



In real life and online, getting cancelled is toxic to kids and teens. Here's how parents and educators can help

SHAWNA COHEN

SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE AND MAIL

PUBLISHED SEPTEMBER 12, 2022

FOR SUBSCRIBERS

This article was published more than 3 years ago. Some information may no longer be current.

There's a new phenomenon affecting children and compelling moms and

dads to sharpen their parenting skills: cancel culture. Also referred to as call-out culture, it's the idea of silencing or taking away support for a person because of something they've said or done that's perceived as offensive or wrong.

Cancel culture is nothing new: A slew of celebrities have been “cancelled” in recent years, everyone from actor Will Smith (after he slapped Chris Rock at the Academy Awards, the Academy slapped him with a 10-year ban) to author and TV personality Chrissy Teigen (she lost deals with major brands carrying her cookware line after alleged online bullying of reality star Courtney Stodden). The Merriam-Webster Dictionary even added the use of the verb “to cancel” in 2021. Now the trend is trickling down to a younger generation – and the impact is detrimental.

Of course, there are benefits to some of the ideas that can lead to cancel culture: they hold people with power accountable, advocate for victims who might otherwise be silenced, and help combat racism, sexism and all sorts of phobic behaviours. When it comes to children and teens, however, cancel culture is a form of shaming that experts are calling toxic.

“Being excluded from a social group can be very devastating for kids and the effects can last a long time. It shatters their confidence; they become withdrawn, afraid to take risks and then they’ll become even more socially isolated,” says Joanne Cummings, a Toronto-based child psychologist and director of knowledge mobilization at PREVNet, a national organization working to eliminate violence caused by bullying.

In fact, studies show the distress caused by social exclusion activates brain circuits related to physical pain. For many children and teens, being



COMMENTS

SHARE



SAVE FOR
LATER



GIVE THIS
ARTICLE

Unfortunately, it's a common scenario in some schools, where children are

immediately suspended or expelled for wrongdoing – and later shunned by friends – without any understanding as to why their behaviour was inappropriate. With such a knee-jerk reaction, adults and children are missing out on important conversations on topics such as race, consent and sexuality. It's precisely these types of discussions that can help kids resolve conflicts in a peaceful and more understanding way.

Cummings, too, believes that adults should give kids consequences that help teach empathy rather than punishing them right off the bat. She describes cancel culture as “the summary dismissal of someone and their worth and basic value because of a mistake they made.” Indeed, kids make mistakes. It's up to parents and educators to help them learn from their mistakes.

She suggests parents have constructive conversations with their offspring about what kind of behaviour is okay and how they could have better handled a situation. “When teasing or roughhousing goes too far, the person on the receiving end is no longer equally entertained or amused,” Cummings says. “How can you tell? You look at the other person's face, you check in with them. That's the whole idea of consent when it comes to dating and sexual violence, too.”

Of course, teaching children how to learn from their mistakes takes self-awareness. Cummings says she's seen parents freak out, asking their child how they could have done this horrible thing, while others won't even entertain the notion that their child could do wrong. “Neither reaction is helpful,” she says. “The best reaction is to say, ‘I know you're a good kid. How can we learn from this and is there an opportunity to make things right?’”

As a new school year begins, educators have the added challenge of teaching children who have missed out on some key social skills during COVID-19 lockdowns. For example, playing soccer with friends or day-to-day experiences at recess or lunchtime help teach children life lessons such as

how to work with others and the importance of compromise. Kids have been cooped up at home over the past few years and, as Cummings explains, “may be a bit more impulsive and less sensitive to picking up social cues from others.”

MORE STORIES BELOW ADVERTISEMENT

Ad : (0:11)



Jill Klein, a special education teacher with the Toronto District School Board, agrees that conflict resolution often boils down to engaging kids in conversation. “We’re all far more aware about language usage in the last few years – about what we can and can’t say. Kids may think it’s funny to say something without realizing it’s hurtful, and that’s okay,” Klein says. “We all make mistakes. It’s what we do with those mistakes that matters.” To that end, she suggests teachers and parents talk to children about how to treat others and respect differences (and model that behaviour, too).

“We need to help them understand that language can be hurtful,” says Klein, who with a colleague created Girls Club – a weekly lunchtime meetup where

girls in Grade 6 can discuss various topics, ranging from friendship to peer pressure, in a safe space.

Face-to-face interactions like these are vital when it comes to engaging in open dialogue. That's in stark contrast to social media, which is the leading tool for cancelling someone. People tend to become nasty, or at least bolder, when hiding behind a screen. In a recent survey by Statista, a company specializing in market and consumer data, 71 per cent of social-media users in Canada said they found people to be more hostile and negative on social media than they are or would be in real life.

Paul Davis, a social-media safety expert who, for more than a decade, has given in-person presentations on the subject to thousands of students across North America, knows all too well how “vulgar” people can be online. He has built a career around educating students and empowering parents about social networking and online safety.

“You can be cancelled in a private Facebook group or a public forum, such as Instagram or Twitter,” he says. “Someone disagrees with your thoughts and opinions and instead of engaging in a good debate, they immediately say, ‘That’s wrong and we want nothing to do with you.’ ”

Davis has learned it's often the zeitgeist of the day (or week or month) that causes online conflict and bullying. “Two years ago, you could have been cancelled for your position on Black Lives Matter. I just had a conversation with an educator about how some kids were recently shunned if they didn't subscribe to a particular pronoun,” he says. At the end of the last school year, he asked students for examples of online topics that divide them. The responses were broad: Johnny Depp versus Amber Heard. Pro- or anti-mask. Pro- or anti-vax. Anti-abortion or pro-choice. Pro- or anti-guns. “It depends on pop culture and what makes the news,” Davis says.

He suggests preventative measures such as talking to children about the context of what they post online, regardless of subject, and about

respectfully disagreeing with others. For a child who's dealing with the aftermath of being cancelled, Davis highlights that they should focus on the people who truly matter. He stresses the importance of differentiating between real friends, who are willing to express their opinions face-to-face, and those with ulterior motives, who are more interested in attacking others on a public forum.

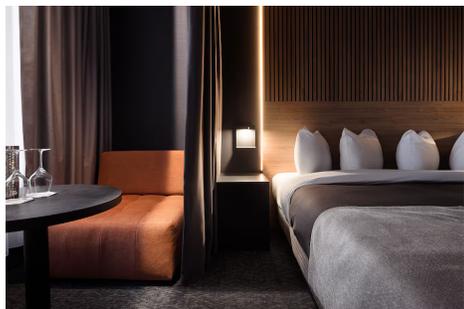
“A real friend would say, ‘I saw what you posted, I disagree, let’s talk about it.’ I always say friends are not found or made online but rather in school, sports clubs and so on,” he says. “My position has always been freedom of expression. With that comes a calculated risk that someone’s not going to like it.”

Sign up for the Health & Wellness Newsletter. Keep up to date on the latest nutrition news and dietary advice, fitness tips and wellness trends

+ SIGN UP | EXPLORE NEWSLETTERS

[Report an editorial error](#) [Report a technical issue](#) [Editorial code of conduct](#)

More from Life



In Montreal’s Old Port, SonoLux hotel is a match for the city’s vast art scene



How much do you know about healthy eating? Take our nutrition quiz




For figure skating champ Madeline Schizas, knitting is the perfect way to unwind off the ice



**I work in conflict zones.
Here's what tourists need
to know about sudden
crises abroad**



**Six high-carb foods
surprisingly high in
protein**



**How to shop the fall 2026
runway trends that are on
sale now 🔑**

