ADVERTISEMENT

Canada

4 ways to tackle a rise in disrespectful behaviour in classrooms

We 'take it for granted that people should just know these things,' says researcher

Jessica Wong · CBC News · Posted: Dec 05, 2024 4:00 AM EST | Last Updated: December 5

Kids are getting ruder in the classroom. This researcher explains why
5 days ago | 2:01

New research from Ontario and Quebec finds students are becoming ruder in the classroom, leading to negative learning impacts for everyone. CBC News spoke to one researcher who explained how pandemic shutdowns and increased screen time made the problem even worse.

Talking loudly to drown out another student, fooling around mid-lesson, mocking a classmate's incorrect answer — tales of disrespectful behaviour in today's classrooms abound.

And a recent study from Brock University in St. Catharines, Ont., found a significant increase in classroom incivility since the pandemic.

"Incivility" sounds old-fashioned, but it can disrupt classrooms and student development — and it's something educators and experts focused on Canadian youth believe deserves attention and action.

ADVERTISEMENT

The study noted that more students lacked self-regulation skills, compared to before the COVID-19 pandemic, says Natalie Spadafora, its lead author and a postdoctoral researcher at the university.

It makes sense, she said, with teachers finding that pandemic-related school disruptions have impacted the usual classroom routines, rules and expectations that kids typically learn.

Students are behaving with less civility, according to a recent survey of Ontario students and teachers, with lead researcher Natalie Spadafora noting that pandemic disruptions impacted kids learning classroom rules and routines. (Juice Flair/Shutterstock)

For instance, when students were doing virtual school, they could put themselves on mute or turn their cameras off at home and easily leave the room, engage in side chats with friends or otherwise distract themselves.

"Things that are deemed uncivil in the classroom, they were able to do," she said.

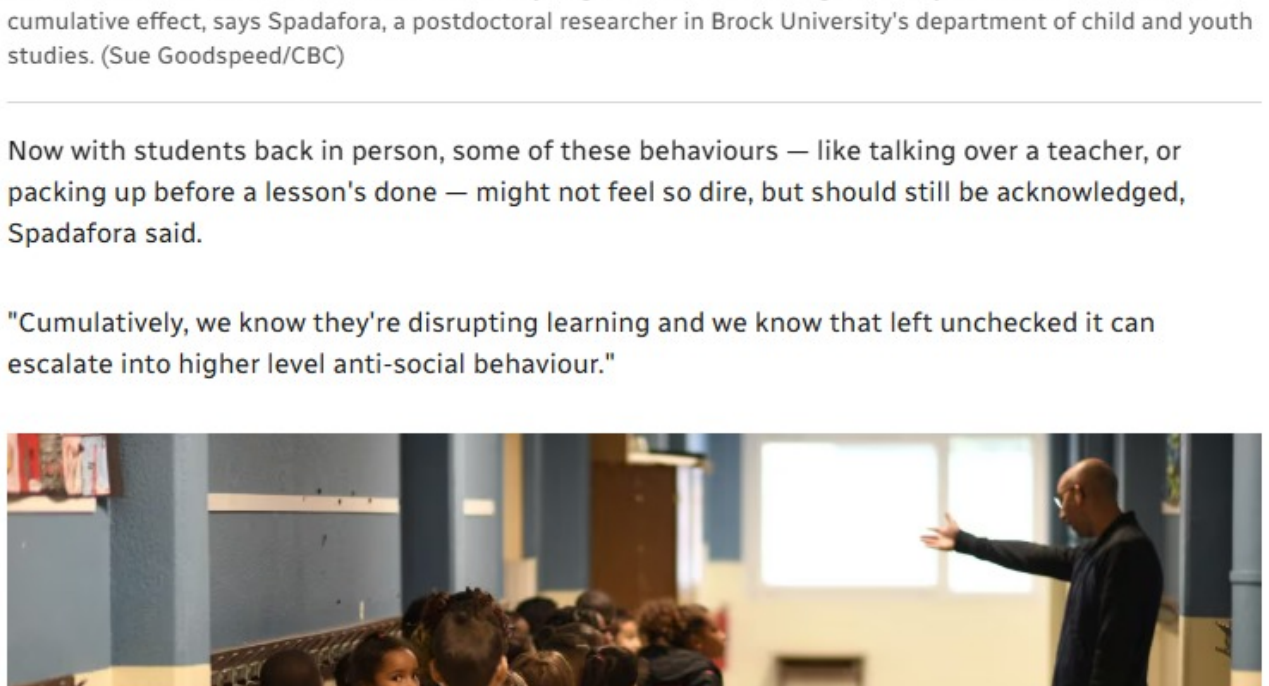
The study spoke with 101 primary teachers, and surveyed 585 students in November 2019 and 536 students in November 2022. About 300 kids participated both times.

