



**ANURADHA DUGAL**

## **What's Working About Healthy Relationships Programs in Schools**

*"This is the stuff we should be learning about in school"*

**W**hen Dustin was in Grade 9, he was called names by the other kids. He tried to ignore it. He tried not to feel left out or picked on. "I just wanted it to stop" he said. And so he became someone else: someone he just wasn't supposed to be. He did not want to stick out and be victimized anymore, so he did everything he could to fit in. He goofed off. He laughed at the jokes. He agreed with the other kids that the Respectful Relationships program in his BC school was stupid.

This is the beginning of his journey and it sounds very familiar to teacher Tiffany Wightman, a teacher in the Gulf Islands School District in British Columbia. She notices that kids get uncomfortable in the beginning when they start to look at what she sees as violations. "Violence is happening in schools like it is happening in society," she says, "and education needs to take a practical, pro-active approach to understand what our children are facing."

Psychologist Nathalie Hazan, who works with kids in Montreal who have been severely bullied, is often called in when parents realize just how serious the violence is. She knows that young people in schools face a vicious mix of peer pressure, media influence, alienation from adults and a dawning awareness of societal norms just as they are building their own identities. They respond with what could be called extreme acts of socialization and make sure they act a certain way, to

fit the mold. We have all seen the kid that does not fit in who just gets picked on by peers. The aggressor pinpoints a weakness and uses their power, exploiting the insecurity until victim believes it himself.

Young people have to navigate more and more complex social networks, with little or no adult guidance. Just like adolescents of any generation, they are prone to the changes in mood, and have poor impulse control. But right now, much of what is happening in their relationships is affected by the media, and their media is often full of sexist, racist, homophobic images and sometimes vague on pro-social behaviour. If they are to navigate this world more successfully, they need to learn vital skills about critical thinking, decision making, negotiating, and communicating in healthy ways while at the same time building their self-esteem and empathy. These skills are embedded in almost every school curriculum from coast to coast to coast. And yet, these are the skills that are often skipped over, as teachers work all out to teach reading, math and French. That is why healthy relationship programs are vital and why so many people are working on getting them in every school.

Group socialization theory (Harris 1995, 1998) helps explain why young people in school establish cliques and hierarchies that lead to exclusion and victimization, according to Dr. Shelley Hymel (University of British Columbia). This socialization system within a peer group helps young people become part of the group and absorb the group culture. In a group culture marked by favouritism, discrimination and use of power and control over others, the cliques that get established pull certain kids into a group, but may leave others out. Their alpha leaders require everyone who joins the group to maintain the group culture. If that is a culture of intolerance then the group is on the lookout for difference and will be name calling, usually using homophobic, racist, or sexist slurs. In some cases it includes physical abuse and in some schools, this can be a toxic place for boys as the culture reinforces a version of masculinity that is actually damaging.

But what if we can turn this around, asks Hymel? What if we could use influential leaders to create an “us” rather than splitting the group? What if teachers learned about, understood and engaged in the group process so that they could create a safe and caring environment, one where they were able to pull all kids into the group and the culture was one of inclusion? And what if the kids themselves took a role to lead this change?

Across the country in Nova Scotia, Laura Swaine knows the power of peers. The program she runs in Antigonish, Healthy Relationships for Youth, is almost entirely youth-facilitated. The teachers play a role in making sure that the topics raised in the workshops become integrated into the school culture. Terry Chisholm is a Vice Principal in a school that has included the Healthy Relationships for Youth program for close to 10 years. He notices that kids in his schools are anxious about life, and especially girls struggle with self image. He believes the program in his school has saved lives, but it couldn't have happened without a strong message from schools about what is and is not acceptable. He remembers going to the schools board to request special permission to suspend kids extra days for using a homophobic slur. But it does not stop there. Now the school has an active Gay-Straight Alliance club that works together with the Healthy Relationships for Youth program.

