



# PARENT TOOL KIT

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## R<sup>E</sup>LATIONSHIPS

**WHAT PARENTS CAN DO TO  
HELP THEIR CHILDREN DEVELOP  
HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS**

# A MESSAGE FROM THE COUNCIL OF ONTARIO DIRECTORS OF EDUCATION (CODE)

This Tool Kit is intended to help parents as they guide and encourage their children in learning skills that are essential for success at school and throughout life. The support that parents provide plays a major role in children's and teens' achievements, both in and out of the classroom.

Parents, students, and educators from across Ontario have helped create this Tool Kit by generously sharing their insights and feedback on what works for them. We thank them all. Many organizations also helped us, and they are listed at the end of this Tool Kit.

We have also included contributions from professionals who have shared their expertise in a variety of key areas in response to parent questions. In particular, we would like to thank Jean Clinton, Bruce Ferguson, Mary Gordon, and Debra Pepler.



The enclosed USB Webkeys will help you to access the complete kit (the Tool Kit and the Guidebook) at [http://www.ontariodirectors.ca/parent\\_engagement.html](http://www.ontariodirectors.ca/parent_engagement.html). You may download all or part of either document. Hard copies of the complete kit have been provided to all public schools and boards in Ontario. It is our hope that you will find these documents useful and circulate them widely.

These documents are part of a series of Parent Engagement Resources. The earlier documents are:

*Parent Tool Kit: What Parents Can Do To Help Their Child Succeed in School;*

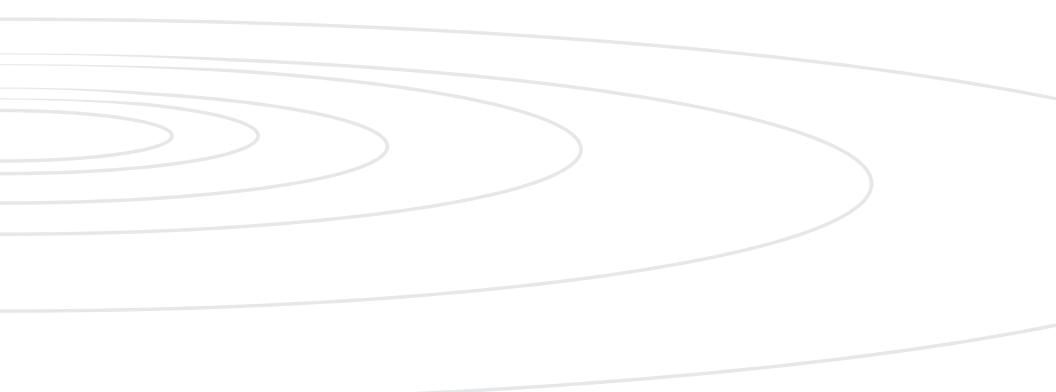
*Parent Tool Kit: Teen Edition, What Parents Can Do To Help Their Teens Succeed; and*

*Planning Parent Engagement: A Guidebook for Parents and Schools.*

All of them can be found at [http://www.ontariodirectors.ca/parent\\_engagement.html](http://www.ontariodirectors.ca/parent_engagement.html).

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Throughout this Tool Kit, the term *parents* refers to parents, guardians, and caregivers. The term *children* refers to children and youth.



## USING THIS TOOL KIT

This Tool Kit is a collection of ideas, tips, and resources for parents to help their children and teens build healthy relationships. The Tool Kit's structure and content stem from parents' questions and many of the suggestions come from parents. In addition to all the things your families are already doing, we hope that you will find these suggestions helpful in supporting your children and teens.

You may find one or more things that relate to your experiences. The **six sections** can be read in any order. You can scan the tips, or delve more deeply into sections of interest to you.

Healthy relationships are a foundation for well-being. You may wish to read **BE A MENTOR** for ways to help your child or teen build relationships. It emphasizes the importance of positive parenting and of developing respect, empathy, and a sense of belonging.

**BE INVOLVED** offers tips on becoming familiar with the communication tools your child or teen may be using and on addressing issues such as cyber-bullying. It highlights the role electronic devices can have in building and maintaining relationships in this digital age.



**BE A ROLE MODEL** deals with the importance of building positive and inclusive relationships. It provides tips on how to help our children thrive in our complex, diverse world.

If you are looking for suggestions on how to support children's mental health and well-being, check out **BE A LEARNER**. One of the key factors contributing to well-being for young people is the ability to have healthy relationships and friendships.

Conflict and bullying get in the way of building healthy relationships. **BE A COACH** offers some ways parents are helping children deal with these issues.

**BE A GUIDE** focuses on resilience and the ability to deal with whatever life brings. Suggestions for helping children and youth "bounce back" are offered.



The design of this Tool Kit was created by Humber College AdCentre students.



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**“I need my parents’ help with relationships” – *Student***

Parents have always focused on the importance of academic achievement and well-being for their children. Of all the things that contribute to students’ success, few are more basic than their relationships. Healthy relationships support healthy development.

School boards and schools have put a wide variety of initiatives in place to create the conditions needed for positive learning environments in which our children and youth can thrive. A positive school climate exists when all members of the school community feel safe, included, and accepted, and all members of the school community actively promote positive behaviours and interactions.

The impact of a positive school climate and caring adults on our children and youth cannot be overestimated. As parents and community members, we have a responsibility and role to play, along with our schools and school boards, to foster and support the well-being of our children and our communities.

*By fostering healthy relationships among our children, we can help them develop valuable skills to last a lifetime.*

# **“Last night, in tears, she told me she doesn’t have any friends.”**

Parents want their children to have happy, healthy relationships. For all of us, healthy relationships are fundamental to our well-being. Academic success alone may not bring a fulfilling life.

Our children learn how to build and maintain healthy relationships from the important adults in their lives. Our relationships with our children show them how relationships work.