1. Identify incivility, even when it seems small

While individual instances of classroom incivility might not seem like a big deal, they can have a detrimental cumulative effect, says Spadafora, a postdoctoral researcher in Brock University's department of child and youth studies. (Sue Goodspeed/CBC)

Now with students back in person, some of these behaviours — like talking over a teacher, or packing up before a lesson's done — might not feel so dire, but should still be acknowledged, Spadafora said.

"Cumulatively, we know they're disrupting learning and we know that left unchecked it can escalate into higher level anti-social behaviour."



A teacher speaks to his pupils in a corridor prior to entering a classroom at the start of a new school year. (Christophe Simon/AFP/Getty Images)

Educators start each school year setting expectations and routines, yet Spadafora says teachers have conveyed a feeling of still playing catch-up and constantly reviewing fundamentals.

Teaching manners and civility to students "takes time. It takes effort."

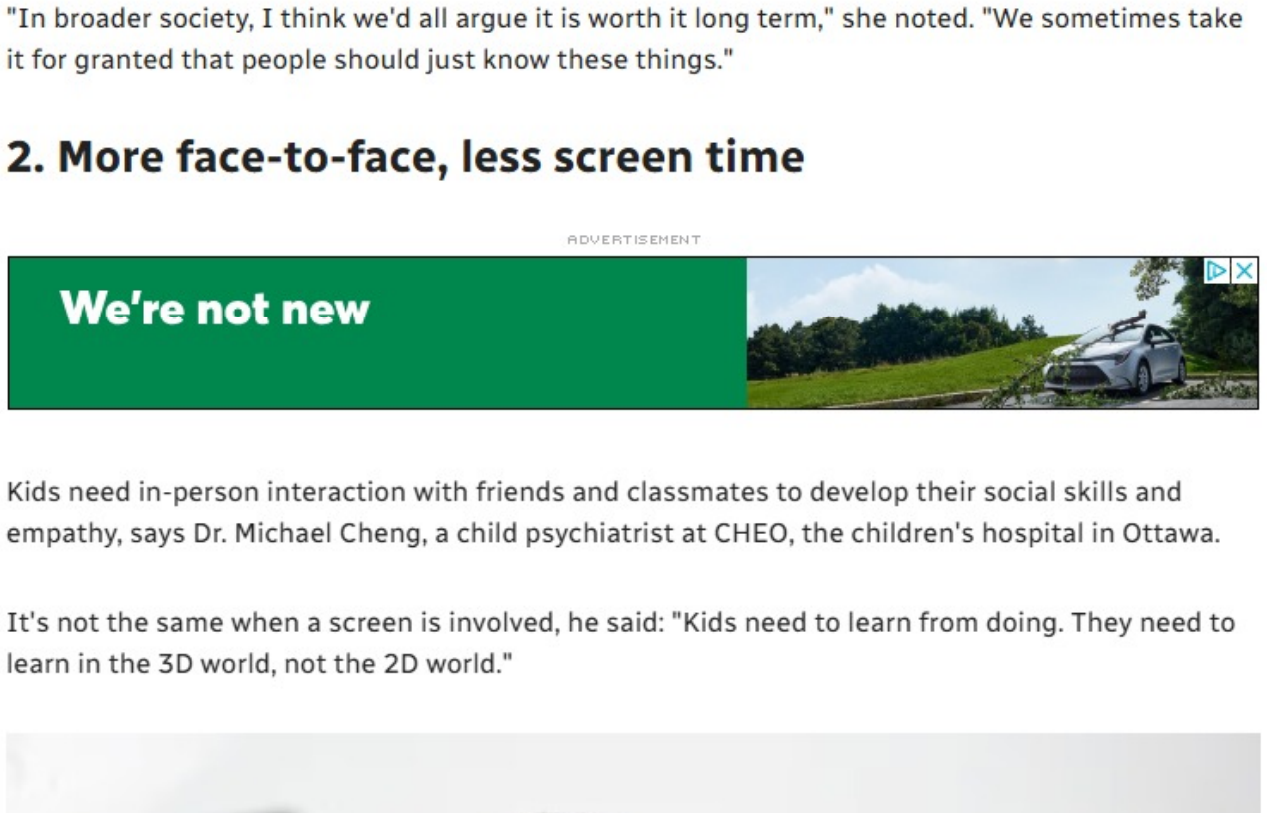
"In broader society, I think we'd all argue it is worth it long term," she noted. "We sometimes take it for granted that people should just know these things."

