Family responses to bullying

Why governments won't stop bullying until families step up

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NOVEMBER 2012

INSTITUT DU MARIAGE ET DE LA FAMILLE CANADA
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Building on the Institute of Marriage and Family Canada's previous report, *The limits of anti -bullying legislation*, this paper explores the body of research on the role of parents and family in contributing to bullying behaviour and in protecting against the negative impact of bullying. We highlight the important role families have in combating the bully problem. Recommendations are divided into those for parents, educators and government.

For parents:

- Be proactive in speaking to children about bullying
- Monitor screen time and establish limits and expectations around use of internet devices
- Be intentional in cultivating primary attachment relationships with children and pursue an authoritative parenting style characterized by warm and caring communication with sufficient supervision and clearly expressed expectations and limits

For educators:

- Facilitate educational opportunities for school staff and parents, connecting stake holders with experts and resources
- Invite parents to partner in developing a school response to bullying behaviour

For governments:

- Legislate very cautiously and promote community based responses
- Consider parents as the primary educator when developing education policy, evaluating how policy initiatives empower parents.

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INTRODUCTION

There are few education issues that receive as much media attention these days as the problem of bullying. News media often feature stories of bullied children and their families desperate for help. The stories present parents who seek help from police, schools or other institutions with few tangible results. Provincial and territorial governments have responded to the increased attention on the issue by adopting motions and passing legislation that denounces bullying and requires school boards to develop policies to prevent and address bullying in the classroom, online and off campus. Legislators have focused primarily on the one environment where they have the most influence—the school board. But what role do parents have in preventing and addressing incidents of bullying? How should parents and schools work together with other community members to address the bullying problem?

In May 2012, the Institute of Marriage and Family Canada (IMFC) released the report, *The limits of anti-bullying legislation*. Here, the IMFC argued that while laws can ensure that schools have adequate policies to address incidents of bullying, the American experience with legislation suggests that anti-bullying laws do little to prevent bullying. The IMFC called on Canadians to champion local community level solutions as the first line of response. The problem of bullying requires the cooperation of families, parents, students and educators.

With this release, we explore the role of families in confronting the problem of bullies—both what families can do well to protect children from the effects of bullying and the attributes of family life that may contribute to bullying behaviour. Families are an important part of the solution to bullying, a solution that has been overlooked for too long.

WHAT IS BULLYING?

As awareness of the bully problem has increased, the term has been applied arbitrarily to a wide range of behaviours bordering on misuse. For the sake

of clarity, this paper offers the description provided by recognized Canadian bullying experts Wendy Craig and Heather McCuaig:

> It is a form of repeated aggression where there is an imbalance of power between the young person who is bullying and the young person who is victimized. Power can be achieved through physical, psychological, social, or systemic advantage, or by knowing another's vulnerability (e.g., obesity, learning problem, sexual orientation, family background) and using that knowledge to cause distress.[1]

While there is no universal definition of bullying, most descriptions identify repeat incidents between individuals where an imbalance of power exists.

UNDERSTANDING AGGRESSION

Bullying is a form of aggression. A number of factors may contribute to aggression in children and youth. A 2012 study published in the journal *Psychology of Popular Media Culture* suggests that identifying a combination of risk factors can serve as a reliable predictor of aggression in children and youth. The study's authors suggest that predicting aggression is not simply the totality of factors but the combination of risk. Just as there are variables that contribute to aggression, there are protective factors that can moderate risk.[2] It is important to note that bullying is one form of aggression but not all aggressive behaviour is bullying. The distinction must be maintained when anti-bullying policies are developed and enforced. Mindful of this distinction, reviewing the research on aggressive behaviour can provide helpful insights into understanding bullying.

The public dialogue about the bullying problem rarely engages this nuanced understanding of aggression. For example, anti-bullying campaigns like awareness weeks mandated in many schools, focus on systemic issues such as racism. These campaigns focus on characteristics bullies exploit rather than the contributing factors of aggressive behaviour. Most definitions of bullying identify the power dynamic between bullies and victims, so solutions are often the result of diagnosing a power imbalance as the core motivation behind bullying.[3] As a result, addressing issues like racism is only peripheral to stemming the tide of bullying; the power dynamic may not be the root cause motivating the bully. School based approaches that emphasize the power dynamics fail to address the kaleidoscope of variables contributing to aggression.[4] In fact, these programs may be unequipped to address these issues.

