

Why are bullies admired?

By Trish Crawford

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Millionaire businessman Donald Trump screams, "You're fired!"

Simon Cowell lashes a contestant on American Idol for having "no talent."



Some poor sucker gets voted off the island.

Bullying is all around us, and not just on television. Government, business and sports all have successful bullies.

Is it any wonder, ask those trying to curb bullying, that impressionable young people aren't buying the message of peaceful co-operation?

"As adults we are a bunch of hypocrites," says psychologist Dr. Peter Jaffe, director of the Centre for Research and Education on Violence Against Women and Children in London, Ont. "What's the matter with kids is what's the matter with society. It's no use telling kids to play nice when everyone else gets rewarded for the opposite," he says.

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"If your favourite hockey player is Tie Domi, your favourite musician is Eminem and favourite video game is Mortal Kombat or Grand Theft Auto, everywhere you see violence."

There is some indication that bullying played a role in the background of the Montreal shooter who went on a rampage at Dawson College on September 13, 2006. Exactly how Kimveer Gill might have been affected by bullying remains unclear.

It has long been known that people who are bullied can snap and strike back, but less attention has been given to the role society plays in fostering bullying.

Jaffe took two of his four sons to a London Knights junior hockey game not long ago and saw not only fighting on the ice but also on the instant replay.

"There were 8,000 people cheering adolescents beating up on each other. And Tie Domi is a millionaire. What does that say? Yes, bullies are rewarded."

Jaffe, who teaches a safe schools course to education students training at the University of Western Ontario, says violent videos are playing a frequent role in the lives of young men who have gone on rampages at schools.

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"We have a culture of denigration," says Robert Fuller, the former president of Oberlin College, Ohio, and author of the book All Rise: Somebodies, Nobodies and the Politics of Dignity. He was speaking at York University's Centre for Practical Ethics last Thursday.

"All of the reality shows involve humiliation," he says, adding that bullying is essentially the abuse of power.

Fuller laments that U.S. President George W. Bush has picked John Bolton, "a famous tough guy," as ambassador to the United Nations, and not someone more skilled in conciliation.

The good news, says Fuller, is "that we do learn. There are examples of those who are noble. Nelson Mandela turned the other cheek and saved his country. Martin Luther King — the civil rights movement would not have been successful if it wasn't non-violent."

Education is the key to curbing bullying, he says, as students learn about the great men and women who promote respect for others.

Master teacher Maureen Kenny (an experienced teacher who helps other teachers handle classroom problems) piloted an anti-bullying curriculum last year in a tough New York City school that was rife with violence. The successful program, based on stories about young people being bullied and the ways they can solve their problems, helps victims and abusers alike, she says.

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"Every bully has been bullied. It's learned behaviour. The good things is that all these kids are getting an education. In school, they are learning about Abraham Lincoln and Gandhi and Albert Einstein and have access to literature and poems they wouldn't have out in the work world. They are exposed to great people and big ideas. So no, it is not hopeless."

The sad truth about bullying, she says, is that "it achieves your aim to dominate. It's fun to dominate other people. Most of us want people to go along with what we want."

"Current school programs aimed at curbing bullying may pay off in the next generation of adults behaving better," says David Wolfe, RBC chair in children's mental health at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health in Toronto. Maybe then viewers will turn off the television shows that belittle participants and thugs will lose their audiences, he says.

The psychologist, who specializes in adolescents, says it is imperative schools handle the issue of moral right and wrong. "The golden rule — Do unto others as you would have them do unto you — is not a religious tenet but the basic structure of a peaceful society," says Wolfe.

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"It's not right to use your strength," he says. "Ingrained in our culture is the belief that good guys finish last. We need to talk more about Gandhi, people like that."

University of Toronto social work professor Faye Mishna, an expert in the field who recently began researching cyber bullying, says it's true that bullies often win. "They're more popular than the victims," she says.

A number of years ago when the first Survivor show surfaced on television, Mishna pointed out that the method of "voting people off the island" was bullying behaviour. The biggest bully, the one who has kicked everyone else off, was rewarded with a cash prize.

Jennifer Connolly, director of the LaMarsh Centre for Research in Violence and Conflict Resolution at York University, says, "Children are growing up in a culture that tolerates levels of bullying, meanness, verbal name-calling and, at the same time, is telling them to be non-violent. ``We need to crank up the volume on that (non-violent) message."