Healthy relationships “provide children with: a sense of security and stability; a sense of being valued and belonging; support and guidance to learn essential skills and understanding”; and the ability to deal with stress.<sup>1</sup>

## **TIPS**

- Connect positively with your children at every opportunity
- Relate to your child or teen in an age-appropriate way
- Help your children develop empathy and respect
- Help reduce the stress in their lives
- Be there: supervision matters
- Accept mistakes as learning opportunities
- Watch for signs of an unhealthy relationship
- Remember positive parenting works

## CONNECT POSITIVELY WITH YOUR CHILDREN AT EVERY OPPORTUNITY

Stay connected! The healthiest force in the lives of teens is their connection with their parents. Busy schedules can mean too little time *connecting* and too much time *correcting*.<sup>2</sup> Children often need help to talk about the important things in their lives such as school, friends or peer pressure when we are busiest. Sometimes we just need to listen and not rush to rescue.

**When parents are connected to their children, they can guide them in positive ways.**

— Jean Clinton

Treat what children say as confidential in order to build *trust*. A time may come when it is necessary to talk to others, such as school staff, even if your child asks you not to. You can help ensure that your child has as much say as possible in dealing with the situation. COPA suggests:

- Informing your child beforehand;
- Involving your child in telling others; and
- Offering to be there when your child or youth is getting help of some kind, or a resolution is being discussed.<sup>3</sup>

**Just be there with EAR: Empathy, Attention and Respect.**

— Jean Clinton

## RELATE TO YOUR CHILD OR TEEN IN AN AGE-APPROPRIATE WAY

Studies show that parent/teen relationships can improve when parent and youth learn how to communicate effectively with each other.

— Bruce Ferguson

Expectations and rules change as children become pre-teens and teens. As youth want more independence, it is helpful to adapt our ways of communicating. Whatever their age, encourage open discussion and hear them out. Invite them to be part of a family *decision-making process*. Maintain a loving, trusting, and respectful relationship. Try *problem solving* together.

### WHAT YOUTH WANT YOU TO KNOW:

**BE SUPPORTIVE.** Guide, don't dictate. Youth want information so they can make their own decisions.

**BE PATIENT AND AVAILABLE.** Don't be discouraged if your first offer of support is turned down as youth will often come around when they feel up to it and the time is right.

**BE OPEN.** When they come to you, listen, listen, listen!

**BE UNDERSTANDING.** Youth learn and grow through failure and mistakes – the important issue is how youth and their support systems respond to setbacks.

**BE EMPATHETIC.** Don't belittle the feelings of youth or be patronizing – “my feelings are real and important, even if whatever I'm going through doesn't seem like a big deal to you, it is to me right now.”

Stepping Stones p. 31  
[www.ontario.ca/steppingstones](http://www.ontario.ca/steppingstones)

## HELP YOUR CHILDREN DEVELOP EMPATHY AND RESPECT

Healthy relationships are based on good communication. This involves not only language but also understanding, respecting, and caring about how another person may be feeling.

**Empathy is the ability to understand and care about how another person feels. The need to be understood is universal, whether we are five or fifty; all of our worries or upsets are calmed when we feel we have been heard or understood. This doesn't mean that the problem has been solved, but when our feelings are recognized and accepted, so are we. – Mary Gordon<sup>4</sup>**

Help children understand *their own feelings*. Talk about how they feel when someone says hurtful things. Let them know you understand.

Children also need help to understand the *feelings of others*. Encourage them to watch for facial expressions and body language and to listen and respect the feelings and views of other people. Discuss their perceptions. Encourage them to help those who may not feel included and to put themselves in the shoes of others who may be affected by their actions. This can help our children build understanding and is an important foundation for social responsibility.

## HELP REDUCE THE STRESS IN THEIR LIVES

**The more stress we have, the less we can concentrate. It is easier to learn when we are relaxed and happy.**

Parents can help children and youth deal with stress by:

- Providing a sense of belonging and security;
- Coordinating family schedules together;
- Ensuring they get enough sleep and eat well; and
- Taking part in physical activities and fun activities together.

The World Health Organization defines health as “a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.”<sup>5</sup>

With your family, try exercise such as walking, cycling, swimming, running or dancing every day. Everyone needs to eat a healthy diet. Suggest relaxation techniques such as deep breathing exercises, yoga, and listening to relaxation music. Try to ensure the family gets the best sleep possible. Sleep requirements vary with age but many of us are sleep deprived. Adequate sleep supports healthy development. Try planning ahead with your children to allow everyone enough time to get things done.

**It has been said that a daily dose of friendship is very good medicine. Supporting your children's friendships and relationships promotes good health.**

## **BE THERE: SUPERVISION MATTERS**

Youth do better when adults are present at four critical times of day:

- When they get up;
- When they come home from school;
- At the evening meal; and
- When they go to bed.

*Jean Clinton*

In parents' busy lives, it is not always possible to be there. The adult cannot always be you. Many parents try to arrange for a trusted person to be there when they can't be.

Mealtimes are excellent opportunities to build parent-child relationships. Helpful hints for conversation starters are offered on the UNICEF website at:

[www.unicef.ca/en/article/making-meals-meaningful](http://www.unicef.ca/en/article/making-meals-meaningful)

**"Too bad our family seems to have less and less time to have dinner together these days. We have to fix that...it's when we hear about what everybody is up to." – Parent**

The more time young people spend unsupervised, the more they are apt to engage in risky behaviour. Make sure your children know how to get help at any time – by contacting you or someone you have designated.

## ACCEPT MISTAKES AS LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

We learn from making mistakes. Ask your children what can be learned from a mistake that has been made. Try to focus on the learning – not the mistake. Learning from mistakes helps us to improve ourselves and our relationships. Try to help your child understand why the mistake happened and how it could be avoided in the future.

Apologies are important for young children and youth to learn. Helping young people focus on the apology can keep them from continuing to justify their mistake. Children can learn about heartfelt apologies and practise at home. Parents are powerful role models for children and youth.

**“As a parent, it can be hard to admit I may have responded inappropriately to my child. I’ve learned it’s okay to say I’m sorry when we’re both calmer.”**  
– Parent

## WATCH FOR SIGNS OF AN UNHEALTHY RELATIONSHIP

Peer approval is important for young people. At times, they will put up with behaviours that are hurtful in order to have a sense of belonging. Peer pressure can be a powerful influence, both positive and negative. Unfortunately, there may be times when parents recognize signs of an unhealthy peer relationship such as:

- Critical or insulting comments;
- Anger, and perhaps even force, being applied;
- One person in the relationship keeping the other from having friends; and
- One person getting angry with the other very easily.