2. More face-to-face, less screen time

ADVERTISEMENT
We're not new

Kids need in-person interaction with friends and classmates to develop their social skills and empathy, says Dr. Michael Cheng, a child psychiatrist at CHEO, the children's hospital in Ottawa.

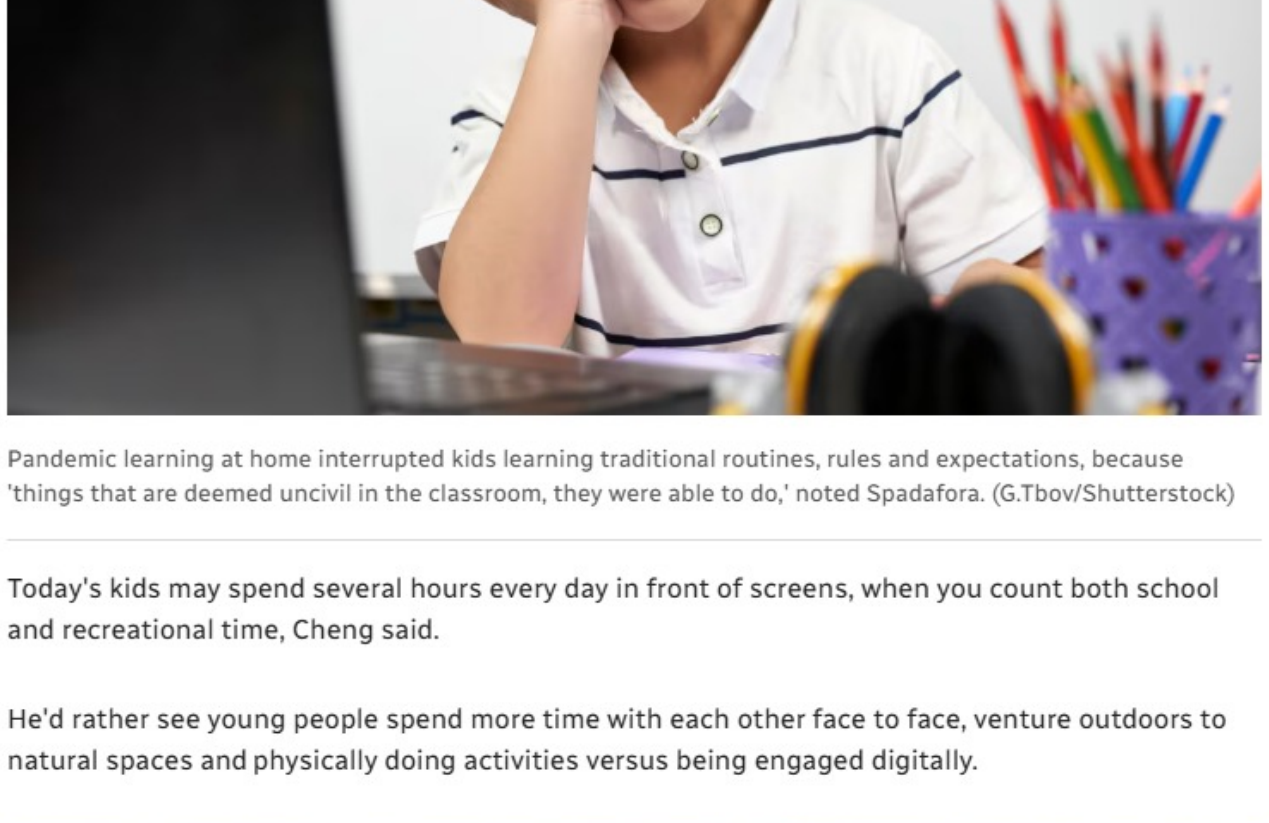
It's not the same when a screen is involved, he said: "Kids need to learn from doing. They need to learn in the 3D world, not the 2D world."