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1. Craig, W. and McCuaig, H. (2011). Bullying and fighting. In *The health of Canada's young people: a mental health focus.* Ottawa: Public Health Agency of Canada. Retrieved from http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/hp-ps/dca-dea/publications/hbsc-mental-mentale/bullying-intimidation-eng.php
2. Gentile, G.A. and Bushman, B.J. (2012). Reassessing media violence effects using a risk and resilience approach to understanding aggression. *Psychology of Popular Media Culture* vol. 1, no.3. pp. 138-151.
3. Psychologist Gordon Neufeld suggests that approaching bullying from a power dynamic paradigm has led to flawed anti-bullying responses. Neufeld believes bullying results from a healthy dominant instinct gone awry.
4. Although this paper focuses on family factors, it must be acknowledged that mental health is a significant variable in understanding bullying.

FAMILY FACTORS AND BULLYING

The body of research on family factors and bullying suggests that while family background alone may not account for bullying, it is likely a significant contributing factor. Research suggests that family background and home environment can contribute to aggressive behaviour or help protect against the effects of bullying. Family background, along with other factors, can predict who is at risk of becoming a target of bullies.

TALKING ABOUT THE PROBLEM

In a haunting story from British Columbia, a girl targeted by bullies took her own life in the fall of 2012 only a month after posting a video on YouTube about her experience. There are similar stories where children have blogged or used social media to convey their experience and desperation with bullying. These tragic stories raise the profile of the problem of bullying and dire consequences that can occur. They also offer a window into how some young people express personal feelings about bullying through a public medium.

Not all victims of bullying are forthcoming about their experiences. Researchers from the University of New Hampshire gathered data from middle school students and their parents examining parental perspectives on bullying and family characteristics associated with the problem. The researchers explored which children disclosed their bullying experiences to adults and concluded that approximately 40 percent of children targeted by bullies do not tell an adult.[5] When children do report bullying to adults, they are more likely to tell their parents than teachers, with girls and chronic targets most likely to report their bullying experience.[6] The study found that students who are physically bullied are least likely to report the incident to an adult.[7]

Parents are at greatest risk of being out of step when it comes to their awareness of their child's bullying behaviour toward other children. Parents of bullies were the least aware of their children's bullying involvement.[8]

Some forms of bullying such as social exclusion are more difficult for adults to detect. While a number of studies present varying data on the level of parental awareness of their children's exposure and involvement in bullying, the fact remains that parental awareness and intervention are key in addressing the issue.

HOME LIFE MATTERS

As noted in Gentile and Bushman's article in *Psychology of Popular Media Culture*, it is likely that numerous variables interact and increase the likelihood of aggression in children. Various factors contribute to the problem while other variables have a protective effect. The complexity of the interaction between variables may be one reason why broad anti-bullying policies and legislation that focus on muting behaviour have not yielded significant results.

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5. Holt, M.K., Kaufman Kantor, G. and Finkelhor, D. (2009). Parent/child concordance about bullying involvement and family characteristics related to bullying and peer victimization. *Journal of School Violence*, 8. p. 44.
6. *Ibid*.
7. Holt, et al. *Parent/child concordance*, p. 59.
8. Holt, et al. *Parent/child concordance*, p. 42.

Family factors alone may not predict which child is likely to bully or be a victim, but some family traits are more likely to be common among bullies and victims.

BULLIES AT HOME

Parenting style has been identified as a variable associated with bullying. John Butler VI and Rhi Anna Platt of Purdue University Calumet have identified that children who engage in bullying are more likely to come from homes with *authoritarian parenting*. They mean that the parenting style in these homes is characterized by strictness and lack of warmth.[9] The authoritative parenting style, on the other hand, is characterized by warm and caring communication with sufficient supervision and clearly expressed expectations and limits. Australian based researchers Eliza Ahmed and Valerie Braithwaite examined how family and school environments interact in the context of bullying. The researchers contend that a parenting style that utilizes stigma and shame, and communicates disapproval not simply of behaviour but also of the individual may be linked to bullying behaviour. [10] Some researchers argue that children who are bullied at home learn the behaviour and become bullies themselves.[11]

Another characteristic of home environments associated with bullying is a lack of parental supervision.