Should parents become aware of any behaviours that are hurtful, children and youth will need guidance and support.

Find opportunities to talk with your children and teens. Some parents find it helpful to have conversations when driving together.

**“Talk to your children about relationships. What do they think makes a good friend? Why? How do they work with classmates? How do they get along when it’s more difficult? What skills do they think they need to get along with different people?” – Parent**

## REMEMBER POSITIVE PARENTING WORKS

**Positive parenting is proven as the best approach to parenting. It requires that you be supportive, warm, and encouraging while also being firm, consistent, and fair.**

– *Jean Clinton*

The best gift you can give your children is your time. Show that you enjoy devoting time to them. Show your children that their time and energy can make a difference too, and recognize the value they offer. Encourage them to take part in community projects such as helping seniors or tending a community garden.

Create opportunities for your children to be successful:

- Help them find out what they are good at doing;
- Help build their confidence in their skills and abilities;
- Be active together. Choose something you both like and can do;
- Be sure to comment on a job well done or an act of kindness; and
- Acknowledge when they meet a difficult challenge with perseverance.

The better children feel about themselves, the better they will relate to others.

# ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- COPA (Centre ontarien de prévention des agressions), *Fostering Safe, Inclusive and Accepting Schools, Bullying Prevention Guide – A Resource for Parents and Schools*, (Toronto, COPA, 2013), see: <http://www.changeourworld.ca/resources>
- Ontario Ministry of Children and Youth Services, *Stepping Stones: A Resource on Youth Development*, (Toronto: June 2012). The report can be viewed or downloaded on the Ministry's website: [www.ontario.ca/steppingstones](http://www.ontario.ca/steppingstones)
- PBS, *This Emotional Life: In Search of Ourselves...and Happiness*, a three-part series, hosted by Daniel Gilbert, on video, (Vulcan Productions). See PBS website: [www.pbs.org/thisemotionallife/](http://www.pbs.org/thisemotionallife/)
- Promoting Relationships and Eliminating Violence Network (PREVNet) website: [www.prevnet.ca/](http://www.prevnet.ca/)
- Mary Gordon, *Roots of Empathy: Changing the World Child by Child*, (Toronto: Thomas Allen, 2005), and Roots of Empathy website: [www.rootsofempathy.org/](http://www.rootsofempathy.org/)
- A three-minute animated TED talk on The Power of Empathy. [www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Evwgu369Jw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Evwgu369Jw)
- TVO Parents <http://tvoparents.tvo.org/article/teaching-kids-build-healthy-relationships>
- A Parent Primer on Socio-Emotional Learning -Edutopia [www.edutopia.org/stw-louisville-sel-parents-information](http://www.edutopia.org/stw-louisville-sel-parents-information)



*Technology is offering our children and teens huge benefits for communication, collaboration, learning and research. Rapidly growing technology can also bring challenges. When parents listen, set limits, and communicate, we can help children and teens to use digital technology to develop and grow.*

# “Our kids communicate through social media. I want to be a part of that, but how?”

Our children build and maintain friendships through social media. By being part of their experience, we can help guide them in the development of positive relationships and help them learn how to use these digital experiences to mature and grow. Healthy social media relations can enrich your parent-child relationship.

**“Social media” refers to the wide range of Internet-based and mobile services that allow users to participate in online exchanges, contribute user-created content, or join online communities.<sup>1</sup>**

As the world of digital communication continues to grow, it shapes how we interact with one another. Many families rely on electronic devices to keep in touch and provide updates on daily schedules and activities. This may be a good way of starting to “talk” with your children through social media.

Some parents suggest it is better to text their kids than to phone them.

**“Texting is more private. Our kids can reply instantly to our questions without having to interrupt their activities with friends. If I need to talk with my kids, I might even text them to phone me.”**

*– Parent*

Sometimes “the technology that is supposed to bring people together is used instead to abuse others.”<sup>2</sup> Cyber-bullying requires adult intervention.

Parenting involves “being involved.” Just as you have always listened, interacted, and set limits in the past, the same can apply to social media. Helping your children manage their electronic devices and online relationships can seem overwhelming for parents. You may find the following tips helpful.

## **TIPS**

- Share digital skills and online tools
- Know the basics of social media safety
- Help your children deal with online relationships
- Assist your children to manage their online identities
- Reach out for help if your child is impacted by cyber-bullying or sexting

## SHARE DIGITAL SKILLS AND ONLINE TOOLS

Many jobs require skills in online collaboration and communication. While our children pick up new media with ease, they could benefit from adult guidance about “netiquette.”

Their favourite venues for communication will change as new sites and trends become available. Try bookmarking these sites on all computers and devices to stay on top of the latest trend.

New texting language can be fun to learn. One parent says: “Our kids text hundreds of messages a day. I have fun reading the shorthand they’re using.” Online dictionaries can translate texting shorthand. Simply enter the shorthand message into a search engine.

Some children and teens prefer their parents not use the latest shortcuts. One child explained: “When my parents try to text like my friends and I, it’s like they’re turning into someone else. It gets confusing.”

**“I actually like it when my mom texts in full sentences. It makes me feel safe because I know it’s her. That’s the way she talks.” – Tween**

Mealtimes are a good opportunity for all family members to put aside electronic devices and enjoy face-to-face time.

## KNOW THE BASICS OF SOCIAL MEDIA SAFETY

Find a balance between respecting your children's privacy while at the same time keeping them safe. Take the time to talk to your children about why you might want to know passwords and see the profiles and posts of friends.

Become familiar with the rules regarding Internet and social media use at your children's school and help support them to follow the rules. Be prepared to say no to your children participating in a social media site if you feel they are not yet ready to participate safely.

If you come across something on social media that is disturbing, take a moment to gather your thoughts and think about how to best approach the subject with your child. You may find your child is also disturbed or embarrassed by the content and wants your advice and help.