Pandemic learning at home interrupted kids learning traditional routines, rules and expectations, because 'things that are deemed uncivil in the classroom, they were able to do,' noted Spadafora. (G.Tbov/Shutterstock)

Today's kids may spend several hours every day in front of screens, when you count both school and recreational time, Cheng said.

He'd rather see young people spend more time with each other face to face, venture outdoors to natural spaces and physically doing activities versus being engaged digitally.



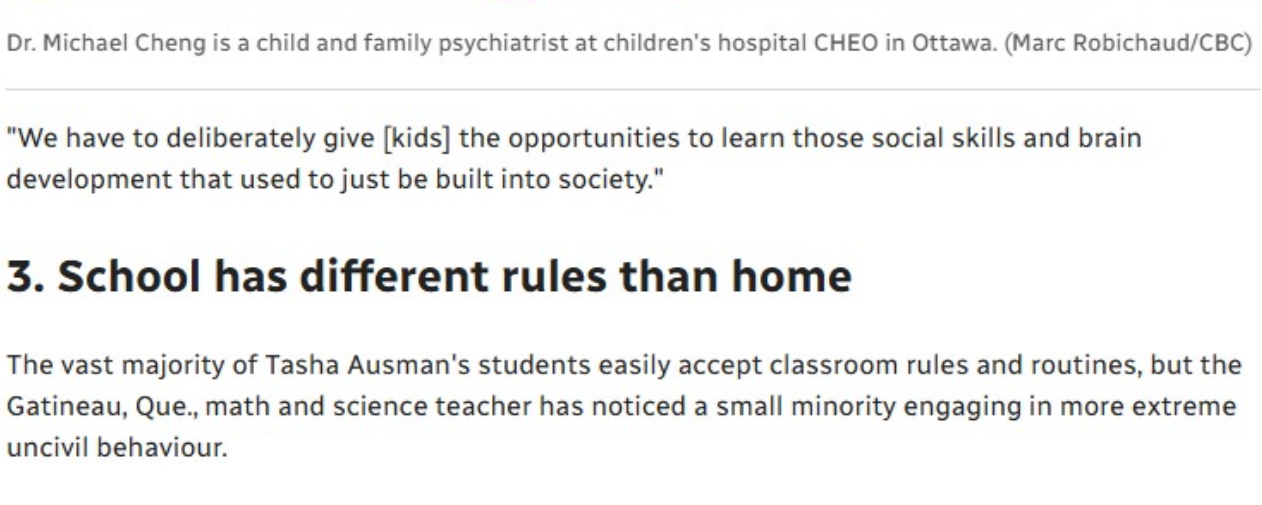
Dr. Michael Cheng is a child and family psychiatrist at children's hospital CHEO in Ottawa. (Marc Robichaud/CBC)

"We have to deliberately give [kids] the opportunities to learn those social skills and brain development that used to just be built into society."

3. School has different rules than home

The vast majority of Tasha Ausman's students easily accept classroom rules and routines, but the Gatineau, Que., math and science teacher has noticed a small minority engaging in more extreme uncivil behaviour.

She's encountered some students, for example, who simply don't understand that certain things that are OK at home — a casual cellphone chat with mom or leaving the room to grab a snack — aren't acceptable during class time.