Longitudinal studies that follow a cohort of children over time have found that future bullies often experience a home life lacking in emotional support and cognitive stimulation.[12] According to some studies, bullies perceive their families more negatively when surveyed about how their family resolves problems and communicates with one another.[13] High levels of family conflict are often paired with a low level of conflict resolution skills.

Family discord can even influence a child's self-perception. American researchers Melissa Powell and Linda Ladd argue from their research:

> [P]arental discord can affect children's self-concept because children internalize both positive and negative aspects of parental behaviour and this internalization affects future behaviour.[14]

Parental relationships and role modelling are critical to child development and future behaviour.

BULLIES WHO ARE VICTIMS AT HOME

Some children who bully are also targets of bullying themselves. Researchers have noted that while there is less data on bullies who are also victims, these children tend to share similar family environments as bullies. Longitudinal

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9. Butler, J.L. and Platt, R.A.L. (2008). Bullying: A family and school system treatment model. *The American Journal of Family Therapy*, vol. 36. p. 20.
10. Ahmed, E. and Braithwaite, E. (2004). Bullying and victimization: causes for concern for both families and schools. *Social Psychology of Education* 7. p. 36.
11. *Ibid*.
12. Ball, H.A., Arseneault, L., Taylor, A. Maughan, B., Caspi, Avshalom and Moffit, T.E. (2008). Genetic and environmental influences on victims, bullies and bully-victims in childhood. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* vol. 49 no.1. p. 104.
13. Cenkseven Önder, F. and Yurtal, F. (2008, September). An investigation of the family characteristics of bullies, victims and positively behaving adolescents. *Educational Sciences: Theory and Practice* vol. 8, no. 3. p. 821.
14. Powell, M.D., and Ladd, L.D. (2010). Bullying: A review of literature and implications for family therapists. *The American Journal of Family Therapy*, 38. p. 196.
15. Ball, et al, *Genetic and environmental*, p. 104.

studies reveal that male bully/victims are more likely to have experienced aggression, maternal hostility and strict home environments during childhood.[15]

Ahmed and Braithwaite made an interesting observation about bullies who are victims. They argue that the home life of bullies who are victims resembles the home environment of bullies, but their school life reflects the experiences of victims. The researchers also note that bully/victims have the highest rates of referral to psychiatric consultation.[16]

VICTIMS AT HOME

There are many reasons why a child might be targeted by a bully. In some cases, it is simply opportunity and a perceived weakness. Interestingly, research suggests that some family factors may be more common among those targeted by bullies, though researchers Ahmed and Braithwaite caution that the body of literature shows mixed results.[17]

As with bullies, some researchers have found associations between victimization and poor communication within a family.[18] Victims may also be more likely to come from homes where parents are over protective of their children.[19] Powell and Ladd report that children who are teased about their appearance by members of their own family may also be at greater risk of becoming a target.[20]

FAMILY ENVIRONMENT PROTECTIVE FACTORS

There is evidence that family environment offers protective factors against the effects of bullying and the probability that a child will participate in bullying behaviour. Research suggests that increased father involvement can protect against participation in bullying behaviour, particularly in homes where there may be lower maternal involvement.[21] Many studies have affirmed the benefits of an authoritative parenting style characterized by warm and caring communication with sufficient supervision and clearly expressed expectations and limits.[22] While bullies or targets can emerge from any family, authoritative parenting has been shown to be beneficial for child development.

Ahmed and Braithwaite note positive results when an authoritative parenting style is applied where inappropriate behaviour is addressed without stigmatization of the child.[23] The researchers favor a type of conflict resolution that clearly addresses the problem behaviour and communicates expectations while avoiding the denunciation of the child.

Parents have an important role in monitoring the behaviour and activities of their children. Even parental

16. Ahmed and Braithwaite. *Bullying and victimization*, pp. 46-47.
17. Ahmed and Braithwaite. *Bullying and victimization*, p. 37.
18. Cenkseven Önder and Yurtal, *An investigation of the family*, p. 827.
19. Cenkseven Önder and Yurtal, *An investigation of the family*, p. 827. Powell and Ladd, *Bullying*, p. 197.
20. Powell and Ladd, *Bullying*, p. 196.
21. *Ibid.*
22. For a summary on parenting style research see Schwartz, K.D. (2010, March). Parents in control. Best practice or another way to be a bad parent? Ottawa: Institute of Marriage and Family Canada. Available at http://www.imfcanada.org/sites/default/files/Parents_%20in_control_Final.pdf
23. Ahmed and Braithwaite. *Bullying and victimization*, p. 36.

