Safe Spaces

Bullying Prevention Programming for Young Children

A program of Westcoast Child Care Resource Centre

I'm scared. my hair is standing up.

Bullies: Where Do They Come From?

When you think of bullying who comes to mind…an older child, teenager or even a young adult? Studies have shown that most Canadians think of the 8 to 12 age group. The fact is that many of those who engage in bullying behaviours began their bullying careers as preschoolers.

Numerous studies over the past 20 years have shown that bullying is common amongst young children. Recent research has shown that among Canadian children 4–6 years of age, 14.4% of boys and 9.4% of girls had bullied other children and approximately 5% had been victimized (*Craig, 1997*).

It is generally not appropriate to consider preschooler aggression as bullying. However, young children need guidance to develop pro-social skills in order to reduce the likelihood of becoming a bully or a victim.

Early intervention should not wait until the start of school.

> "[This information has] extreme value. It makes you aware how social skills are the basis for healthy all-round cooperation between each person."
>
> Safe Spaces© program participant
>
> "I could implement a program to assist children and prevent bullying, a program a child could benefit their whole life from."
>
> Safe Spaces© program participant

What Is Bullying?

A person is being bullied or victimized when he or she is exposed repeatedly and over time to negative actions by one or more persons (*Olweus, 1991*). There are four classic types of bullying behaviours:

🢐 **Physical** This is the least sophisticated type of bullying, involving hitting or kicking victims or taking or damaging their property.

🢐 **Verbal** This type of bullying includes name-calling, insults, racist comments or constant teasing.

🢐 **Emotional** This kind of bullying occurs most commonly among girls. They may use threats or hurtful gossip to convince peers to exclude or reject a certain person or group of people.

🢐 **Reactive** In these instances an individual will engage in bullying or provoke bullies into physically attacking them.

(*Stones, 1993; Haberlin, 1998*)

What To Do About Bullying

Until recently children of all ages have been left to suffer bullying alone. Now it is increasingly recognized that bullying must not be considered a rite of passage that children must survive as part of growing up. The key to success in preventing bullying is the active involvement of everyone—parents, siblings, extended family members and children as well as the staff of schools, child care centres and recreation programs—in creating a safe place for everyone.

Safe Spaces©: Bullying Prevention for Young Children

Westcoast Child Care Resource Centre has developed a preschool bullying prevention program called *Safe Spaces©*. The *Safe Spaces©* program is designed to involve all children in the child care program. It focuses primarily on teaching key pro-social and emotional vocabulary and skills identified as essential in preventing bullying behaviours. Funded by the City of Vancouver, *Safe Spaces©* was first piloted with young children in a Vancouver child care program.

Both staff and families from the child care centre reported successes from the *Safe Spaces©* pilot. It seemed that four and five year old children became better able to use the key vocabulary appropriately during free play at daycare and at home. Child care staff and parents were so pleased with the changes in children's social behaviour that they adopted *Safe Spaces©* as part of their ongoing curriculum.

Many of those who engage in bullying behaviours began their bullying careers as preschoolers.

How Does *Safe Spaces©* Work?

Safe Spaces© is based on four major concepts known as the Safe Spaces Rules:

🢐 **My Body is Safe:** This means that no one will hit me, kick me, push me, or hurt me.

🢐 **My Feelings are Safe:** This means that no one will laugh at me or make me feel like a failure.

🢐 **My Thoughts, Ideas and Words are Safe**: This means that I can express my feelings and opinions without being interrupted or punished.

🢐 **My Work is Safe:** This means that no one will disrupt or damage the materials with which I am working.

These concepts are taught and implemented gradually as the program progresses. *Safe Spaces©* is designed in four parts presenting key vocabulary to all the children. It teaches the concepts using stories with puppets, photographs, art activities, and a peace table. *Safe Spaces©* encourages open discussion of interpersonal issues with young children.

