

The Globe and Mail

## Cyberbullying won't be stopped with laws and punishments. We need to get involved

Marvin Bernstei Published Tuesday, May. 07, 2013 08:51AM EDT

We are witnessing a growing number of tragedies from cyberbullying, most recently the tragic losses of Rehtaeh Parsons in Nova Scotia and Amanda Todd in British Columbia.

A natural response is to search for a cure-all to stop victimization and loss of precious human life. Currently the federal government is considering closing perceived legal gaps and imposing tougher punishments against cyberbullies.

But who is a cyberbully?

Any youth who passes on a defamatory remark or exploitative photo? In the cases of Amanda Todd and Rehtaeh Parsons, it seems dozens of young people appeared to have participated in the relentless torment. Is it realistic to rely on the courts and prisons to deal with all of them?

Where are the legal gaps?

Contrary to what many believe, Canada has a strong set of legal and civil laws available for online bullying cases including laws against child pornography, the sexual exploitation of children, criminal harassment, uttering threats and intimidation. Civil remedies are also available including defamation, invasion of privacy and the intentional infliction of mental suffering. But these laws are not always enforced.

And last September, the Supreme Court of Canada recognized the particular vulnerabilities and rights of children and ruled that child victims of cyberbullying do not have to disclose their identity to pursue a civil case against an online bully.

But laws aren't enough to save young lives..

A recent Senate study on cyberbullying heard from dozens of Canadians of all ages and found no evidence that tougher punishments would end cyberbullying or prevent it.

Since most bullies or those being bullied are children and youth, we would be punishing young people without any assurance that other youth would be discouraged from engaging in similar behaviour.

Youth are not only more impulsive because of their developmental stage, but they think less about the future. For adolescents, short-term interests and the perceived rewards of offending are likely to outweigh potential legal consequences, which most young people view as remote possibilities.

Since Canada currently has sufficient criminal laws and civil remedies to address cyberbullying, we now need to focus on enforcement and more importantly prevention to stop cyberbullying before it occurs by improving education and co-ordination with the resources necessary.

So what are some of the solutions that trial and error have shown to be effective in preventing cyberbullying?

Education is critical.

Children and youth have the ability and resiliency to protect themselves and others and to alter their own behaviour once they are effectively informed about risks.

This means empowering children at an early age to become good digital citizens and making informed and responsible choices when they use online media.

The Senate committee on cyberbullying has called for the federal government to coordinate a national anti-bullying strategy with provincial and territorial counterparts, promoting restorative justice programs (including mediation between victim and bully) and working with industry to make the Internet safer for children.

In UNICEF's recent report card on child well-being, Canadian children ranked 21st of 29 nations in incidence of bullying. Canada must examine what other countries with lower rates, such as Italy, Sweden and Spain, are doing right, so we can prevent more pain, loss and senseless death.

There is no quick fix to cyberbullying or the harm it has on our young people. But parents, teachers, social workers, health professionals, law-enforcement officials, policymakers and the private sector all have a role to play in effective prevention.

With this assumption of greater collective responsibility to prevent cyber-bullying from happening, these tragedies need not continue to affect the lives of so many young innocent victims.

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