monitoring of media viewing and screen time is associated with healthier behaviour outcomes. A 2008 IMFC report on the near constant media use by children suggests that "kids don't come to this kind of life all by themselves. In addition to providing their children with an environment that is saturated with media, parents are modelling heavy media consumption."[24] The authors report that homes where children own fewer media sources are more likely to have rules about the use of those devices. Parents who are more intentional about media use in the home tend to be more familiar with media and devices, are more likely to encourage alternative activities and be consistent in enforcing family guidelines around media use.[25]

While family environment alone does not predict who will be a bully or victim, research does suggest that it is a contributing factor in the interplay of variables leading to aggressive behaviour in children. Reflecting on their data, Ahmed and Braithwaite conclude that "[t]o maximize the effectiveness of an anti-bullying program, we need to integrate a family level approach to a school level approach."[26]

Bullying and the media

A longitudinal study published in 2008 in the *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* found among other variables that children who later become bullies have higher levels of exposure to television shows. [1] Television and other forms of screen time have been blamed for numerous behavioural issues, including increased aggression. Another recent study published in the *Journal of Communication* examines a random sample of episodes from the fifty most popular programs among children age 2 to twelve. Researchers found that 92 percent of the programs displayed acts of social aggression – meaning non-violent or non-physical behaviour such as gossip and exclusion. [2] Violent media has long been argued to influence aggressive behaviour but this study suggests that parents should be monitoring programming for non-violent aggression common in bullying as well.

As the debate over the influence of violent movies and video games continues, researchers Douglas Gentile and Brad Bushman argue that media violence should not be granted a special status as a variable in aggression, nor should it be dismissed as unrelated. Instead, Gentile and Bushman argue that media consumption is similar to other risk factors in predicting aggression and is mediated

Bullying and the media continued on the next page

24. Whitefield, N. and Schwartz, K. (2008). The wired world of families: youth, their parents and the media. *IMFC Review*, Spring/Summer 2008. Ottawa: Institute of Marriage and Family Canada. p. 24. Retrieved from http://www.imfcanada.org/sites/default/files/Wired_world_of_families.pdf
25. Whitefield and Schwartz, *The wired world*, p. 27.
26. Ahmed and Braithwaite. *Bullying and victimization*, p. 51.

by factors such as parental involvement, which acts as a protective variable. [3]

Parents may not be able to regulate all the media their children consume, but they can set limits and mediate what is viewed in their own home. Nicole Martins, co-author of the social aggression study in the *Journal of Communication* told CTV News, "Two things that might surprise parents are that the shows that are popular with kids are not necessarily the shows that are made for them...and in fact those shows were often the ones that had the highest level of social aggression." [4]

Endnotes

1. Ball, H.A., Arseneault, L., Taylor, A. Maughan, B., Caspi, Avshalom and Moffit, T.E. (2008). Genetic and environmental influences on victims, bullies and bully-victims in childhood. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* vol. 49 no.1. p. 104.

2. Freeman, J. (2012, Sept. 29). Bullying, aggressive behaviour rampant in children's shows: study. CTVNews.ca. Retrieved from http://www.ctvnews.ca/health/bullying-aggressive-behaviour-rampant-in-children-s-shows-study-1.976431

3. Gentile, G.A. and Bushman, B.J. (2012). Reassessing media violence effects using a risk and resilience approach to understanding aggression. Psychology of Popular Media Culture vol. 1, no.3. p. 147.

4. Freeman. Bullying, aggressive behaviour.

PARENTS AND SCHOOLS WORKING TOGETHER

Families have an essential role in addressing bullying and yet the school environment is often ground-zero for bullying behaviour. Legislators can mandate that schools take action and provincial legislation is increasingly holding educators accountable for bullying incidents that occur not just on school property but after hours and on the web as well. How should the spheres of home and school complement one another within the wider community to address bullying?

