

Western policies echo community anti-bullying pledge

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How will you help end workplace bullying? That's the question being posed this week by London-area educators, officials, civic leaders and media representatives.

Monday, Nov. 14, marks the beginning of Bullying Awareness and Prevention Week – a community initiative aimed at eradicating abusive behaviour from the schoolyard to the workplace. At 10 a.m. Monday, children, teachers and staff at schools throughout the London region will take a pledge to end bullying.

That Pledge reflects values Western has actively fostered since 2008, when the university created its Safe Campus Community initiative. Involving such departments as Equity and Human Rights Services (EHRS), the initiative educates and supports all staff, faculty and students on their rights, roles and responsibilities with respect to physical, environmental, emotional and cyber safety.

Since 2006, EHRS has consulted with almost 1,300 members of the university community to address issues such as harassment, discrimination and employment equity. In addition to addressing individual issues, they conduct customized workshops at the request of faculty members, teaching assistants and staff leaders.

And since amendments in June 2010 to the Ontario Occupational Health and Safety Act, the EHRS team has educated more than 2,700 faculty and staff on the prevention of workplace harassment. Although not formally mentioned in the act, bullying awareness and prevention is a key element of the training.

“Harassment and bullying have subtle but distinct differences,” says Larissa Bartlett, director of equity and human rights services. “A single incident can constitute harassment, even if the person doesn't intend to offend. Bullying, however, involves repeated incidents over a period of time that are intended to intimidate, offend or humiliate a particular person or group of people.”

The term ‘bullying’ may conjure images of stolen lunch money and playground fistfights, but it is not the sole domain of children. According to the Canada Safety Council, one in six employees in Canada has been bullied, and one in five employees has seen a co-worker bullied.

“While child bullies use fists, adult bullies use words,” Bartlett says. “And we all know psychological and emotional abuse can be even more damaging than physical over the long term.”

In the workplace, bullying can take many forms including: spreading rumours about a person; excluding them from social situations; interfering with their work; belittling their intelligence; blocking their attempts at promotion or training. The list goes on.

And workplace bullying takes its toll in every part of the targets' lives. They can't eat or sleep; they lose interest in their work; they experience relationship problems at home; and, generally, they lose their love of life.

Many decide that the only way to escape the bullying is to quit their job. This move has significant financial implications for both the individual and their organization. A

2001 International Labor Organization report estimates that workplace bullying and harassment cost society between 1-3.5 per cent of GDP.

Since a bully's goal is to make their target feel isolated and helpless, Bartlett implores witnesses of workplace bullying to take action.

"If you observe bullying behaviour, reach out to the target. Say, 'I see what's going on: I want to help you.' Also, please contact us at Equity and Human Rights Services for support."

Bartlett's favourite saying is: "What we permit we promote."

She points out that if we as a community allow hurtful, disrespectful actions to go unchecked, we send the message that they are acceptable. "Our goal at Western is to create a culture of respect," Bartlett says, "where harassment and bullying are completely unacceptable and therefore nonexistent.

"Although," she laughs, "that ideal also means working myself out of a job."

Bull's-eye on bullying

One of your colleagues may be a target of bullying if he/she:

- Complains someone is consistently sabotaging their work/studies;
- Acts paranoid or anxious about someone's influence on their work;
- Is afraid for their job security or even their personal safety;
- Appears unhappy and expresses feelings of isolation;
- Starts avoiding work or school despite a history of regular attendance;
- Demonstrates a significant drop in performance.

What You Can Do

- Reach out to the person you believe is the target of bullying and offer your support;
- Contact Equity and Human Rights Services (EHRS) to coordinate training/information workshops www.uwo.ca/equity;
- Contact EHRS to report harassment that you are experiencing;
- Take The Pledge to End Bullying <http://ctvnewslondon.ca/thepledge/>.