Safe Spaces© is intended to develop a sense of community where all children, staff and families feel valued and that they belong. This builds the foundation of a safe space. The *Safe Spaces©* program is intended to be implemented holistically into the program to provide pro-social experiences

> "Early intervention should not wait until the start of school. School communities must reach out to families even before kindergarten…Children with poor social and behavioural skills can be identified as early as three years of age, and the earlier these children and families receive intervention, the more successful these efforts will be."
>
> (*Dwyer, Osher and Hoffman, 2000*)

SHARED GOALS	*(Derman-Sparks, 1992)* ANTI-BIAS EDUCATION	SAFE SPACES©
DEVELOP SELF-ESTEEM	Each child needs support to construct a knowledgeable, confident self-identity and group identity. This means creating the educational conditions in which all children are able to like who they are without needing to feel superior to anyone else. It also means enabling children to develop bi-culturally and helping children and their families resolve the problems faced when a person operates in more than one culture.	Lack of self-esteem seems to be a characteristic common to children who are bullied. A strong sense of self-esteem is especially important for children who are identified as different in some way from children in the mainstream. Contrary to earlier beliefs about bullying, children who bully are more likely to have relatively high self-esteem compared to their peers. *(Olweus, 1991)*
DEVELOP EMPATHY FOR OTHERS	Each child needs support to experience empathic interactions with people from diverse backgrounds. This means guiding children to develop the behavioral skills needed to respectfully and effectively learn about differences, adapt to differences, and cognitively understand and emotionally accept the common humanity that all people share.	10-15% of Canadian children are likely to get involved in bullying others. Children who bully tend to lack an ability to empathize with the children they set out to hurt. Children who bully usually argue that it is the victim's fault.
THINK CRITICALLY	Each child needs to develop critical thinking about bias. This means having the cognitive skills to identify "unfair" and "untrue" images (stereotypes), comments (teasing, name-calling) and behaviors (discrimination) directed at one's own and other's identity (gender, race, ethnicity, disability, class, family lifestyle, age, weight, etc.) AND have the emotional empathy to know that bias hurts.	Most bullying takes place in the presence of 70% of children who are never active bullies or victims. They support bullying behaviour by creating a peer audience that acknowledges the bully's power. The group could take a stand if they shared the responsibility to decide whether the actions are fair or unfair.
TAKE ACTION WHEN ONE WITNESSES UNFAIRNESS AND BIAS	Each child deserves support to develop the ability to stand up for her/himself and for others in the face of bias. This "activism" objective includes helping every child learn and practice a variety of ways to act: (a) when another child acts in a biased manner towards her/him (b) when a child acts in a biased manner toward another child, and (c) when an adult acts in a biased manner.	Children can learn how to take action when they witness unfairness and bias. Providing children with the skills and confidence to reject being part of the silent majority plays a significant role in stopping bullying behaviour *(Craig and Peplar, 1997)*.

for all children, not just those who display behaviours of concern.

We know that activities and experiences that focus on positive social and emotional development promote positive pro-social behaviour and empathy in young children. These skills play a role in determining children's academic success in school. Children who feel socially competent are ready to learn.

Safe Spaces© and Anti-bias, Anti-racist Education

Safe Spaces© is highly consistent with the goals and principles of anti-bias, anti-racist education as determined by the work of Derman-Sparks (*1992*). These goals are explicitly intended to teach young children to protect themselves and others from more broadly defined injustice and discrimination.

These four goals are for children across all age groups. They are also for the adults who raise and teach children. *Safe Spaces©* teaches young children the specific skills they need to prevent and resist bullying.

The aim of *Safe Spaces©* is to facilitate the understanding and learning of pro-social behaviours within the context of the total learning environment. It has been designed especially for preschool aged children with developmental stages in mind and focusing on the development of the whole child.

To date, Westcoast has trained 24 child care centres throughout BC in the *Safe Spaces©* program. Although the *Safe Spaces©* program is still evolving, the centres that are implementing it as part of their curriculum greatly appreciate the value *Safe Spaces©* brings to the child care learning environment. If you are interested in knowing more about *Safe Spaces©* call Westcoast Child Care Resource Centre at 1-877-262-0022 toll-free or 604-709-5661 in the Vancouver area. ◀

These skills [also] play a role in determining academic success.

I'm sad.

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