However, Sibylle Artz, the University of Victoria's director of the School of Child and Youth Care, said it is far more effective for schools to have in-house suspensions and deny privileges to children who bully, rather than let them go home and watch television.

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