

# A safe environment is key to reducing bullying

By Nathan Howes  
OAKVILLE BEAVER STAFF

Empowering students to stop bullying and mistreatment is up to everyone in the community.

This was the message delivered to parents and students in Oakville last week by John Linney, executive director of Impact Coaching and Speaking, and a co-author of the book *Safe School Ambassadors: Harnessing Student Power to Stop Bullying and Violence*.

"When it comes to bullying prevention, I've noticed it's getting younger. Things are happening to my daughter who's in fifth grade now that I didn't see until I was probably in tenth grade," said Linney. "Things are happening younger for students, it's getting meaner. There are more young people more likely to retaliate with force."

The workshop highlighted the impact bullying has on students and families, and shared practical strategies to address bullying and how parents can partner with their schools to prevent and address such issues.

"Being mean is a way to being accepted in youth culture. One way I get social power is by being mean and so it's getting meaner, it's becoming

more acceptable. It's like, it's okay, it's just how we do it around here," said Linney.

"It's getting more difficult for adults to identify when there's text messaging, Facebook, those things that are out there (that) go on that we don't see, young people know what to do and so they're keeping it even more below the radar," he added.

There are five types of mistreatment in school, including exclusion, put-downs, bullying, unwanted physical contact and acts against campus, Linney said.

One out of four kids are bullied, one out of five kids is the bully, and 282,000 high school kids are attacked each month nationally, according to BullyingCanada.

Almost one-third of students in Ontario experience bullying at school, and one-quarter report having bullied someone else, according to a 2009 report from the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health.

The latest Halton Youth Voice Roadshow report, released in March, shows that 39 per cent of Grade 7 students and 28 per cent of Grade 10 students in Halton reported being bullied at school at some point during the 2009-10 school year.



STEVEN DER-GARABEDIAN / SPECIAL TO THE BEAVER

**NO THANK YOU:** John Linney, co-author of *Safe School Ambassadors*, speaks to parents at the Halton Regional Centre's auditorium during a free forum on bullying, presented by the Halton District School Board in conjunction with Halton Region.

"A lot of kids are brought up, particularly in elementary school, 'Don't be a tattletale, don't be a tattletale,' and then they get to middle school and, all of a sudden, they (teachers) want them to say things and they

don't because they've been told the whole time don't be a tattletale," said Linney. "They don't know the difference between telling and getting helped sometimes. To tell on someone is to get someone in trouble about

little things. Getting help is getting people out of trouble about big things."

There are three Ps when it comes to bullying prevention — programs, policies and practices and Linney said every school should have some kind of program.

A positive school climate is important for many reasons, Linney said, and is based on an inner sense of how people feel safe and how much they belong there.

"If you walked in tonight, walk in the door and had people smiling and some of them were wearing 'ask me' buttons, you get a certain feeling. 'Okay I'm safe, I'm welcome here,'" said Linney. "Where as if you walk into a school where it's really dingy or dark or the doors are locked and no one is there, you get a certain feel."

When young people feel more connected to a school because the climate is warm, there's decreased substance abuse, decreased risky activity and decreased violent behaviour, Linney said.

"As kids felt safer in schools, they do better on their test scores. So the safer kids felt, no matter what neigh-

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