**“I don’t want my parents spying on me,  
but at the same time, it’s good to know  
they’re there.” – *Student***

## HELP YOUR CHILDREN DEAL WITH ONLINE RELATIONSHIPS

**“Who is this friend of a friend of a friend?” – Parent**

Encourage your children to be mindful of their online interactions while using social media. Advise them not to post in anger and to check all their messages before posting. Would they say that face to face? How will it look a year from now? Ten years from now? Let them know that what is shared on social media often spreads very quickly. Would they share that comment, photo or video with an auditorium full of their peers? What if someone could keep a record of their text or photo and share it with others?

Help them understand the differences between friends and acquaintances. People they meet online may not always be who they say they are.

**“I love social media because I can share so much with my friends and feel so connected with them. I can also keep in touch really easily with my parents.” – Student**

## ASSIST YOUR CHILDREN TO MANAGE THEIR ONLINE IDENTITIES

Just as we strive to develop positive relationships and reputations in our face-to-face communities, children should behave the same way in online communities. However, a child's or teen's idea about what constitutes a great reputation may differ from an adult's. Peer pressure may have a role to play in how your child wants to be perceived online. For an example of tips for becoming a responsible digital citizen, see [http://mediasmarts.ca/sites/default/files/pdfs/tipsheet/TipSheet\\_BuildingYourBrand.pdf](http://mediasmarts.ca/sites/default/files/pdfs/tipsheet/TipSheet_BuildingYourBrand.pdf).

Take the time to update the privacy settings on the social networking sites your children are using. Make sure they understand how to make appropriate privacy decisions. Unless your child is promoting a special project (e.g. a global awareness page), your child's personal page should not be public.<sup>3</sup>

Talk about the risks. Online information and images can live forever and many universities, colleges, and employers may check applicants' sites. Encourage your child or teen to post items that leave positive impressions, such as collaborating on arts or social justice projects.

Caution children and teens not to post identifying information online, including their phone number, address, hometown, or school name.

Sharing passwords can mean someone else could post embarrassing or unsafe information on their pages. Talk to your children about the wisdom of sharing their passwords only with you.

## REACH OUT FOR HELP IF YOUR CHILD IS IMPACTED BY CYBER-BULLYING OR SEXTING

Electronic bullying or cyber-bullying is electronic communication that:

- Is used to upset, threaten, or embarrass another person
- Uses email, cell phones, text messages, and social media sites to threaten, harass, embarrass, socially exclude or damage reputations and friendships
- Includes put-downs, insults and can involve spreading rumours, sharing private information, photos or videos, and threatening to harm someone
- Is always aggressive and hurtful.<sup>4</sup>

Encourage your children to let you know about incidents of cyber-bullying right away. Contact your child's school and work together with staff to bring about the best resolution.

Teens need to know that sexting and cyber-bullying are serious activities and could lead to criminal charges.<sup>5</sup>

Helpful information about cyber-bullying can be found at [www.prevnet.ca](http://www.prevnet.ca).

*Children and teens who feel welcome and accepted are more confident in their own abilities, and achieve greater success. Everyone has a role to play, and everyone benefits from an environment that is safe, inclusive, and accepting.*

**“Diverse cultures provide such rich opportunities. How can we help ensure that all our children continue to thrive and feel included without being affected by harmful biases, comments or barriers?”**

Our children will not be able to build and maintain relationships necessary for success without knowing how to be inclusive. Parents are positive role models when they help their children develop the skills and attitudes necessary for building healthy relationships in our diverse world.

Canadians embrace human rights and diversity as fundamental values. Ontario is the most diverse province in the country. Our diversity is our strength, and ensuring everyone feels welcomed and valued is our goal. Our differences may be visible or invisible. They include culture, race, religion, sexual orientation, ability, socio-economic situations, and mental and physical health.

Collaborating with our schools, parents support the creation of positive school climates built on principles of equity and inclusive education where everyone can build healthy relationships that are free from discrimination and harassment.

## TIPS

- Be a role model for respect and inclusion
- Address bias, stereotypes, and discriminatory behaviour
- Promote and maintain a sense of belonging

### BE A ROLE MODEL FOR RESPECT AND INCLUSION

Help your children understand and appreciate the richness of diverse cultures and ideas by showing them that you respect and value differences in people.

Encourage your child's involvement in clubs, school, and community events that promote inclusiveness and celebrate diversity. Help them learn how diversity enriches our lives through friendships, books, movies, and travel.

Make every effort to use language that is inclusive and free from bias. Help your children be sensitive to the feelings of those around them and to develop empathy. Be aware of phrases, words, and expressions that can exclude or be damaging.

**Children with empathy “are able to see beyond differences to commonalities.”**

*— Mary Gordon<sup>1</sup>*

**“I’ve always been a different person and I’ve always had friends. It doesn’t mean I have a lot of friends. I have friends who understand me. You are who you are. You can’t change that and you shouldn’t.” – Youth**

## **ADDRESS BIAS, STEREOTYPES, AND DISCRIMINATORY BEHAVIOUR**

Children may hear unkind generalizations about people of different cultures, orientations, abilities, or beliefs. Make a point of helping your child access accurate information and build cultural sensitivity and awareness.

Make sure your children know that stereotypes and jokes that make fun of other people are unacceptable. Addressing discrimination in every situation demonstrates to your child that it will not be tolerated. Remaining silent can give the impression that we condone the comment or behaviour. Encourage your children to speak up when they hear offensive jokes as well.

**“When I hear people say things against people in other cultures, it makes me angry. I feel I have to say something because it’s an insult to me as well.” – Youth**

Challenging biases and stereotypes can sometimes be difficult. Yet, if left unchallenged, biases can lead to negative attitudes and behaviours that become more rigid and fixed over time.

## PROMOTE AND MAINTAIN A SENSE OF BELONGING

We all have a need to belong. We want to be accepted. Parents can help children develop a sense of belonging by including them in family responsibilities. “The best way to make a child feel he belongs is to give him a chance to show he has a place in your family.”<sup>22</sup> Understanding our own roots can help us to respect individual differences.

**“Our children’s sense of belonging begins at home.” – Parent**

Young people have a strong sense of justice and fairness. By providing children and youth with opportunities to be leaders in social justice issues, we can help them learn that their voices matter. There may be opportunities through community groups, school clubs, and activities or bullying prevention and intervention initiatives to help your children become active leaders and agents of change for the world they wish to live in.