With the emphasis on school responses to bullying, how do families currently view their role? Canadians in general recognize the seriousness of bullying according to a 2012 Angus Reid opinion poll. The vast majority of respondents to the nationally representative poll believe bullying is a significant problem, with nearly 65 percent of Canadians saying bullying should be a crime.[27]

Researchers at the University of New Hampshire surveyed parents of fifth graders about their attitudes toward bullying. Although the results are limited to one set of parents within a select region with children of a certain age, the findings are interesting. Parental attitudes are noted in the box below:

Parents of fifth graders' attitudes toward bullying

- 93% of parents believe the best way to deal with bullying is to encourage positive interactions
- 82% of parents favour strong punishment for bullying
- 81% of parents say schools should pay more attention to bullying
- 37% of parents say schools should work out bullying without parental interference

Source: Holt and Kaufman, pp. 52-53.

27. Ipso Reid Public Opinion. (2012, February 29). Many Canadians believe bullying should be considered a crime. Retrieved from http://www.angus-reid.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/2012.02.29_Bullying_CAN.pdf
As noted in the Ipso Reid report, many of the behaviours around bullying are already an offence under the criminal code.

The researchers argue that in their sample "about a third of parents did not think that parents should work in conjunction with school staff to deal with bullying."[28] While the researchers speculate on why some parents do not engage the school, the data does not provide concrete answers.[29] The study's authors argue that schools should do more to engage parents. A positive reading of the data would suggest that a healthy number of parents do wish to work with the school or are at the very least not opposed to it.

One reason why some parents may not be engaging the issue is that they have yet to experience it in their own lives. In early 2012, the Standing Senate Committee on Human Rights studied the issue of cyberbullying. An expert in the area, Dr. Justin Patchin of the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire related to the committee that he had given numerous parental presentations yet low attendance was a consistent problem.[30] Speaking specifically about cyberbullying, Patchin concluded:

> You can get the schools involved and you can create opportunities for parents to learn about these technologies and the problems, but unless their child is experiencing something like this, often they do not show up. It is a huge challenge; and I do not have an answer for that.[31]

The challenge of involving busy families is not unique to the bullying issue but it is clear that exploring how the school/parent relationship can be improved is helpful.

Cyberbullying: Engaging parents and educators

Cyberbullying presents a unique challenge in the effort to confront the bully problem. Cyberspace provides bullies with an unlimited audience while at the same time offering the perpetrator anonymity. [1] Offending material can be accessed for years to come, creating an inescapable cycle of victimization. [2]

The growing body of anti-bullying legislation in Canada is increasingly holding schools accountable for responding to cyberbullying by developing policies that require schools to act if an incident of bullying negatively impacts the school environment regardless of when and where the incident occurs. In Alberta, the proposed Education Act introduced in the legislature during the fall 2012 session proposes to hold students accountable for not reporting online incidents of bullying. The proposed act would grant schools the authority to suspend complacent bystanders. In effect, students would have to police the internet on behalf of the school or face the threat of suspension. This is not an effective way to engage students regarding cyberbullying.

Writing about the U.S. experience, Dr. Patchin, co-director of the Cyberbullying Research Center, and his colleague Sameer Hinduja of Florida Atlantic University argue that schools south of the border are in the precarious position of being required to address cyberbullying while protecting

Cyberbullying continued on the next page

28. Holt, et al. *Parent/child concordance*, p. 58.
29. The authors argue that a third of parents believe children should resolve the issue by fighting back and that this may reflect aggressive home environments. Holt, et al. *Parent/child concordance*, p. 58. However, this is merely speculation by the researchers.
30. Study upon the issue of cyberbullying in Canada with regard to Canada's international human rights obligations under Article 19 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Standing Senate Committee on Human Rights, 41st Parliament, 1st Session (June 11, 2012). (Testimony of Justin W. Patchin).
31. *Ibid.*

educational institutions from lawsuits. In a number of legal cases in the U.S., schools have been reprimanded for punishing students for after hours online behaviour. [3]

Cyberbullying researchers Michael Couvillon and Vessela Ilieva argue that in addition to engaging parents, schools should define the problem, enforce the rules and consequences, collect data on the prevalence of the problem and incorporate an anti-cyberbullying curriculum. [4] All this while attempting to cover the core curriculum, which is no small feat.

Another scenario is for lawmakers to compel parental engage by holding parents accountable for the online activities of their children. Speaking to the Standing Senate Committee on Human Rights, Dr. Patchin reported that involving parents is one of the biggest challenges in confronting cyberbullying. Patchin testified, "We can develop laws and school policy, but it is hard to legislate parents to be good parents." [5] In some cases, the government does intervene where there is abuse and neglect, but it would be difficult and invasive to attempt to legislate 'good' parenting.