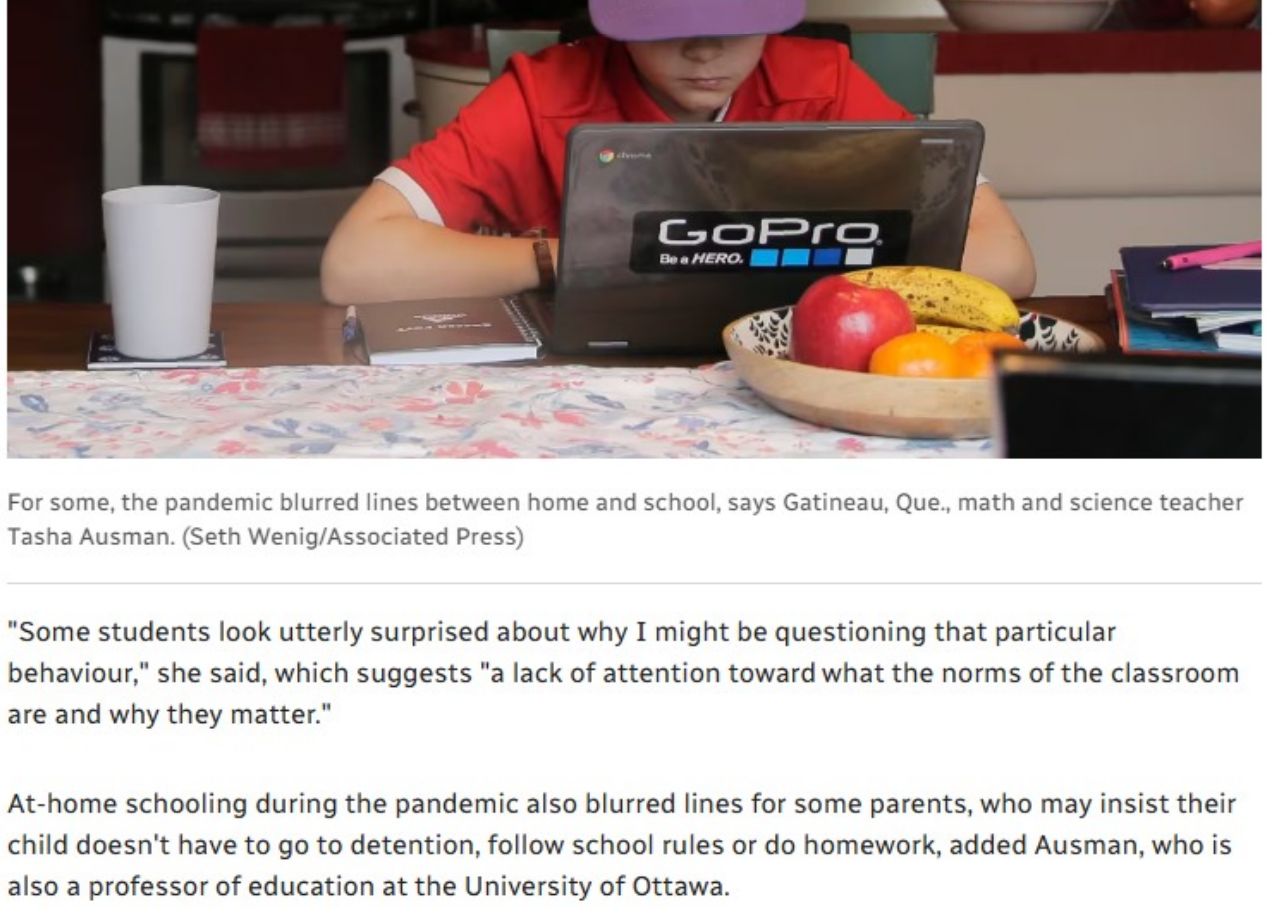


For some, the pandemic blurred lines between home and school, says Gatineau, Que., math and science teacher Tasha Ausman. (Seth Wenig/Associated Press)

"Some students look utterly surprised about why I might be questioning that particular behaviour," she said, which suggests "a lack of attention toward what the norms of the classroom are and why they matter."

At-home schooling during the pandemic also blurred lines for some parents, who may insist their child doesn't have to go to detention, follow school rules or do homework, added Ausman, who is also a professor of education at the University of Ottawa.

Parents "rule their own roosts, but they can't rule the institutional norms of a whole school system," she said.



The majority of students accept classroom rules and routines, notes Ausman. But in a minority of students, she's also seen a rise in more extreme instances of incivility. (Van Tran Photography)