Treat every child as a gift.

**Inclusion is not bringing people into what already exists. It is making a new space, a better space for everyone. — George Dei, quoted in *Realizing the Promise of Diversity: Ontario’s Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy*, 2009, p. 1.**

# ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- COPA (Centre ontarien de prévention des agressions), *Fostering Safe, Inclusive and Accepting Schools: Bullying Prevention Guide – A Resource for Parents and Schools*, (Toronto: COPA, 2013): <http://www.changeourworld.ca/resources>
- PFLAG Canada, “When Sons and Daughters Come Out,” [www.pflagcanada.ca/pdfs/glb-mychild.pdf](http://www.pflagcanada.ca/pdfs/glb-mychild.pdf)
- Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat, Ontario Ministry of Education, *Research Monograph # 30, Forging Safer Learning Environments-Addressing Homophobic Bullying in Schools*, September 2010. To download, go to: [http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/literacynumeracy/inspire/research/WW\\_safe\\_learning\\_environments.pdf](http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/literacynumeracy/inspire/research/WW_safe_learning_environments.pdf)
- Marsha Forest, *Inclusion Is the Future*, 1994. See Alliance for Inclusive Education (ALFIE) website:  
<http://www.allfie.org.uk/pages/useful%20info/inclusion.html>
- The Canadian Child Care Federation, *Resource Sheet #35*. See CCCF website for link: [www.cccf-fcsge.ca](http://www.cccf-fcsge.ca)
- Canadian Centre for Diversity: <http://centrefordiversity.ca>
- Ontario Ministry of Education, *Realizing the Promise of Diversity: Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy*, 2009. To download, go to: <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/policyfunding/equity.html>

*Friendships are important for good health and well-being. Parents can help children and teens understand that it is worth putting effort into maintaining friendships and making new friends. These relationships provide a safety cushion to help them cope with life's challenges.*

**“My child goes through periods when she is angry and worried about everything. How do we know if this is to be expected or whether it could be a sign of a mental health issue?”**

We all want our young people to be able to function to their fullest potential and to be able to enjoy mental and physical health. The ability to form and maintain satisfying relationships is part of mental health.

In turn, these relationships provide a safety cushion and help protect us from life's challenges.

Friendships are important for physical and emotional health. Young people may talk to friends in confidence about things they might not share with others.

**Young people who found it hard to talk to best friends about things that bothered them tended to have higher levels of emotional problems than young people who found it easier to talk to friends. This was especially true for girls.<sup>1</sup>**

According to Health Canada, other “signs of mental well-being include:

- Knowing and taking pride in who you are;
- Enjoying life;
- Coping with stress in a positive way;
- Striving to realize your potential; and
- Having a sense of personal control.”<sup>2</sup>

Mental well-being is closely tied to physical health. Regular physical activity and healthy eating are important. Are there times when your family can do physical activities or enjoy planning and eating nutritious meals together?

Emotional difficulties and mental illness can develop despite our best efforts. Mental health problems are not anyone’s fault. Families should not feel shame and blame when problems arise.

The good news is that early diagnosis and treatment lead to better outcomes for children and teens later in life.

## TIPS

- Promote positive mental health and well-being
- Recognize when something is wrong
- Find out where, in your community, help is available
- Help to build understanding and reduce stigma

## PROMOTE POSITIVE MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

There are skills that help to build healthy relationships and ground mental well-being. These include social-emotional skills – things like problem solving, decision making, and goal setting. Many situations at home may require these

skills. Parents can support the development of these skills by finding opportunities for children to practise them at home.

## RECOGNIZE WHEN SOMETHING IS WRONG

**Look for changes.** You know your child best. If you notice persistent changes in mood, behaviour, school work, relationships, interest in things, eating and/or sleeping, then a trip for a checkup may be warranted.

**Trust your instincts.** If you think something may be wrong, talk to your child about what you have noticed. Create safe, open spaces for quiet talking.

**Don't panic!** Mental health problems are relatively common, and can be addressed with a range of support options when identified early.

It is estimated that one in five children and youth in Ontario experience a mental, emotional, or behavioural disorder at some time that is severe enough to seriously affect how they function at home, school, or within the community.<sup>3</sup>

Recognizing signs is key. Awareness leads to early identification and can be the first step toward effective treatment. Signs of mental health issues may include:

- Changes in school achievement despite good efforts;
- Abuse of drugs and/or alcohol;
- Inability to cope with daily problems and activities;
- Changes in sleeping and/or eating habits;
- Defiance of authority, skipping school, stealing, or damaging property;
- Long-lasting negative moods, often accompanied by poor appetite and thoughts of death;
- Frequent outbursts of anger;
- Loss of interest in friends and activities they usually enjoy; and
- Excessive worrying or anxiety.

All children and youth may experience brief problems with some or all of these, but if signs continue or increase in intensity enough to disrupt everyday living, it is time to seek help.

## **FIND OUT WHERE, IN YOUR COMMUNITY, HELP IS AVAILABLE**

Proper assessment and diagnosis is an important first step. You may seek support from a counsellor at school or begin with a medical professional in your community.

Parents can also approach community child and youth mental health agencies directly in their community. A doctor's referral is *not* required.

Contact Children's Mental Health Ontario at [www.kidsmentalhealth.ca](http://www.kidsmentalhealth.ca) for information on community-based mental health services for children and youth.

In addition, the following organizations offer family-friendly resources that give in-depth information on general and specific mental health issues:

- Parents for Children's Mental Health:  
[www.pcmh.ca/](http://www.pcmh.ca/)
- Child and Youth Mental Health Information Network:  
<http://cymhin.offordcentre.com/>

At those times when young people may not be able to talk to parents or a trusted family member, they can call Kids Help Phone, which is available twenty-four hours a day every day. A call to 1-800-668-6868 connects them to professional counsellors who can provide short-term support. The call is free, they can remain anonymous, and anything they say is confidential.

Kids Help Phone has a website [www.kidshelpphone.ca](http://www.kidshelpphone.ca) that has helpful resources on a wide variety of topics.