This program does not talk about bullying but about relationships and especially about how violence in relationships can happen. Swaine, the program coordinator, believes that by naming types of violence and thinking about levels of violence, young people are able to think about specific actions that can make a difference.

Swaine also says that she is seeing a worrying increase in sexual violence in schools, something that Chisholm agrees is very worrisome. Young women in the Youth Team or in the school often talk about feeling conflicted about sexual behaviour. They feel pressured to behave in certain ways, like Dustin, and they do things to fit in, without really thinking about what the impact is. Often in these situations, it starts with a selfie (photo) sent to a boyfriend. This creates an expectation that the girl involved will do more, engage in more risky behaviour. Consent is implied. There is peer pressure to do more, even when it doesn't feel right. And after the selfie, or the escalated activity, she feels anxious or depressed. And behind it all, adding to this mix of remorse and self-doubt, is the possibility that friends or peers who egged her on might end up publicly shaming her for this behaviour. However, the girls themselves do not name this as sexual violence, or sexism, or a result of a society that values young women most for the sexual attraction and availability. No school is immune to this. In Wightman's school, there have been two cases out of 300 students just in the last year, of selfies being passed round the school without consent.

## OUR SCHOOLS/OUR SELVES

Police in Toronto are currently investigating a slut-shaming Twitter feed followed by a group of 14 to 16 years olds. These young people were encouraging peers to share intimate details on the Twitter feed, which would then be open for comment. Many comments were hurtful and blaming, deliberately bringing girls down. Most of the targets were young women and the comments were around attractiveness, popularity and sexual behaviour. No community is immune from this.

Schools understand that online activity has a huge impact on education outcomes and that the harassment and unhealthy behaviour that happen on Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, Ask me, Snap Chat (and whatever the latest forum is) loom large in real life. What can teachers or a healthy relationship program do about cyber sexual harassment, intimidation and bullying? Swaine often finds herself having conversations about why kids are uncomfortable with their decisions. She sees this conversation as being very different from what might be talked about if this is labelled bullying. "Typically if you ask a kid in school, what is bullying — they will tell you, but it is a question and answer that is pat. It doesn't mean anything to those kids," says Swaine. "Most kids know it by rote, but don't really see the violence — bullying can be anything for them right now." Swaine says that when she gets away from this dialogue and allows space for conversations to happen, the Grade 9 and 10 students she sees start to talk about double standards, stereotypes, ways we portray ourselves in social media. This is now a conversation about identity and about learning how to navigate a complex social structure while learning who you are and want to be. And then she can also talk about consent.

And at this same age, when young people are so heavily socialized by their peer group, fewer young people are experiencing high quality relationships with teachers, parents or other adults, according to Dr. Wendy Craig (Queens University and PREVNet). Just under one fifth of boys and girls in Grades 9 & 10 report having a high quality relationship with teachers, and it is not much different for parents. (Peplar D, Craig W & Haner D, 2012)

With long-term, consistent, team efforts and concrete, small acts, school personnel and students can change the culture. Teachers may want to walk by or ignore a slur, but best of all would be to find positive ways to intervene. Craig's research tells her that "It is the responsibility of every adult to foster positive, trust relationships with children."

These relationships have long-term effects on development of young people in school. “Adults have a responsibility to include kids who might otherwise be marginalized.” No teacher needs to be told that fewer incidences of bullying lead to better academic achievement, or that kids who are engaged in school will stay longer and graduate with better results. By seeing a group of young people every day, teachers observe who is able to concentrate in class, or who always sits against the wall so there is no one behind them.

This sensitivity can be put into truly beautiful action when you consider how the teacher highlighted in this blog (<http://momastery.com/blog/2014/01/30/share-schools/>) uses seating arrangements to help her students connect through “Patterns of Love and Loneliness in Mathematics”.