ADVERTISEMENT
We're not new

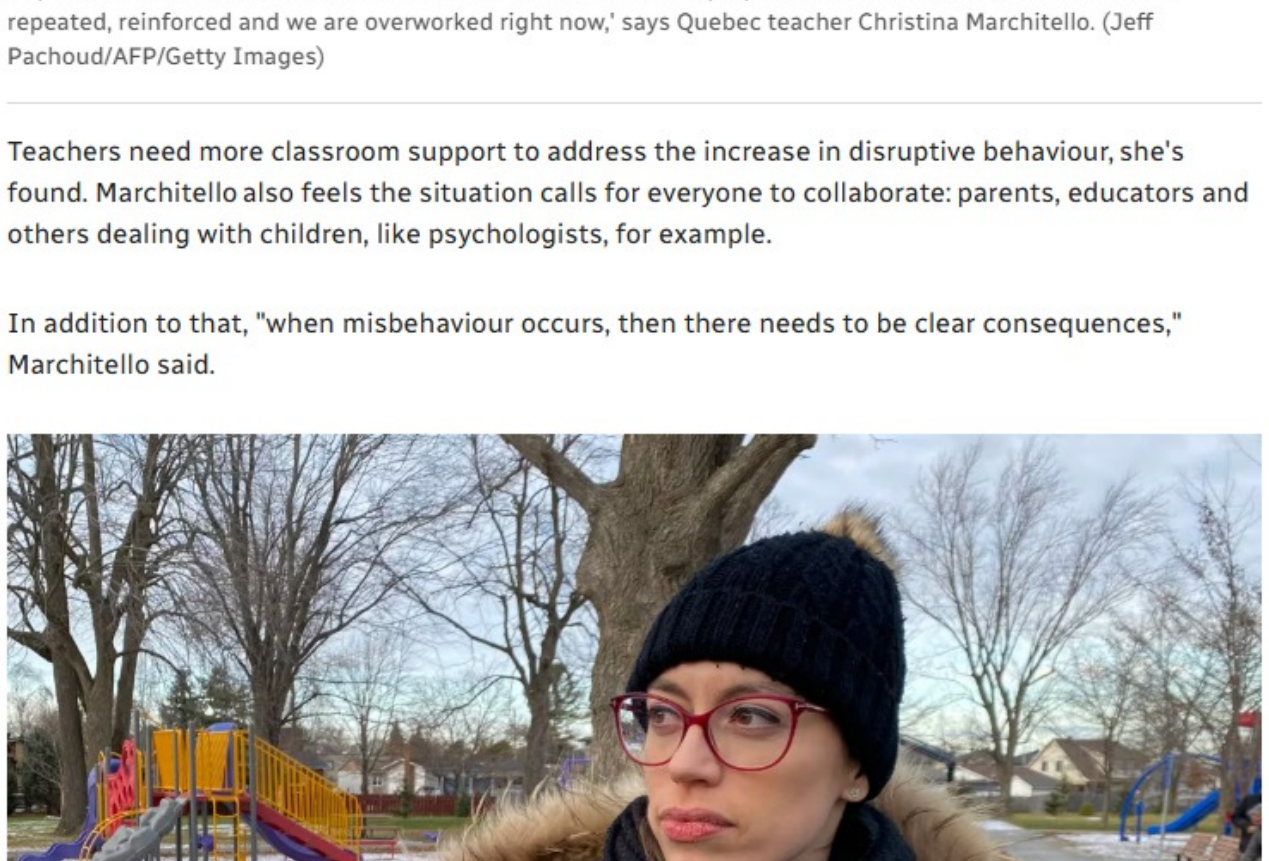
Overall, however, she thinks setting clear expectations, having well-enforced boundaries and giving students some grace to grow will help most develop more civil behaviour.

"Students who might have been a bit rough around the edges in September are actually doing a lot better now that we're going into Christmas."

4. Collaboration between home and school

Both a recent teachers' union poll and the Coalition Avenir Québec's youth wing have flagged growing incivility as an issue in Quebec's schools.

