Battling Childhood Aggression:
A unique research network takes on bullying

By Alec Ross
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Bullying at its extreme can be high-profile and horrifying, such as when one or two disaffected youth go on a shooting rampage at a school, or when a gay student kills himself after months or years of taunting about his sexuality. It can also be quiet and escape public notice, as when the “mean girl” in the class makes your daughter cry by repeatedly pulling her pigtails, snickering all the while.

Whether it makes the headlines or not, bullying and its consequences are big problems, and Wendy Craig is determined to fix them.

Craig is a Queen's psychology professor and scientific co-director (with Dr. Debra Pepler of York University) of Promoting Relationships and Eliminating Violence Network (PREVNet), a Canada-wide network that brings together organizations that work with children and youth, governments, university researchers and graduate students and child-health practitioners. The network partners work to expand knowledge about causes of bullying and aggression and develop and disseminate programs to eliminate violence and promote healthy relationships.

Says Craig: “What we want to do with PREVNet is get research findings that have the potential to make a difference and impact on how children and youth function out to the people who need most need it - the practitioners, educators, adult leaders, and parents - so that they can use the information on the front lines.”

PREVNet was established in 2006 as a part of the federal Networks of Centres of Excellence (NCE) program. Six years later it has 62 expert researchers from 27 Canadian universities, and 51 national organizations involved in 85 different knowledge dissemination projects addressing PREVNet's four core areas of focus: education about bullying; assessment of the extent of bullying in schools and communities; intervention and prevention strategies to reduce the incidence of bullying; and public policy that supports children's right to be safe. Today, with help from $1.6 million in second-round NCE funding, the core focus is on ten “signature projects” whose outcomes can impact children and youth in all the places they live, learn, play and work.

One signature project, being carried out in conjunction with the Public Health Agency of Canada, has involved populating a website - the Canadian Best Practices Portal - with a series of tested and proven violence-prevention programs. “Our partners, educators and other frontline workers now have a place to go to find
programs that we know work and have evidence to support their effectiveness,” says Craig. Another signature project is called Walking the Prevention Circle. This project, co-led by Shelley Cardinal, an Aboriginal consultant with the Canadian Red Cross, acknowledges the history, challenges and potential of Aboriginal individuals and communities as it explores issues relating to abuse, neglect and interpersonal violence. Designed for adults, the program empowers participants to name and reclaim the past, and begin the transformation from the cycle of violence to the circle of healing, a journey that begins with awareness and moves toward prevention. From small beginnings, it is now being rolled out across Canada.

Over the last 20 years, there has been a sea change in the knowledge of bullying and its effects. What we now know and understand about bullying has changed our views. We now know that bullying is not just a common part of growing up whose unpleasant effects are short-lived.

In fact, research by Craig and others clearly shows that children who are victimized and children who bully often do not get over their experiences. Children who are victimized may later have clinical depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem. Girls may develop eating disorders. The children who bully are at higher risk of delinquency and sexual harassment, and more likely to join a gang. They are also more likely to be physically aggressive with their romantic partners. The effects of social ostracism, another form of bullying, can be just as long-lived and devastating as the physical sort. A recent analysis of the subject showed that having poor social relationships is as big a contributor to early death as smoking, drinking, and obesity.

Another important finding from research is that bullying can actually affect a child's physical development. Some chronically victimized children may exhibit lasting stress response that causes changes in brain function. "Negative social experiences impact the genetic expression of certain behaviours and traits, which has potential long-term implications. In the long term, problem behaviours may be passed on to the next generation.” says Craig.

The public also knows more about bullying, largely because youth violence is more common in the news - from notorious cases such as the Columbine High School shootings in 1999 to the more recent death of Jamie Hubley, a gay Ottawa teenager whose suicide in October 2011 was attributed to years of relentless teasing by his school peers. These and scores of other wrenching stories over the years have raised awareness about bullying. Significantly, in virtually all of the most egregious cases of bullying and youth violence, the perpetrators of the acts were themselves bullying victims at one time or another.

Another form of bullying that has become widespread in the last 10 years or so is electronic bullying, the practice of using electronic media to intimidate and harass others. PREVNet researchers have found that girls are more likely to bully electronically than boys, but the prevalence of the behaviour is increasing among the latter. In some ways, electronic bullying is even worse than face-to-face bullying because it can exacerbate existing problems. In other words, says Craig, "the experience of being bullied electronically increases the risk for experiencing depression over and above face-to-face bullying."

One unique aspect of electronic bullying is that children who are victimized can feel as if there is no escape from it. With traditional schoolyard bullying the child can go home and, one hopes, gain a sense of security. But for today's teenagers, cell phones and social networking sites such as Facebook are integral to their social life. Teens are glued to their electronic devices, so if they're being bullied electronically, they may feel it's impossible to ignore.

Of course, because electronic bullying takes place online, the audience for it is potentially huge. Humiliating or compromising videos and photographs, or nasty rumours about a person, can be seen or red by potentially hundreds or millions of people. Making matters worse, the viewers may snicker at what they're seeing but fail to connect the material to an actual human being who may be suffering greatly from the exposure. "this broader audience, and the desensitization it engenders, greatly increases the impact of electronic bullying," says Craig.

Since most traditional bullying takes place at schools, it seems logical that teachers would be equipped with the professional knowledge and skills to nip bullying in the bud or handle on-going cases. Not so: Bill Beasley, an Alberta teacher and Queen's alumni, who hosts a much-visited website called www.bullying.org, notes that bullying is on of the biggest non-academic problems for teachers, yet they get virtually no formal training for dealing with it.
For her part, Craig lectures about bullying to teacher candidates at the Queen's Faculty of Education, but admits that this is not enough. Addressing this lack is another PREVNet signature project: an online magazine called MyHealth. Schools can subscribe to it so that teachers and students can read articles, written by youth, about health topics including bullying. PREVNet's role is to provide the evidence-based background material to the writers. "The idea is that the magazine will reach every youth and educator across the country so that they'll have a sense of how to recognize bullying in their classroom, what strategies will work, which ones don't, and how to pick bullying prevention programs for your classrooms that do work," says Craig.

Another key PREVNet role is to help more than 82 graduate students in its network to develop their own research knowledge and skills. The students do this by working on real-world problems with actual clients. For instance, for the past two years, a PhD student in psychology at Queen's has been evaluating a mentoring program for Big Brothers Big Sisters of Canada as part of her dissertation. This student is solving an applied problem and bringing science to practice in a new innovative manner. "Both the student and the organization benefit," says Craig. "The student has an innovative earning opportunity, and the organization gains research capacity to inform their practices."

The next step for PREVNet, apart from completing the current signature projects, is to figure out how to bring PREVNet research to wider audiences so that it actually changes public attitudes and behaviours. This work isn't new: in 1997 Craig was interviewed about bullying on Oprah. For the past nine years, PREVNet has lent its expertise to the StandUp! Campaign aired on the Family Channel during the annual Bullying Awareness Week in November. This year, Craig gave bullying prevention advice to the pop superstar Lady Gaga, a former bullying victim who in late February launched the Born This Way Foundation, whose tagline is "Empowering Youth, Inspiring Bravery."

Another step is to mobilize communities. PREVNet already has reached into mental health centres, schools, parent organizations and other groups, but these parties need to better communicate with each other. "How in the community do we break those silos and get them coordinating together to make differences?" says Craig. "That's the next step in the evolution."

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