“Relationships matter,” says Wendy Craig. Adverse childhood experiences have long-term health effects that carry on well into adulthood, whether through depression, obesity, chronic diseases or risky use of substances. Adverse experiences include any psychological abuse that might be happening in schools, as well as verbal abuse, sexual abuse, and negative factors in the home environment. In this same report, Peplar, Craig and Haner remind us that social exclusion fires up the same parts of the brain as physical pain. Social rejection hurts like physical abuse does, and so young people who have these experiences many times over experience the effects of chronic stress. In time, this can affect brain development and gene expression. Being in a class that is warm and supportive can protect young people and start to reverse some of the early negative effects of stress. This is especially true for girls.

Positive experiences in school relationships with teachers can turn this around and protect against the negative outcomes. However, teachers need resources to do this. Teachers are already using every minute they have to teach curriculum, manage extracurricular activities, focusing on academics, parents’ expectations, and school board requirements. Often they wish they could get to teaching and reinforcing important relationship skills. Wightman, a teacher in the Gulf Islands School District in British Columbia, knows how hard it is. Most teachers would love to spend more time on attitudes and behaviour change in class time, but the pressure they are under to deliver curriculum-based learning is intense. “All the –isms are in our

## **THE BENEFITS OF SCHOOL-BASED PROGRAMS**

---

### FOR STUDENTS...

- All youth learn about healthy relationships.
- Students do not feel stigmatized by being singled out for help.
- Students with weak relationship skills or previous negative experiences can learn from peers with stronger skills.
- Students may earn academic credit.

### FOR SCHOOLS...

- Improved sense of safety in the schools, which is linked to higher outcomes for students and better school performance.
- A more positive school climate.
- Enhanced teacher-student bonds; teachers can apply enriched strategies and skills to their relationships with students.

### FOR SOCIETY...

- Makes a strong statement about the value of healthy relationships.
- Helps youth build leadership skills.
- Produces future leaders that use positive, non-violent behaviour.
- Develops positive bystander skills and a sense of responsibility among youth.

*Sourcebook on Violence Against Women, p. 332.*

Proscribed Learning Outcomes, says Tiffany, “but it is really hard for teachers to cover them when they are covering medieval architecture or sine, co-sine, tangent”.

But a whole school approach can help. First of all, Wightman’s school worked to include a program that was based on sound research, developed by a group they trusted and most of all, worked on transferable skills — what is generally called social and emotional learning. They found SWOVA’s Respectful Relationships (R+R) program and it has been working in her middle school for close to 10 years from Grades 8 and up. Having a community group in the school working on this has many benefits: “It takes the stress off the teachers” says Wightman. “Most teachers don’t have specialized training in gender equity or in sex education”. She is proud to have the program working tirelessly on issues like sexism, homophobia and racism.

But the whole school approach does not start or stop with a program: “The hardest thing to change is the culture” says Wightman, “and you can get to that with leadership. We are explicit about what we believe in, we have a common language and all the teachers are on board.” This change in a school culture can be achieved over time. Her school gave teachers time to integrate new policies and procedures, they were supported with training. “But policy was easy, it provided a framework and it was the ongoing hard work, building relationships with kids, building trust that made the difference.”

Wightman’s schools policies are backed up by research. Craig stresses that non-punitive ways to respond to behaviour are more effective. “Kids need to think about the impact of what they did. Have a supportive discussion about remarks or behaviour, help them find a different way to interact”. This is the ideal scenario and would happen if teachers had the support and training. Wightman believes even the smallest act should be called on. A kid might write “You suck” on another kid’s binder. Some teachers might tell student to grow a thicker skin and get over it. But in the right culture, an adult can have a conversation about this, help the young people involved gain understanding and then seek restoration. A culture like this expects the best and gives all kids hope.