That doesn't mean law makers have not attempted to legislate parental responsibility where bullying is concerned. In Nova Scotia a private member's bill was introduced in April 2012 that would hold parents liable for the misuse of electronic devices for cyberbullying by their children. The proposed bill states that parents who "knew or ought to have known the youth was cyberbullying" would be guilty of an offense under the proposed Cyberbullying Intervention Act. [6] The legislation raises the question of whether parents are aware of their children's online activities, especially if these activities include bullying. As shown above, parents of bullies are often unaware of their children's bullying behaviour. It is unclear that legislation would encourage parental engagement. It is conceivable that some families facing the potential of punitive action would be more evasive when confronted with alleged acts of cyberbullying.

In early 2012, the Nova Scotia Task Force on Bullying and Cyberbullying released a report Respectful and Responsible Relationships: There's No App for That. Report author A. Wayne Mackay suggests that parents are the most influential role model in communicating appropriate behaviour. In the case of cyberbullying, Mackay argues that parents need to become more educated about social media and online safety. Schools could provide educational opportunities for parents. [7] This approach is less coercive and focuses on prevention, though, as already mentioned, engaging parents has proven to be difficult.

Parent/school partnerships will only succeed if parents engage the cyberbullying issue and assume their role as primary educator and mediator of the use of internet equipped devices through setting clear limits and expectations around use.

Endnotes

1. Couvillon, M.A. and Ilieva, V. (2011). Recommended practices: a review of schoolwide preventative programs and strategies on cyberbullying. Preventing School Failure, vol. 55, no. 2. pp. 96-97.

2. Couvillon and Ilieva, Recommended practices, pp. 96-97.

3. Hinduja, S. and Patchin, J.W. (2011). Cyberbullying: a review of the legal issues facing educators. *Preventing School Failure*, vol. 55, no. 2. p. 71.
4. Couvillon and Ilieva, *Recommended practices*, pp. 99-100.
5. Study upon the issue of cyberbullying in Canada with regard to Canada's international human rights obligations under Article 19 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Standing Senate Committee on Human Rights, 41st Parliament, 1st Session (June 11, 2012). (testimony of Justin W. Patchin). 6. Cyberbullying intervention Act, Bill 27, Sess. 61 of the General Assembly of Nova Scotia. (2012). Retrieved from http://nslegislature.ca/index.php/proceedings/bills/cyberbullying_intervention_act_-_bill_27
7. Mackay, A.W. (2012, Feb. 29). Respectful and responsiblerelationships: Th ere's no app for that. Nova Scotia Task Force on Bullying and Cyberbullying. pp. 31-32.

As with many social problems, the challenges are more visible than the solutions. The impact parents are having on the issue may not be immediately evident and simply noting attendance levels at parenting seminars may not accurately gauge parental involvement.

Researchers have explored how families contribute to the resilience of children in the face of bullying. One study found that maternal warmth had a protective effect for bullied primary children, reducing the negative outcomes associated with being bullied.[32] The authors conclude, "Warm parent-child relationships can exert an environmentally mediated effect on children's behavioural adjustment following bullying victimization."[33] The researchers argue that a well structured home with uplifting environment may help boost resiliency.[34]

Despite the connection between family environment and aggression, few studies have examined the use of family therapy to address bullying.[35] Therapy can help address family environment issues that contribute to bullying behavior such as conflict resolution. Among the limited number of studies that have been conducted on family therapy and bullying, results suggest that family therapy can decrease bullying behavior in males and aggressive and bullying behaviour among females.[36] Programs that intervene in bullying should consider how families can be engaged in the process.

Canadian Clinical and Developmental Psychologist Dr. Gordon Neufeld agrees that parents and other adults hold the key to addressing the bullying problem. He argues that the root of the problem lies in the natural human instinct to connect or attach with others. He defines attachment as, "the pursuit and preservation of proximity, of closeness

32. Bowes, L., Maughan, B., Caspi, A., Moffitt, T., and Arseneault, L. (2010). Families promote emotional and behavioural resilience to bullying: Evidence of an environmental effect. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* vol. 51, no. 7. p. 809.
33. Bowes et al., *Families promote*, p. 810.
34. *Ibid*.
35. Butler and Platt, *Bullying: A family and school system*, p. 18.
Powell and Ladd, *Bullying*, p. 201.
36. Powell and Ladd, *Bullying*, pp. 201-202.

