

The Current

Kids are getting ruder, teachers say. And new research backs that up

Outbursts and interruptions have increased since pandemic, say educators



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Some teachers say kids are just plain ruder these days, with a sharp increase in disruptive behaviour like texting, talking out of turn and conflict with other students. (Ground Picture/Shutterstock)

An Ontario teacher says "manners have gone out the door" in classrooms since the pandemic, and new research agrees that kids have become ruder to both teachers and each other.

"There's a lot more outbursts," said Marylinda Lamarra, a secondary school teacher in the York Catholic District School Board in Ontario.

"Students feel empowered to just speak out whenever they have a question on their mind ... or they ask to go to the bathroom, mid-sentence while I'm teaching," she told [The Current](#).

Lamarra said students struggle to pay attention through a whole lesson and can't seem to manage their own disruptive behavior. They're also ruder to each other, and often can't resolve conflicts without resorting to yelling.

"It's just become increasingly more noticeable post-COVID," she said.

They were at home behind a screen ... They could do what they wanted-
Marylinda Lamarra

A [recent study from Brock University](#) found a significant increase in classroom incivility since the pandemic. Researchers asked 308 Ontario kids aged nine to 14 to fill out a survey, which asked if they ever engaged in rude or disruptive behaviour.

That includes things like texting in class, interrupting or talking over a teacher, or packing up before the lesson is even over. The Brock team also spoke with 101 primary educators about their experiences in the classroom.

That data was collected in fall 2022 and compared to surveys previously conducted in fall 2019. The results showed a significant increase in classroom incivility, even though other issues raised in the survey — such as bullying and emotional wellbeing — showed little change.

Natalie Spadafora, who led the study, said that while some of the behaviours may just seem like minor annoyances, they shouldn't be dismissed.

"Cumulatively, we know from teachers, students and our research that it can have negative effects," said Spadafora, a post-doctoral fellow and adjunct professor in the Department of Child and Youth Studies at Brock University.

"We know that left unchecked, it can escalate to higher level anti-social behaviour."



Teacher Marylinda Lamarra says disruptive behaviour is 'more noticeable post-COVID.' (Submitted by Marylinda Lamarra)

'At home behind a screen'

Lamarra thinks pandemic shutdowns and remote learning played a role in this spike in incivility, especially for younger kids who lost out on learning how to behave in a classroom setting.

"They were at home behind a screen with no classroom instruction or decorum.... They could do what they wanted, and they seem to have brought that into the classroom," she said.

Lamarra said educators did expect they'd have to play catch up to get kids "back on track," but it hasn't been easy.

"There are students who have made the shift back, it's just been slower than anticipated," she said.

Spadafora thinks the pandemic did have an impact, but pointed out that generational and technological factors may also play a role.

"Ten years ago ... texting during class wasn't an item on our scale, but now it definitely is," she said.

"I would say behaviours change over time, right?"



Researcher Natalie Spadafora says that disruptive behaviour can escalate if left unchecked. (Submitted by Natalie Spadafora)

She added that many of these issues are not kids intentionally trying to cause harm. She gave the example of packing up books before a lesson has ended and while a teacher is still teaching, because a kid is keen to get to recess or home at the end of the day.

Those kids are thinking "about themselves or their social life" but "forgetting about the group dynamic and what that might be implicating on a broader scale," she said.

Getting 'back to basics'

Lamarra said it can be frustrating to deal with these disruptions, but she has to maintain her composure as a teacher and help her pupils improve their behaviour.

"I think we just need to get back to the basics where we're teaching that civility, we're teaching proper manners," she said.

She added that "parents do have a role to play in teaching their kids how to cope in the classroom, how to cope in society. We need to give them those skills."

She worries that if kids don't learn how to behave with civility in the classroom, that bad behaviour will show up in wider society as they get older.

Spadafora agrees that it's important to foster civility at a young age. "Civil children means civil adults, and that's what we all want," she said.

<https://www.cbc.ca/radio/thecurrent/kids-ruder-classroom-incivility-1.7390753>

I suppose I have two-cents worth to add here, being a teacher again. I think the article fails to mention something also key, i.e., how much more difficult it is to present “interesting” and appealing subject matter with TikTok just a click away. In most academic settings, cell phones need to be suppressed; teachers simply can’t compete and snuff out illicit use. So many kids by the time they hit high school are sick and tired of what curriculum has kept shoving at them as they are warehoused. (If you want to kill a good and noble initiative, put it in curriculum to be taught by an ordinary, maybe lacklustre, teacher at 9:00 AM.) Before Grade 10, there is no real evaluation, and kids know they will keep being moved along on the assembly line. Hence, little satisfaction has been obtained for many in marks driving achievement. (Some students will always focus on grades; good grades are competitive and affirmative indicators of worth and future prosperity.) Most are pretty sure ways will still be found for them to keep passing, moving them along avoiding heavy-duty remedial work, and out of the public purse. Online learning—I hate it—settled students into a lazy solipsistic learning model of worksheets and assignments, fakery, with teachers more diminished and easily duped on the screen of a cheap laptop. If any brave in-person educator tries to “stand and deliver” something original and engaging, more often than not they are met with grudging minimized compliance and cynicism. After all, the big chunk of our society confined to toil on the sidelines by poor school outcomes has arisen acting out its grudges and grievances. Everyone has undergone schooling and is an “expert.” I see young parents bringing their kids skeptically to *kindergarten*, doubting the process, and amongst our most distrustful population, the Indigenous one, the residential schools uproar only made them feel that much more how they themselves hated school. And the public knows the quality of schooling is steadily, if slowly, deteriorating. Teachers themselves assert this, lamenting crippling “class sizes and classroom complexity,” then make demands of governments that they refuse to meet—everyone wants someone else to do the heavy lifting—leaving the only conclusion that schools are failing. I see young teachers putting down roots and families in place, making the big commitments, who bracingly come to wonder if they can do this—survive—for a career, daily facing disparate expectations and centrifugal forces. All parents can do is make sure their kids get enough of what they need from schools—superficially at least, in terms of certificates and required grades—while most of their classmates do not. TJB