A similar service, providing support for parents, is available from ConnexOntario's Mental Health Helpline at 1-866-531-2600 or their website [www.mentalhealthhelpline.ca](http://www.mentalhealthhelpline.ca)

## HELP TO BUILD UNDERSTANDING AND REDUCE STIGMA

Youth report that stigma around mental health issues makes it difficult to confide in people about their fears and concerns. Stigma refers to negative attitudes that people hold about something they do not understand. These attitudes and unkind comments about mental health make it difficult to seek help.

We can help reduce stigma that is frequently attached to issues of mental health. The best way to do that is to learn the facts and build caring and accepting cultures. Helpful Tip Sheets, on topics such as anxiety, are available at: <http://healthyandhappy.sickkidsfoundation.com/tip-sheets.html>

Thank you to  
Children's Mental Health Ontario  
for expert assistance in developing this section.

***Conflict and bullying get in the way of building healthy relationships. Understanding the difference between conflict and bullying is important because they require different responses.***

# RESOLVING CONFLICT AND PREVENTING BULLYING

## RESOLVING CONFLICT

**“Why do they always seem to be fighting? Why is everything becoming a battle?”**

Conflict is a natural part of how we relate to others. Conflict can arise whenever two or more people hold different opinions. Depending on how the conflict is resolved, it can be positive or negative. Learning how to deal with conflict in positive ways is an important life skill and helps us to build and maintain strong relationships.

When handled well, conflict can lead to positive outcomes – better decisions and ideas, more creativity, and deeper understanding of each other. Sometimes, however, dealing with conflict constructively seems impossible.

## TIPS

- Don’t ignore conflict, it will only get worse
- Develop conflict resolution skills
- Look for the real problem
- Model handling conflict positively

## DON'T IGNORE CONFLICT, IT WILL ONLY GET WORSE

Conflict is an emotional state and gets worse when ignored. Try to deal with it right away, or let those involved know it will be sorted out later. Follow through.

When children in conflict come to you, listen to their concerns and encourage them to express their feelings. Sometimes children and teens come to understand their feelings better when they tell someone else how they feel. Once people in conflict feel heard, they are more likely to accept help to resolve the conflict positively.

## DEVELOP CONFLICT RESOLUTION SKILLS

Young people's relationships can be much healthier when they learn to use conflict resolution strategies. Help your children learn how to:

- Focus on reducing stress;
- Listen and breathe deeply to help maintain their own composure;
- Think about how to end with a "win-win" situation for everyone; and
- Problem solve for possible solutions. Negotiated solutions work far better than imposed solutions.

You may want to try a method many teachers use. Invent a story about a conflict. As you get to the conflict, ask your child or teen: What is the problem? What could be possible solutions? What might make the problem better? What could make the problem worse?

## **LOOK FOR THE REAL PROBLEM**

The real problem may not be the one that children or youth name. Ask questions and listen carefully to get to the real cause of the conflict. It will then be easier to work together toward a lasting solution.

## **MODEL HANDLING CONFLICT POSITIVELY**

Children and youth learn about resolving conflict from parents and other adults. Perhaps you can think about how you resolve conflict. Do you give in easily? Do you stay in control or let emotions fly? Do you try to see someone else's point of view? Do you admit that you could have been wrong? Do you listen and give everyone a voice?

Have conversations about conflicts in the community and in the news. Explore different points of view and share ideas with your child about how some conflicts could be resolved.

# PREVENTING BULLYING

## When is “kids just being kids” actually bullying? What can we do to prevent it?

“Bullying is the opposite of a healthy peer relationship – it is a destructive relationship.”<sup>1</sup>

Bullying can happen in the home, at school, or in the community. It is a learned behaviour and must not be condoned.

*Bullying is a relationship problem that requires relationship solutions.* It happens when children use power aggressively to control or distress others. It is typically repeated, and, through repetition, the power difference between the child or youth who bullies and the child or youth who is victimized increases. Conflict mediation strategies are not appropriate interventions with bullying because bullying involves an imbalance of power.

**Children gain power over others in many ways that adults often miss. It may be a difference in age, size, or intelligence, but it may also be social power or knowing another's sensitivity related to race, disability, sexual orientation, or socio-economic disadvantage.**

– Debra Pepler

The serious short- and long-term effects of bullying on all those involved have been well documented: physical ailments, anxiety, depression, and even suicide, especially for youth who may be particularly vulnerable.

Ontario is taking bullying very seriously. Our *Education Act* was amended in 2012 with the intent of preventing

bullying and creating safe and accepting schools that are truly inclusive. A definition of bullying can be found at: [www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/parents/safeschools.html](http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/parents/safeschools.html) (Click on *Accepting Schools Act*.) Using a whole school approach, our schools are required to create bullying prevention and intervention plans and to communicate with families regarding serious student incidents, including bullying, that have involved their child.

We all have a role to play in creating positive school climates. So what can parents do? Adults see only a small portion of bullying incidents and young people often do not report bullying for many reasons, including fear and peer pressure.<sup>2</sup> Parents can help by encouraging children to report bullying and working with their schools and communities.

**Bullying affects the majority of Canadian children, at least once, throughout their childhood... The effects of bullying are immediate and long-lasting, putting our children at risk for a number of physical, social and mental health problems. As parents, these risks should not be acceptable. Adult intervention stops bullying—it is our responsibility.**

— **PREVNet<sup>3</sup>**

Many school boards and schools have set up a variety of anonymous reporting options using drop boxes, phone lines or the Internet. If children are reluctant to report bullying, parents can encourage them to do so by using anonymous options.

Kids Help Phone is always available at 1-800-668-6868 and through its website [www.kidshelpphone.ca](http://www.kidshelpphone.ca). A chat room and many other resources are available.

Because bullying is a relationship problem, the solution has to focus on the relationships among those who are bullying, those who are bullied, and those who witness bullying. All three groups need to be involved in prevention programs.<sup>4</sup> Helping our children to develop skills for healthy relationships with peer groups and communities will not only improve their personal lives, but will help to create positive school climates and cultures where bullying ceases to exist.