and connection: physically, behaviorally, emotionally and psychologically."[37]

Neufeld argues that attachment always occurs in a hierarchy; one individual assumes the dominant provider instinct and the other the dependent seeking instinct. Bullying occurs when the natural provider instinct or alpha instinct goes awry. Neufeld argues that these instincts should be fluid and responsive but can become "stuck," becoming the defining aspect of a personality. When this occurs with the alpha instinct, Neufeld refers to immobility of the alpha instinct as the "alpha complex."[38]

When a person encounters severe emotional wounding the limbic system in the brain switches into survival mode, to protect against feelings of vulnerability. Vulnerable feelings are necessary for the alpha instinct to fulfill its caretaking role. Neufeld's theory is that when the alpha complex is numbed to the caretaking aspect, the alpha becomes a predator and the bully instinct is born. Neufeld states that the bully instinct is "to assert dominance by exploiting vulnerability."[39]

Neufeld points out that there may be no other place where young people face the potential for wounding than the school environment. Kids naturally form hierarchal attachments, but in the absence of adults these attachments are immature and unstable. He argues that the typical Canadian approach to anti-bullying programs assumes that a power imbalance is the root of the bully problem. The solutions often focus on democratization – imposing egalitarian values on childhood environments with the hope that students will develop these values among themselves. He stresses that this works against human instinct to form hierarchical relationships that are evident even in observing young children at play.[40]

Neufeld argues that adult intervention is the key response to bullying. As he understands bullying to be an instinctual social and emotional issue, simply addressing the behaviour is insufficient. He argues that adults must first establish a "caring dominance" that manoeuvres with the bullies' need to lead. He argues that the alpha presence of an adult in a bully's life must also reduce the wounding that causes the child to push out vulnerable emotions. In short, a secure adult/child attachment relationship must be re-established. The larger goal is to re-establish a "village of attachment" where primary attachments are between children and adults. He advises that today's culture tends to separate children and adults rather than supporting healthy attachments.[41]

Parents are ideally positioned to address bullying in Neufeld's paradigm, but he also believes that educators can establish primary attachments and that doing so is especially important in classroom management. He argues that a proper understanding of attachment would

37. Neufeld, G. and Maté, G. (2005). *Hold on to Your Kids*. Toronto: Vintage Canada, p. 17.
38. 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.
39. *Ibid.*
40. *Ibid.*
41. *Ibid.*

transform the education system.[42] Yet many philosophies and programs in Canadian education enforce immature peer to peer attachment rather than establishing healthy adult/child relationships.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Most Canadians are eager for action on the problem of bullying. However, the complexity of the problem makes it difficult to formulate effective responses. Public policy approaches typically call for anti-bullying policies at the school level and increased funding for support and awareness programs. This approach often acknowledges the importance of parents and families but offers few tangible supports. Researchers have acknowledged the influential role of parents and the family environment and encourage schools to engage families in responding to the bully problem. Recommendations are divided into those for parents, educators and government.

For parents:

- Be proactive in speaking to children about bullying
- Monitor screen time and establish limits and expectations around use of internet devices
- Be intentional in cultivating primary attachment relationships with children and pursue an authoritative parenting style characterized by warm and caring communication with sufficient supervision and clearly expressed expectations and limits

For educators:

- Facilitate educational opportunities for school staff and parents, connecting stake holders with experts and resources
- Invite parents to partner in developing a school response to bullying behaviour

For governments:

- Legislate cautiously and promote community based responses
- Consider parents as the primary educator when developing education policy, evaluating how policy initiatives empower parents.

CONCLUSION

Researchers recognize that families have an important role in preventing and addressing incidents of bullying. Family environment and parenting style are important factors that interact with other variables to influence aggressive behaviour.

While family environment alone does not determine which children will bully, similar family characteristics are found among many bullies. Children who bully are more likely to come from homes where supervision is less consistent and family conflict more prevalent. Poor communication and the absence of conflict resolution skills in the home environment have been associated with bullying. Healthy family environments have been

42. *Ibid.*

associated with reduced negative outcomes that result from being targeted by bullies.

Government legislation has focused on holding schools accountable for creating safe environments. However, unless educators and parents engage one another little will be accomplished through legislation.

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