

injured, bewildered, and often friendless or subject to ridicule by other students.⁴⁶⁶ Many students thought they were the only children being abused. This confusion made it difficult for them to describe or report their abuse.⁴⁶⁷ Some were told they would face eternal damnation for speaking of what had been done to them.⁴⁶⁸

Many students fought back against their far larger and more powerful assailants, especially as they got older and stronger.⁴⁶⁹ Some succeeded in forcing their tormentors to leave them alone.⁴⁷⁰ Many others, such as Lawrence Waquan, concluded that there was “nothing you can do.”⁴⁷¹ Some students ran away from school in an attempt to escape abuse.⁴⁷² Others begged their parents not to return them to school after a break.⁴⁷³

Some students never reported abuse for fear they would not be believed.⁴⁷⁴ Other students who did report abuse were told that they were to blame.⁴⁷⁵ In some cases, school officials took immediate action when abuse was reported to them, but the rarity of such actions is itself noteworthy.⁴⁷⁶ Former students spoke of how betrayed they felt when nothing was done about their complaints.⁴⁷⁷ Many simply felt too ashamed to ever speak of the abuse.⁴⁷⁸ Family members often refused to believe their children’s reports of abuse, intensifying their sense of isolation and pain.⁴⁷⁹ This was especially so within families that had adopted Christianity, and could not believe that the people of God looking after their children would ever do such things.⁴⁸⁰

The impact of abuse was immediate and long-lasting. It destroyed the students’ ability to function in the school, and led many to turn to self-destructive behaviours.⁴⁸¹

Staff abuse of children created conditions for the student abuse of other students. Every school system has to deal with school bullies, student cliques, and inter-student conflict. It is part of the socialization process. Ideally, corrective lessons in how to treat others well are taught, as well as shown by example. Residential school staff had a responsibility not only to model such behaviour, but also to protect students from being victimized. In many cases, they failed to provide that protection. Conflicts between students are not unique to residential schools, but they take on greater significance in a residential school setting where children cannot turn to adult family members for comfort, support, and redress. The moral influences that a child’s home community can exert are also absent. Instead, the children were left vulnerable and unprotected. Residential schools failed to live up to their responsibility to protect students from being victimized by other students.

Older or bigger students used force—or the threat of force—to establish their dominance over younger students. In some cases, this dominance was used to coerce younger or smaller students to participate in sexual acts. In other cases, bullies forced vulnerable students to turn over their treats, their food, or their money, or to steal on their behalf. In addition, bullies might simply seek a measure of sadistic satisfaction from beating those who were weaker. Bullies operated individually or in groups. Such groups were often formed initially as a defensive response to the level of violence within the school, but, over time, would take on their own offensive characteristics. Sometimes, such groups not only focused their anger and/or frustration on other students, but also sought to disrupt