**"My kids do well in school when they feel like it's their school – when they take ownership...and want to go back the next day." – Parent**

## TIPS

- Help to support and empower children who have been bullied
- Help children who have bullied others to stop bullying, repair damages and become positive leaders
- Help bystanders to stand up for others and themselves

## HELP TO SUPPORT AND EMPOWER CHILDREN WHO HAVE BEEN BULLIED

Children who are bullied need support and understanding. Assure them that they have a right to be safe and that being bullied is never acceptable. Draw out feelings about what happened by listening. Decide together how to go about dealing with the situation, including how best to report the bullying.

Be sure to report the bullying to the school and continue to work together toward a satisfactory resolution.

Discuss how people stand up for themselves in difficult situations. This may include assertive, not passive or aggressive communication.

**Learning to communicate assertively can help to foster dignity and empowerment for everyone. You may wish to explore COPA's model of *Empowerment-Based Problem-Solving* and *Assertive Communication*. (See [infocopa.com](http://infocopa.com) and Additional Resources.)**

## **HELP CHILDREN WHO HAVE BULLIED OTHERS TO STOP BULLYING, REPAIR DAMAGES AND BECOME POSITIVE LEADERS**

It may be hard to discover that your child is bullying others. When children bully, it is important to intervene quickly and help them understand the hurtful impact of their behaviour on others. Be clear: bullying is wrong. Remember, however, that those who bully also need support, and this can be a powerful learning opportunity.

Punishment is not nearly as effective as providing consequences that help a child learn. If your child has been bullying, talk about the pain they have caused and responsibility for their actions. Include the best way to apologize, repair any damages and make up for what they have done.

**Children are sensitive to their parents' emotions. If you feel angry, compose yourself, and be careful not to model aggressiveness or a lack of compassion. If we are harsh with our children, we may be showing them how to use power aggressively.**

*– Debra Pepler*

Children have the power to make the world better, even in small ways. Supporting children and youth to use their power positively is one of the most helpful things we can do to guide them in developing healthy relationships within and beyond the family.

## **HELP BYSTANDERS TO STAND UP FOR OTHERS AND THEMSELVES**

All children may witness bullying at some time. Remind your child that everyone has the right to be safe and everyone has a responsibility to report bullying. Young people have the power to challenge things that do not seem right to them.

**When peers do have the courage to step in, bullying behaviour stops 57 per cent of the time within 10 seconds.<sup>5</sup>**

Explain that if reporting helps get someone out of trouble, it is a good thing.

Encourage your child to join a bullying prevention initiative or support group. Besides developing leadership skills, this can also be an empowering way to help support a safe and accepting school and positive learning environment.

**Students who are able to have healthy relationships will be less likely to bully others, will be more likely to support students who are bullied, and will be better able to reach their educational goals. Promoting healthy relationships is a key way to prevent bullying and create a safe and accepting school climate.<sup>6</sup>**

# ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Peaceful Parent Institute, *Resolving Conflicts Peacefully* [http://peaceful-parent.com/resolving\\_conflict.php](http://peaceful-parent.com/resolving_conflict.php)
- COPA (Centre ontarien de prévention des agressions), *Fostering Safe, Inclusive and Accepting Schools: Bullying Prevention Guide – A Resource for Parents and Schools*, (Toronto: COPA, 2013), p. 29 and p. 35. <http://www.changeourworld.ca/resources>
- Safe@School COPA-OTF joint initiative on bullying: [safeatschool.ca](http://safeatschool.ca)
- Barbara Coloroso, *The Bully, the Bullied, and the Bystander*, (Toronto: Collins, 2006).
- Wendy Craig, Debra Pepler, Joanne Cummings, *Bullying Prevention: What Parents Need to Know*, (PREVNet Pocket Guide to Bullying Prevention), (Tucson, Arizona: Quickfind Books, 2013). This book is available as an e-book and as a printed book from: [www.bullyingpreventionanswers.com](http://www.bullyingpreventionanswers.com).
- London Anti-Bullying Coalition and York Region Anti-Bullying Coalition, *A Parent Guide for Addressing Bullying in Publicly-funded Schools in Ontario*, (London: LYRABC, 2013), available at: <http://www.ldcsb.on.ca/Programs/SafeSchools/Documents/LABCTOOLKIT042113P.pdf>
- Ministry of Education, website for information on definitions, policies, procedures, resources, etc. pertaining to bullying, see: [www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/parents/safeschools.html](http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/parents/safeschools.html)
- PREVNet website: [www.prevnet.ca/bullying/parents](http://www.prevnet.ca/bullying/parents)
- TVO's website on anti-bullying. See: <http://tvoparents.tvo.org/topic/social-emotional>

*We cannot always protect  
our children from the  
disappointments and challenges  
they will face in the future,  
but we can prepare them for  
that future by helping them to  
become more resilient.*

## **“When something goes wrong, he gets discouraged and gives up. What can I do to help him bounce back?”**

Resilience is the ability to “bounce back” after disappointments. It is about learning what went wrong, gaining strength from setbacks, and trying again. Children can learn to become more resilient through their experiences. We cheer them on when we teach them that failures are simply part of the learning and growing process.

The more supportive relationships your children have, the more resilient they can become in stressful situations. Resilient children not only make their own world better, but they can also help others.

Parents can play a key role in helping their children become more resilient.

**“When I have a goal, I know it’s not always a smooth path. I still get there – but it might not be the way I expected.” – Child**

## **TIPS**

- Help children and youth set realistic goals
- Give children and youth responsibilities
- Guide your children in developing their strengths
- Stress the importance of helping others
- Help children and teens handle disappointment and focus on the positive
- Help children identify their emotions and ways to manage them
- Listen to your child's or teen's feelings and ideas

### **HELP CHILDREN AND YOUTH SET REALISTIC GOALS**

Children and teens are more motivated to succeed when they set their own goals. Guide them to make sure their goals are not too easy or too hard. Encourage them to create a step-by-step plan.

With plans to realize goals, it is easier for children to identify where things go wrong. Problem solving with your children empowers them and gives them the confidence and strength to feel less discouraged.

Reaching doable goals builds self-confidence.

## GIVE CHILDREN AND YOUTH RESPONSIBILITIES

Encourage children and teens to take responsibility for enjoyable tasks and for monitoring their own success. When a task is done, they feel better about their abilities.