Craig encourages teachers and all adults to create opportunities to practice healthy relationship skills and to give students alternate strategies. Reinforce positive behaviour. Small things matter. Celebrate

## ANATOMY OF A TYPICAL PROGRAM

---

Most healthy relationship programs are designed for students in Grades 7 to 12. A typical program includes information on:

- **The continuum of violence:** Different forms of violence (physical, sexual, emotional, financial, spiritual, criminal harassment/stalking).
- **Stereotypes:** Revealing gender inequality and challenging stereotypes.
- **The dynamics of dating violence:** Control and power in intimate relationships.
- **The dynamics of healthy relationships:** Respectful behaviour, healthy boundaries, and assertive communication.
- **Media literacy:** Sexism, racism, and violence in popular media.
- **Skills Building:** Learning conflict resolution, critical thinking, and managing disappointment and anger.
- **Community Resources:** Where to go for help.

generosity. Follow up after a teachable moment — don't just leave it after one discussion, but come back to the discussion another time. Teachers' (and parents') interactions can be seen along two dimensions: support, which is the warm, open, caring part of interactions and structure, where the adult provides consistency in



response, sets boundaries, and in the case of teachers, has sound classroom management skills. "This is the foundation of developing strong trust relationships with those children in your care," says Craig.

She also sees the value in healthy relationship programs. "By providing a universal program in school, you are sending a message, one that has to be reinforced by teachers, that this is important for kids to learn, that the school has an expectation for a certain kind of behaviour and that the social and emotional well being of the children is important." Terry Chisholm sees even quieter kids getting interested in the sessions and opening up more than they would in any other class. He says this is thanks to the environment of trust created in the groups. They know that things that are shared will not end up all over the school. And talking about

**Many acts of violence on the internet between young people of high school age are gendered, based on sexual identity and focus on slut shaming.**

issues like alcohol abuse, intimate partner violence and sexual assault means they also know when and how to look for help. They come to Chisholm for help after the groups, sometimes even months after, and he can connect them to the resources they need.

But not all school-based approaches or programs talk about all forms of violence. This is an important part of the equation, says Swaine. She likes to name specific types of violence because then young people can get to the roots of what is happening. She knows that using words like sexual violence, harassment or abuse can make students and teachers uncomfortable, but she says it also helps the discussions get more concrete. This is more important than ever. Many acts of violence on the internet between young people of high school age are gendered, based on sexual identity and focus on slut shaming.

Acknowledging the gender inequality can be hard. "Kids don't see it at first," says Wightman. She gives examples of how it plays out in schools. "The worst thing a boy can be called is a girl. Boys belittle things that are considered girlish, so that girls reject them too. Kids should be able to be their whole selves, and not forced into a gender box." She would like programs that discuss gender inequality, racism,

identity and social inequity as part of the curriculum in school from day one. “That way, there is more chance to integrate it into their thinking. When they come to it in Grade 8, it is part of who they are and they feel shame or guilt about racism or sexism. They struggle.”

Healthy relationship programs in schools make a difference. Programs funded by Canadian Women’s Foundation from 2006 to 2011

### TIPS FOR DEVELOPING A GENDER LENS

---

- **Examine your program materials for gender balance in language, images, ideas, etc. Is the everyday reality of both women and men equally represented?**
- **Create role plays or scenarios that challenge gender stereotypes.**
- **Take the lead in naming gender issues. For example, state that there is a “double standard” when it comes to dating. Typically, girls who engage in sexual activities are negatively labelled as “easy,” while boys who behave the same way are usually admired.**
- **Does your program material assume that everyone in the class is straight? Avoid always saying “boyfriend” and “girlfriend.” Encourage the use of the gender-neutral term, partner.**
- **If a student makes a sexist statement or perpetuates a gender stereotype, don’t let it pass unremarked or unchallenged. Do not excuse the use of stereotypes because you think the students are too young to understand the implications or because “they are just having fun.” Use the opportunity as a teaching moment.**
- **Teach students how to explore stereotypes through self-reflective discussion. Tap into their curiosity. Ask them how and why these stereotypes may have emerged, and about what social or economic purpose they may serve.**

