



Imagine Newsletter

A School Climate Approach to Bullying Prevention

Information for Parents

Issue # 16B

Words Matter When Building a Positive School Climate

"A Positive School Climate exists when all members of the school community feel safe, comfortable and accepted" (Waterloo Region District School Board Policy 6009). "Students and educators have the right to a safe, secure and inviting school environment free from all forms of harassment." (Waterloo Catholic District School Board Policy APC034). The Imagine Framework fosters school staff, students and parents to help their school community be a more welcoming place for everyone to learn and grow. Improving school climate is an important part of the school's plan to stop bullying/harassment.

The words we use matter in how safe and welcome people may feel. A "putdown" or a "slur" is a word that is used to make someone or something seem worthless or not acceptable to the community. When "putdowns" are used a lot, people feel less welcome and less safe to learn.



A common slur used by students at school is the word "gay", as in "He's so gay--he can't even catch the ball". These words may or may not be used to describe the sexual orientation of a person, as it is common for students to call things "gay", such as "This book is so gay" or "I hate this class—it's so gay". Whether these words are said about a person or a thing, it is meant to be a "put down", and it links "being gay" (being same-sex oriented) to being unacceptable. These words have the same effect on school climate as when people use racial or sexist comments---people end up feeling hurt and unwelcome.

Our schools have policies that support stopping all kinds of slurs because of their harm to the school climate. Not only do these words hurt the person they are being used against, they also hurt people who might be in that same group or the people who might care about someone in that group. For example, school community members may have friends, parents or other relatives who may be same-sex oriented. Hearing the word "gay" used as a slur over and over can foster a belief that people who are same-sex oriented are not acceptable and are less worthy. This belief changes the balance of power in the community. When power between groups in a community is not equal, bullying is more likely to happen. If students hear this "putdown" year after year, and the comments are not stopped or labelled as hurtful by adults, students may accept the belief that this group is less worthy than others, and it may allow them to think they have a right to hurt them. This can lead to the bullying of students who may be same-sex oriented, or who are perceived by others to be so. This kind of bullying happens often, especially as students move through adolescence (Egale Canada's National Survey, 2008).

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"Adults are responsible for creating positive environments that promote children's ability to create and maintain healthy relationships." (Peplar and Craig, *Binoculars on Bullying: A New Solution to Protect and Connect Children* in *Voices for Children*, February 2007). As adults, we need to stop such comments when they are used by adults or children in the school community, just as we would stop racist or sexist comments.

How can parents help?

- Remember that we all have our own ideas, values, and beliefs, but that our actions and words must respect the rights of all citizens to be welcomed and accepted in our school communities.
- Find out about your school's code of conduct. Help your children understand that it tells them how to talk and act with others at school.
- Talk with your children and explain to them how slurs hurt people and can make everyone feel less safe.
- Stop "putdowns" at the moment they are said. Children need action right away to remind them to respect others at all times, even if there is a problem to be solved in the relationship.



Let's all support each other in creating a more positive school climate where all are welcome to learn, work and grow.

Resources for Parents:



Waterloo Region District School Board Policy 6009

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Ontario Ministry of Education's Provincial Code of Conduct and School Board's Code of Conduct.
<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/document/brochure/conduct/conduct.html>

<http://www.thinkb4youspeak.com/>
<http://www.dayofsilence.org/index.cfm>
<http://www.nonamecallingweek.org/cgi-bin/iowa/home.html>