

Using our WITS

Victoria's innovative anti-bullying program is about to go national

by Peigi McGillivray

Anyone facing a bully knows it's important to keep your wits about you. Since 1998, students in Victoria schools have had an opportunity to do just that, thanks to a unique anti-bullying partnership between the University of Victoria and an anti-violence charity founded by local police.

Together with Greater Victoria School District 61, the university and Rock Solid Foundation have created a program called WITS that aims to reduce victimization in schools.

Children across Canada will now be able to benefit from this university-community collaboration. Thanks to \$180,000 in funding from the Public Health Agency of Canada, Leadbeater and her team are taking WITS to schools in Canada's rural and remote areas.

Studies show that between 15 and 20 per cent of Canadian children are affected by bullying. Children who are chronically bullied may become aggressive or depressed, or drop out of school. In extreme cases, bullying can lead to long-term mental health problems, serious injuries or suicide.

"Bullying happens everywhere," says Dr. Bonnie Leadbeater, a UVic psychologist and

WITS program leader. "Everyone needs to know how to handle it, wherever and however it happens, in person or in cyberspace."

WITS teaches students to "Walk away, Ignore, Talk it out and Seek help" when they are confronted with an aggressive situation.

"It gives kids, schools, families and communities a simple way to deal with bullying," says Leadbeater, "It's a great example of how effective university-community partnerships can be. Our ongoing research shows that WITS has significantly reduced bullying and peer victimization in Greater Victoria schools."

The WITS program translates Leadbeater's research on child and adolescent mental health, youth resilience, and peer victimization directly into community action. "Almost every school in Greater Victoria and Sooke uses the program," says Leadbeater. "It's very gratifying to see our research making such a positive difference in the community."

The WITS Rock Solid Primary Program is for students in kindergarten to Grade 3 and teaches a simple, memorable way to deal with peer conflicts. Community services personnel such as the RCMP "deputize" students as "special constables"—who promise to use their WITS at school and at home—and visit the

school regularly to reinforce the message.

A follow-up program, WITS LEADS, is for children in Grades 4 to 6, and specifically targets relational victimization, such as gossiping and spreading rumours. LEADS stands for "Look and Listen, Explore points of view, Act, Did it work? and Seek help."

"Preventing peer victimization takes a lot more than catchy acronyms," says Leadbeater. "WITS is successful because it involves everyone—children, youth, parents, emergency services personnel and teachers—all working together to create schools and communities that are safe and responsive to young children's reports of bullying."

Leadbeater's work with the WITS program permeates every aspect of her academic life, from her research focus to graduate student projects and undergraduate course programming.

"WITS offers tremendous scope for learning about how victimization works, and how we can lessen its impact on communities and individuals," she says, "Our challenge is to find effective ways to share what we have learned in BC and beyond. We're now working with communities and schools from across Canada who have expressed an interest in being involved."

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Bullying can be physical, emotional, racist, sexual or verbal. Cyber bullies use technologies such as email, Internet sites, text messaging, chat rooms and camera cell phones to harass, threaten or socially exclude victims.

To date, the WITS program has been adopted by more than 100 schools in BC and Alberta. This fall, schools in New Brunswick, Ontario and PEI are expected to participate.

Bonnie Leadbeater's evaluation of the WITS Rock Solid Primary Program found that relational victimization—such as social exclusion and rumour-spreading—and physical victimization decreased in all schools using the program.

How can you use your WITS at home? Remind your kids to Walk Away, Ignore, Talk it out, and Seek Help for common conflicts about toys or television, sharing or turn-taking. Find more suggestions at www.witsprogram.ca and click on WITS for families.

UVic researchers were awarded more than \$104 million in outside research grants and contracts in 2008/09—more than double the research support of five years ago.

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