

WORDS HURT

BY AMY LAZAR
Staff Writer

Ugly. Stupid. Loser.

Mean-spirited words and phrases are often exchanged by young children, but Alyssa said it hurts more as a teenager.

"It gets worse as we grow up because the kids think of more names," said the unassuming girl, whose mother didn't want her last name printed for fear of school yard ostracizing.

"Things like you're ugly or you smell is what I've heard," the Richmond Hill student added.

Using language in a derogatory way is a form of bullying and studies show mental and emotional scars take years to heal, if ever.

"Appearance is an easy target, but so is intelligence," said Michelle Wolff, a special education teacher at Walter Scott Public School.

While the assumption is smart — or nerdy — students are the ones being teased, those in special needs classes fall victim as well.

"It is as simple as using the word 'stupid,'" she said, adding she does not hear the word 'retarded' used by students.

However, students often bully in the school yard where they are behind the backs or out of teacher earshot, added Ms Wolff.

When she does hear the name-calling, the teacher discourages the behavior.

"I have taken many students

aside and I question them whether or not they understand what they are saying," she said.

Most of them don't, but they have a very clear understanding of the reaction they receive, said Dr. Glenn DiPasquale, York Region District School Board chief psychologist.

"The words are a part of language and often, kids don't know the true meaning of what they say," he said. "Kids use language for impact, especially when they know it's a taboo word."

With pre-teenagers and teenagers, Dr. DiPasquale said the inappropriate use of language is a clear message of challenging adult values.

The younger children are looking for validation, positive or negative.

"The vast majority of inappropriate language use comes from modelling; they hear older kids using it and connect it to being more mature," he said.

"If bravado or taboo behaviour makes people laugh or gets attention, that behaviour will be emulated."

Phrases such as "that is retarded" have not disappeared even though in the 1980s, schools stopped segregating students with developmental disabilities.

That was done to lessen the discrimination against students with special needs, Dr. DiPasquale said.

When the IQ test was first used in 1905, psychology literature would refer to low-scoring students as idiot, imbecile or morons.

"Language is always changing and adapting," he said.

"Terms become loaded and sensitive so we have to abandon them and find new descriptors to stay ahead of it."

Meanwhile, some words youth use to tease have taken on totally new meanings.

The phrase, "that's so gay" is used to describe someone or something that looks silly, wrong or funny.

"Language can be very homophobic and it is something we challenge on a daily basis," RyePride coordinator Ilanit Goren said. "Language influences and defines how we think and act. It can nor-

malize attitudes and behaviours and when no one challenges inappropriate language then it makes it OK to express it."

Ms Goren is a post-graduate student at Ryerson University who is part of a student support group for gays and lesbians.

"Every year during frosh week we hear the words fagot and dyke," she said.

Dictionaries define fagot as a bundle of sticks used for fuel and a dyke as an embankment built to prevent floods.

But the putdown isn't always limited to words.

A young student said his peers use hand signals to taunt and tease each other.

"They make bunny ears with their hands and put it behind my head," said Grade 3 student, Anthony Fracassi, while having lunch with his sister and grandmother.



While he is too young to realize the sign doesn't mean anything, he's old enough to know he doesn't like to be treated that way.

"It's mean and it hurt my feelings."

ELEMENTS OF BULLYING

- Bullying behaviour involves a power imbalance e.g. size, number of students, status etc;
- There is intent to cause distress;
- The victim experiences distress; and,
- Without intervention, the bullying behavior is repeated.

— courtesy of York Region District School Board



Looks like you finally found that good reason.

Every year, thousands of Ontarians stop smoking. For themselves. For their families. For life. You can too. So set your quit date. And for help, call Smokers' Helpline: 1-877-513-5333.



Paid for by the Government of Ontario