

kids these days...

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Schoolyard Follies?

School bells are ringing again and young people across Alberta are taking part in the annual rituals of new schools, new books, new clothes, new friends...and the potential of new bullies.

Bullying is defined somewhat coldly and impersonally in the dictionary as a conscious, willful, deliberate and repeated hostile activity marked by an imbalance of power, intent to harm, or a threat of aggression. But to 36 per cent of Canadian youth who report being victimized by bullying, it is, simply put, a hellish nightmare.

I'm sure most of you can recall at least mention of Oprah Winfrey reaching out to kids in Drayton Valley earlier this year about the negative consequences of bullying and doing something to stop it if you see it. How loud is a cry for help when even an American talk show host in Chicago hears it?

Of course, bullying is not something new by any means. I'm sure every person can recall at least one occasion of bullying in their life. In my childhood it was a particular family of boys on the far side of town, who were notorious for starting fights with smaller or younger kids. Because of their reputation, I would do anything to avoid even a remote chance of encountering any of them, which was not easy to do in a small town.

Physical bullying is most common, but there are also four other types - name-calling, exclusion, threatening, and the newest, cyber-bullying.

Cyber-bullying does not use the playground as a battlefield but rather computers and cell phones to spread malicious information about people. This form of bullying can be especially hurtful because the number of people who can access the damaging material is virtually

impossible to count. And often a cyber-bully is even meaner because the victim is not close by.

The old adage, "Sticks and stones may break my bones but names will never hurt me," is actually not true. Verbal and threatening abuse can take a devastating toll on children and youth, even leading to suicide in extreme cases.

Unfortunately, bullying is sometimes dismissed by some adults as simply, "Kids will be kids." The tragedy in such a response is that bullying is not something that will correct itself; and it is certainly not something, when serious, that families should have to deal with on their own.

The Ministry of Children and Youth Services has partnered with eight other Ministries to set up common bullying prevention strategies to decrease bullying incidents. A toll-free helpline, 1-888-456-2323, was launched in May of 2006 and had received nearly 1000 calls by the end of 2008. Online resources are also available for children (www.teamheroes.ca), youth (www.b-free.ca) and adults (www.bullyfreealberta.ca).

Some municipalities, with good intentions, have even tried to provide another mechanism to help officials by creating anti-bullying by-laws. I expect their success may have been limited, but at least they are trying to make a difference.

Kids these days need to know that their parents, their community, and their province are willing to support them and help create a bully-free society for their benefit.

Any feedback or comments can be sent via email to david.rideout@gov.ab.ca.