**“In the car, my son keeps track of GPS directions. It gives him a real sense of responsibility.” – Parent**

## GUIDE YOUR CHILDREN IN DEVELOPING THEIR STRENGTHS

Resilient children know your love is not based on how they do on a test. They know you accept them unconditionally.

We all gain confidence when we know that we are capable of making a difference that is valued by others and the people we care about. Avoid making comparisons with your child’s siblings and peers. Let your children know you believe in them and their unique abilities.

**Research says that volunteering and helping others can reduce our stress and increase our sense of well-being and happiness.**

## STRESS THE IMPORTANCE OF HELPING OTHERS

Help children and youth appreciate that there are many people less fortunate than they are. Your children can make a positive difference by doing things for others. This will assist them in developing empathy and giving them a sense of their own self-worth.

Encourage teamwork. We all gain confidence and motivation when we know that we are capable and that others appreciate our contributions.

**“When I help my Reading Buddy, she really looks up to me. It makes me feel great.” – Child**

## HELP CHILDREN AND TEENS HANDLE DISAPPOINTMENT AND FOCUS ON THE POSITIVE

If you've never failed at anything, you haven't set the bar high enough; however, the competition should always be with ourselves.

– Bruce Ferguson

Children need “child-size adversity, a chance to fall down and get back up on [their] own, without help.”<sup>1</sup>

As they learn from their setbacks, children become more resourceful, self-confident, and resilient. Failures are not failures at all, but are part of the learning process we all go through. Be sure to be there after setbacks, but try not to rush to help.

Resilient children recognize that practice leads to success. Teach them that what they accomplish can make a difference. Knowing that they are capable and can make a positive difference is a key factor in determining how optimistic our children are.

**It might be said that teaching optimism to your children is as important as teaching them to work hard or be truthful, for it can have as profound an impact on their later lives.<sup>2</sup>**

## HELP CHILDREN IDENTIFY THEIR EMOTIONS AND WAYS TO MANAGE THEM

**“My parents help me recognize when I am anxious. They tell me to take a deep breath and help me calm down. They support me and help me stay focused.”**

*– Teen*

To get the most out of any learning situation, children need to be able to remain focused and alert. This involves being aware of their emotions, whether they are angry, sad, or calm. Teach them how to calm themselves after a setback.

Helping your child learn how to manage emotions is part of maturing. Slow but steady improvement in your children’s self-management will build their confidence and their ability to relate more easily to others. This is called self-regulation. Children who have developed such skills from early childhood have an easier time coping with challenges – but it is

never too late. For tips on how to develop self-regulation, see Additional Resources.

**Giving children time to wind down from energetic activities to quieter time is important. For example, encourage quiet activity before bedtime.**

**“When my parents listen to me I feel grown-up. I feel like they think I’m more than just a kid. I feel important.” – *Child***

## **LIS TEN TO YOUR CHILD’S OR TEEN’S FEELINGS AND IDEAS**

When listening, try not to interrupt or give advice. Give your children time to relate their thoughts, feelings, and ideas about resolving problems. When they are finished, ask questions to see if, together, you can agree on what to do.

**“Honour your children’s feelings... listen when they are speaking their truth.” – *Parent***

Guiding children and teens through the steps to success builds their belief in themselves. With each success, they become better prepared to face the next challenge.

We are our children’s cheering section. Their belief in themselves and their willingness to take risks are strengthened when we tell them what we love about them, what makes us smile and what makes us proud.

**“I can think of no greater joy than my children and no greater responsibility than parenting.” – Parent**

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# Acknowledgements

## CODE THANKS ALL CONTRIBUTORS:

**Dr. Jean Clinton**, Child Psychiatrist, Associate Professor, Department of Psychiatry and Behavioural Neuroscience, McMaster University and Children's Hospital;

**COPA** (Centre ontarien de prévention des agressions);

**Dr. Bruce Ferguson**, Director, Community Health Systems Resource Group at the Hospital for Sick Children;

**Mary Gordon**, Founder and President of Roots of Empathy; and

**Dr. Debra Pepler**, Co-Director, PREVNet (Promoting Relationships and Eliminating Violence Network).

**Many parents, students, and educators contributed. They represented organizations which include the following:**

Algoma District School Board	Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board
Bluewater Citizens for Education	Hastings & Prince Edward District School Board
Bluewater District School Board	Kawartha Pine Ridge District School Board
Bully Free Community Alliance of York Region	Keewatin-Patricia District School Board
Conseil des écoles publiques de l'Est de l'Ontario	Lambton Kent District School Board
Conseil scolaire de district catholique Centre-Sud	London Anti-Bullying Coalition
Conseil scolaire de district catholique de l'Est ontarien	Near North District School Board
Conseil scolaire de district catholique des Aurores boréales	Northeastern Catholic District School Board
Conseil scolaire de district catholique des Grandes Rivières	Northwest Catholic District School Board
Conseil scolaire de district catholique du Centre-Est de l'Ontario	Ontario Association of Parents in Catholic Education
Conseil scolaire de district catholique du Nouvel-Ontario	Ontario Federation of Home and School Associations
Conseil scolaire de district catholique Franco-Nord	Ottawa Catholic District School Board
Conseil scolaire catholique Providence	Parents partenaires en éducation
Conseil scolaire Viamonde	Peel District School Board
Conseil scolaire de district du Grand Nord de l'Ontario	People for Education
Conseil scolaire de district du Nord-Est de l'Ontario	Rainbow District School Board
Durham Catholic District School Board	Rainy River District School Board
Fédération de la jeunesse franco-ontarienne	Renfrew County Catholic District School Board
Guelph Anti-bullying Coalition	Simcoe County District School Board
Halton Catholic District School Board	St Clair Catholic District School Board
Hamilton Anti-Bullying Coalition	Thames Valley District School Board
	Toronto Catholic District School Board
	Toronto District School Board
	York Region Anti-Bullying Coalition
	York Region District School Board



# **Parent Engagement Is Important For Student Success.**

These materials have been developed by the Council of Ontario Directors of Education and funded by the Ontario Ministry of Education.

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