

MAKING SCHOOLS SAFER

The power of caring in a school atmosphere

Student safety is in the news a lot nowadays. A 15 year old shot, a 13 year old sexually assaulted, and word leaking out that all kinds of abuse is going on in our schools that isn't being reported or being dealt with. It's left many parents and school officials scratching their heads in worry and wonder as to how things got this bad, who's to blame and what can be done to make schools safer.

It made me think, too. At first I thought the problem boiled down to the teenagers themselves and their muddled up ideas of right and wrong. Many teens, for instance, don't think it's wrong to bully someone or rip a person's dignity to shreds on the internet, or bait a teacher into losing his temper. They think revenge is sweet, retaliation is mandatory and treating others with contempt through brutal put-downs, cruel practical jokes or a deliberate shove in passing, is all quite acceptable.

But then I got to thinking why teens think these things are acceptable. Is it all their fault, or is it the adults in their lives who are just as messed up as they are?

Think of the teen, for instance, whose Dad's a violent alcoholic, Mom's a raging gossip who says nothing good about anyone, and the neighbourhood is riddled with fearsome creatures who value no one but themselves. And what message are teenagers getting from politicians who are constantly putting each other down, from hockey players who sucker punch, from movies and video games glorifying violence, and from TV with its daily drivel of dysfunctional people mostly trying to harm each other?

No wonder teenagers' ideas of right and wrong are so muddled up when they've got stupid adults like these influencing them.

It amazes me how any teenager turns out normal. But many do. Somehow they're able to rise above the nuttiness in school and society and set their sights on becoming good and useful people. So, rather than continue getting myself all depressed looking at all the problems, I began to wonder why it is that so many teenagers do well, and even when living in horrible situations, too.

From what I've seen, heard and read there's a common denominator.

Somewhere in these teens' lives is an adult who cares. It may only be one adult, but just one caring adult can make all the difference. There are several movies now, based on true stories, that illustrate this point well. They show the power of just one caring teacher to turn an entire class of unruly misfits into a cohesive unit, who care for each other, resist bad influences and want to learn. It happens: a teen, or group of teens, can be inspired to turn their lives around by a caring adult.

It happened to one of my own children, who had a rough time in Elementary School. At the time, I wasn't involved much in his life, either, and it left him floundering at the bottom end of the class all the way up to Grade 8.

It was his Grade 8 teacher, however, who turned the tide by a simple gesture of caring. Both he and my son cycled to school each day, so one day my son challenged the teacher to a contest, to see who could keep up cycling to school every day for the rest of that school year. The teacher accepted. That entire winter, a horrible one too, my son cycled to school, no matter what the weather threw at him, and the teacher stayed up with him day after day, too. The two of them missed only one day each.

When the year was done, my son was a different boy. His attitude to teachers, to school and to his grades changed dramatically and he went on to graduate from High School as a scholar student. What turned him was a teacher who cared.

The difference these caring adults are making in the lives of our children is inspiring. They do it quietly and without fanfare too, while school administrators spend a lot of time and public money scratching their heads wondering what new programs they need to invent, or what rules they need to enforce, to make teenagers behave.

It wasn't programs and rules, though, that changed my son. It was three very special teachers and a Principal who made it obvious they cared. To him they're more than teachers, they're friends for life.

Caring can turn a human life around. It's so simple and yet so incredibly powerful, but it's been there in scripture all along. "We love him because he first loved us (I John 4:19)." That's how we come to love God, and how our whole attitude to God changes. It's when we discover how much he cares.

It's a point worth noting, I would think, for school officials and parents who are wondering how to make our schools safer. And having personally witnessed a Principal turn a whole school around because he cared, I know it works, too!