



# Back to school:

## Reading, writing... and relationships?

As children, parents and teachers prepare for the 2010-2011 school year, it is important to consider what children really need to learn both in and out of school. While learning to read, do math and science is a given, what about their social development and relationship literacy?

Compared to other countries, Canada is falling seriously behind in supporting children and youth to develop social skills and healthy relationships. In fact, the World Health Organization places Canada in the bottom third of developed nations on bullying and victimization.

Why is this "fourth R" of relationships so important for Canadian children? More and more research points to the fact that starting at birth, children cannot develop in healthy ways without healthy relationships. Many of the problems that children and youth experience, such as bullying, depression, substance use, delinquency and school dropout, often have their roots in troubled relationships. The solutions to these problems lie in promoting the relationship literacy of all children and youth, which is essential to building healthy lives, and a healthy society.

There are three critical steps to building healthy relationships for children and youth. First, all of us involved with children and youth must focus on the challenging and continuous task of teaching healthy relationship skills and insuring that children are embedded in healthy relationships. Secondly, it is important to shift to a supportive educational approach, similar to that used to teach math or reading, in which we honour children's mistakes and help them learn missing skills, rather than punishing or excluding them for relationship lessons they have not had or not mastered. Finally, there must be regular reviews, assessments of and accountability for relationship literacy as there are for reading, writing, arithmetic and science.

Adults have a central and essential role in helping children develop relationship literacy, which is grounded in the ability to understand and control emotions and behaviours. Adults are especially important in addressing bullying problems, which are a "red flag" for relationship problems. Children who bully need support in understanding the impact



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of their behaviours and the importance of relating positively to others. Children who are victimized require protection from bullying and support in developing social confidence and positive friendships. Children who stand by and watch bullying without helping need support in recognizing that their behaviour is part of the problem and coaching on what they can do to stop bullying. Adults must also be aware of and shape the social dynamics in children's groups to ensure that marginalized children are included and that groups of children do not use their power aggressively. All children need to be able to think of many different ways to solve social problems, build social connections, social status, and positive leadership.

Unlike learning to read or to do math, where there is a step-by-step process, the lessons for successful social interactions are much more complex. Children need to develop an understanding of not only their own behaviours and emotions, but also others' behaviours and emotions. The others with whom children interact are highly variable and often unpredictable: even a single person varies from day to day in warmth, responses, and emotions. To achieve relationship literacy, children and youth require positive role models and consistent, ongoing, positive moment-to-moment coaching to help them learn how to relate to others, be successful in achieving social goals, and use power positively, rather than negatively. This is the responsibility for all of us involved in the education of children and youth at home, at school, and in our communities.

For more information and resources on how you can play an active role in promoting relationship literacy go to [www.prevnet.ca](http://www.prevnet.ca).



# PREVNet

Promoting Relationships and Eliminating Violence

La promotion des relations et l'élimination de la violence



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