

Gala brings hope to region's abused

BY LISA QUEEN
Staff Writer

They occupy the two last spots on the York Region Abuse Program waiting list.

Officially, they are known as cases 25 and 26.

She is a three-year-old toddler, he's a six-year-old boy.

The children have never met but they share a common bond—the trauma of being sexually abused by a person they trusted.

The girl was sexually abused by her babysitter, the teenaged son of her parents' friends.

Her parents began to suspect their daughter had been victimized when she suddenly began crying uncontrollably at bath time and begging not to take her clothes off.

A visit to the family doctor confirmed she had been sexually abused.

The boy was sexually assaulted by his uncle, whom the child loved spending time with because many of the visits involved trips to the cottage to go fishing.

But then the trips began to go wrong. The uncle began fondling the boy.

Our main message is abuse is not going away.

There are real kids behind the numbers.

The frightened child finally asked his parents why his favourite uncle "touched him that way."

YRAP's fundraising gala last year helped the agency drastically reduce its waiting list to 26 from 40.

But executive director Lynn Huizer said tragic stories of the children still on the list prove more needs to be done to help sexually abused youngsters.

On Oct. 17, YRAP will host its seventh annual Evening of Hope gala, which features a Mardi Gras theme.

Organizers hope to raise \$50,000, which would allow the agency to eliminate its present waiting list.

"Our main message is abuse is not going away," Ms Huizer said. "We really need more resources to be directed to deal with the kids suffering from this abuse. There are real kids behind the numbers."



STAFF PHOTO/BILL ROBERTS

An Evening of Hope gala chairperson Sue Flanagan, volunteer Karen Lucarelli and vice-chairperson Anne Randall are preparing for the Oct. 17 event at Le Parc in Thornhill, which features a Mardi Gras theme.

Ms Huizer stressed sexual abuse affects more than the assaulted child.

"It's a problem that affects us all. The families are hugely impacted, the children's friends at school are hugely impacted," she said.

"We know if we intervene early, we can make a huge difference. If it's left, 80 per cent of adults who have been sexually assaulted will have mental health issues and some will attempt suicide."

According to YRAP:

- One in four girls and one in five boys will be sexually abused before their 18th birthdays.

- In 2002/03, the agency treated 114 children and 91 families, which officials say is a small fraction of sexual abuse incidents in York Region.

- More than half the children on the waiting list are under seven;
- Between 85 and 90 per cent of

victims know their abuser well, and.

- The agency offers a wide range of services, including programs for victims, families, sex offenders and groups. More than 25,000 York school children have viewed abuse prevention plays to teach them how to stay safe from all forms of abuse. YRAP also provides a court support program to assist victims and witnesses through the legal system.

The cost of the gala is \$125 per person and will feature entertainment by The Legends of Rock and Roll, dinner and dancing, open bar and live and silent auctions.

The event will be held at Le Parc Dining and Banquet Hall in Thornhill.

For more information or to order tickets, call Lynn Rush at 905-830-3040, ext. 302.

Internet bullying increasing concern in schools

BY SIMONE JOSEPH
Staff Writer

Do you think Jane is ugly? Do you think she is a loser?

How about Bob? Do you think he is fat? Check off yes or no.

This is a made-up sample of the types of questions students can answer about their classmates at student-made websites.

This type of Internet bullying is "a disturbing and increasing activity," principals and teachers said in a recent survey of four Vaughan elementary schools.

The bullying can come in many forms: a student-led campaign of nasty e-mail messages to a classmate, a website filled with mean comments about a student, a site where you can vote for the biggest loser, a chat room or instant message conversation where the topic is how much of a geek a student is.

"It's usually gossipy, slanderous types of things about students," said Myrna Beck, principal of Glen Shields Public School. "Kids are more sophisticated (today). Five years ago, it wasn't a problem."

Glen Shields is one of four Vaughan elementary schools whose grades 4 to 8 students, teachers and principals completed a survey on bullying in January 2003. The other schools were St. Joseph The Worker Catholic Elementary School, Yorkhill Public School and Divine Mercy Catholic Elementary School.

The schools had volunteered to participate in an anti-bullying pilot project called Together We Can Stop Bullying, which started May 2003 and will finish at the end of this month. The schools were not chosen because of high rates of bullying.

Surveys before and after the program are used to measure changes in students' knowledge and behaviour.

A report describing the pre-program survey results will go to the region's health and emergency medical services committee.

Internet bullying is virtually impossible to trace, Ms Beck said.

Students can hide their identities by using pseudonyms in chat rooms and making up e-mail addresses using computers from home.

Often, the school finds out about the bullying because the student being targeted or the victim's friend will print out a copy of the e-mail or website and bring it into the office.

This type of bullying can be particularly painful for students because, as opposed to a one-on-one taunt, the information on the Internet is easy to access, said Dr. Glenn DiPasquale, chief psychologist with the York Region District School Board.

"It's public, it's open to the world. That can be very upsetting."

He has had teachers and principals call him about Internet bullying from across the region.

Online bullying can also be easier to do than bullying in person, said Cathy Jaynes, manager of school services with the region's health department and one of the authors of the report.

"You are writing down words and firing them off. It is not as personal."

Thanks to the anti-bullying pilot project at Glen Shields, which included a conference at the school, workshops, videos and discussions on bullying, Ms Beck has seen an improvement in students' understanding of the issue.

STUDENTS HAVE RESPONSIBILITY

"They'll use the term 'victim,' they will use the term 'bystander.' We all now have a common language," Ms Beck said.

Students understand, if they witness bullying, they have a responsibility to do something about it and were taught strategies for dealing with bullying at the school conference, she said.

Last year, a few incidents of Internet bullying were reported at the school but so far this year, there have been none, she said.

In the past, York Region has offered anti-bullying presentations when schools requested it but these presentations are not effective in changing behaviour in the long term, according to a region report. So, health services staff are working with school boards to incorporate bullying issues into classroom curriculum.

Two evening sessions for parents of students in the four pilot schools will be available this month.

One session will focus on Internet bullying and the other will focus on parenting skills for victimized children and children who bully.

For more information on York Region's Together We Can Stop Bullying program, contact York Region Health Services Health Connection at 1-800-361-5653.

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