- **Position “critical thinking” as a sophisticated and important skill. Challenge their thinking by asking unexpected questions such as: “When guys get dressed for a party, do they worry that what they wear might make them look promiscuous?”**
- **In group discussions, monitor the gender balance in the students’ participation. Are the boys speaking more than the girls?**
- **Take special care to ensure that female students have a strong voice in issues that particularly affect them, such as the media portrayal of women and girls. Encourage them to share their thoughts and feelings. Don’t speak for them, and don’t allow male students to belittle their concerns.**
- **Use both female and male facilitators. Ensure that power is shared equally between them and that they are modeling a healthy relationship.**
- **Gender-separate modules must be led by female and male facilitators.**

changed attitudes and behaviors and created safe and caring school cultures (Tutty, 2011). All the kids in Dustin’s school have been in the R+R program from Grade 7. By Grade 10, the kids who had been calling him names started to apologize. What he realized in Grade 10 was that the person he showed to the kids around him was not really him. Until that point, he had done everything he could to fit in and be part of the crowd. Not standing out, being a follower and no one saw his potential. He can lead boys’ groups, help fire up conversations on sexism, lead a presentation on double standards and have an interview with someone he’s never met. Now he can tell other kids “Be who you are.” He is part of the Youth Team and he co-facilitates workshops with the Grade 7 & 8 kids.

Dustin really did not see the advantages of the R+R program until he was in Grade 9 or 10. He now leads sessions about bullying

## OUR SCHOOLS/OUR SELVES

and harassment because he can relate directly back to his personal experience. He uses his experiences to challenge kids about name calling — he has been called all the names they can think of. “It changes the mood in the class when you share something personal, and it encourages other kids to open up.” Dustin loves the fact that he gets to teach younger kids and can make a connection. He tried to encourage the kids to be real, to express their emotions, to look behind the labels. And this has a ripple effect. “I have learned awesome problem solving and communication skills. It has affected all areas of my life.”

---

**ANURADHA DUGAL** has been Director of Violence Prevention Programs at Canadian Women’s Foundation for six years and previous to that was a Board Member (2002 – 2007) and Chair of the Violence Prevention Committee. She is currently responsible for all national strategies related to violence against women and girls and teen violence prevention.

### **ABOUT THE CANADIAN WOMEN’S FOUNDATION**

The Canadian Women’s Foundation is Canada’s public foundation for women and girls. We empower women and girls in Canada to move out of violence, out of poverty and into confidence. Since 1991, we’ve raised money and invested in over 1,300 community programs across Canada, and are now one of the 10 largest women’s foundations in the world. We take a positive approach to address root causes of the most critical issues facing women and girls. We study and share the best ways to create long-term change and bring community organizations together for training and to learn from each other. We carefully select and fund the programs with the strongest outcomes and regularly evaluate their work. We have a special focus on building a community of women helping other women. Helping women creates safer families and communities, and a more prosperous society for all of us. We invest in the strength of women and the dreams of girls. For more information please visit [www.canadianwomen.org](http://www.canadianwomen.org).

## RESOURCES

Canadian Women's Foundation Resources on Violence Prevention  
<http://www.canadianwomen.org/violence-prevention-resources>

PREVNet  
<http://www.prevnet.ca/resources/tip-sheets>

Centre for Education on Violence Against Women and Children, Western University  
<http://www.learningtoendabuse.ca/learn/educators>

## CITATIONS

Social Emotional Learning and Bullying Prevention – Tools and Practical Approaches ,  
Symposium, Creating Caring School Communities, February 7 2014, Opening Presenta-  
tion by Shelley Hymel.

Healthy Development Depends on Healthy Relationships by Debra Peplar, Wendy  
Craig and Dilys Haner  
<http://www.prevnet.ca/sites/prevnet.ca/files/HealthyRelationshipsPaper.pdf>

Healthy Relationships, Preventing Dating Violence by Leslie M. Tutty  
<http://www.canadianwomen.org/sites/canadianwomen.org/files/PDF%20-%20VP%20Re-sources%20-%20CWF%20Healthy%20Relationships%20-%20FULL%20REPORT%20-%20April%2029%202011.pdf>