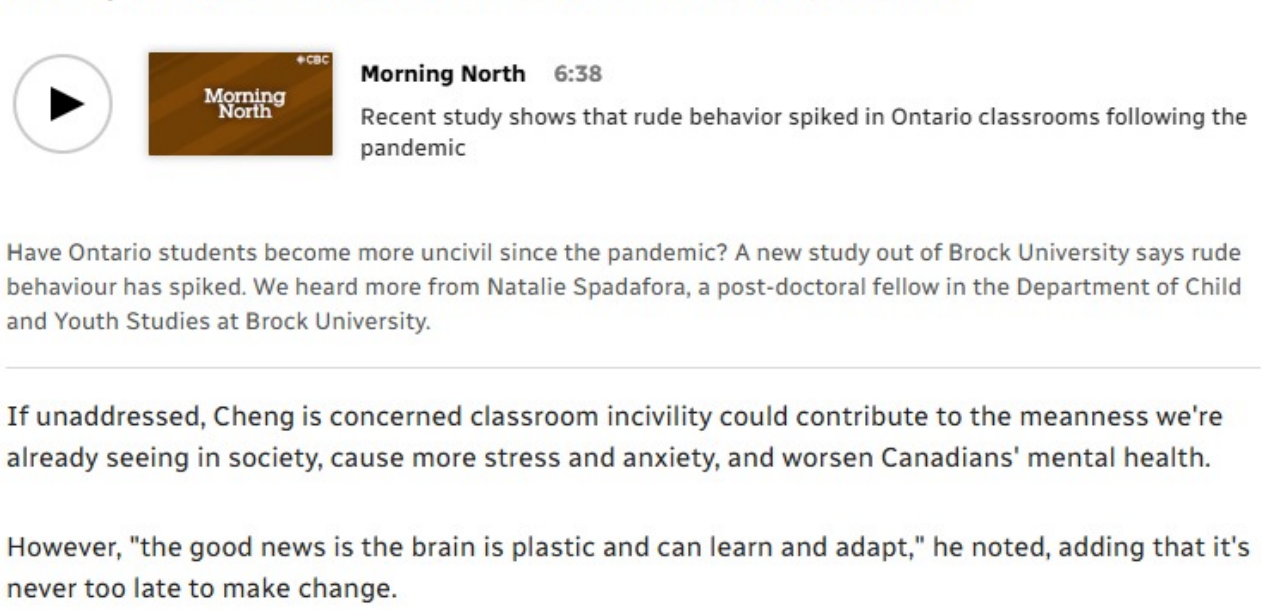
Educators "demonstrate proper behaviour.... However, it needs to be repeated, reinforced, and we are overworked right now," said Christina Marchitello, who teaches English at different schools in the Montreal area.



Pupils raise their hands in a classroom. Teachers 'demonstrate proper behaviour... However, it needs to be repeated, reinforced and we are overworked right now,' says Quebec teacher Christina Marchitello. (Jeff Pachoud/AFP/Getty Images)

Teachers need more classroom support to address the increase in disruptive behaviour, she's found. Marchitello also feels the situation calls for everyone to collaborate: parents, educators and others dealing with children, like psychologists, for example.

In addition to that, "when misbehaviour occurs, then there needs to be clear consequences," Marchitello said.



Marchitello, seen in Longueuil, Que., believes a collaborative effort between parents, educators and other professionals is required to address the rise in classroom incivility. (Cedrick Tremblay/CBC)

LISTEN | Have Ontario students become more uncivil since the pandemic?:

Morning North 6:38
Recent study shows that rude behavior spiked in Ontario classrooms following the pandemic

Have Ontario students become more uncivil since the pandemic? A new study out of Brock University says rude behaviour has spiked. We heard more from Natalie Spadafora, a post-doctoral fellow in the Department of Child and Youth Studies at Brock University.

If unaddressed, Cheng is concerned classroom incivility could contribute to the meanness we're already seeing in society, cause more stress and anxiety, and worsen Canadians' mental health.

However, "the good news is the brain is plastic and can learn and adapt," he noted, adding that it's never too late to make change.

Students must learn so many things today, but civility deserves some space, notes Spadafora.

"Civil kids means civil adolescents, which hopefully means civil adults."

Corrections

- Tasha Ausman teaches math and science teacher in Gatineau, Que. A previous version of the story said her class was in Ontario.
  Dec 05, 2024 7:56 AM ET

With files from CBC's Deana Sumanac-Johnson and Tess Ha

CBC's Journalistic Standards and Practices | *About CBC News*

Corrections and clarifications | *Submit a news tip* | *Report error*

RELATED STORIES

- **Kids are getting ruder, teachers say. And new research backs that up**
- **Trolled out of office: UBC report examines role of online abuse against politicians and democracy**
- **Combatting incivility at work: Rude emails might be a place to start**
- **OPINION In the new year, what we need isn't more historionics, it's civility**

CBCNEWS
Morning Brief
Start the day smarter. Get the CBC News Morning Brief, the essential news you need delivered to your inbox.
Email address:
Enter your email address
Subscribe
This site is protected by reCAPTCHA and the Google Privacy Policy and Google Terms of Service apply.

TRENDING VIDEOS

VIDEO
Horrific crash cancels final round of UCI Track Cycling Champions League

VIDEO
Man gunned down in Brampton driveway in targeted attack: Peel police
CBC News Toronto

VIDEO
Southern Manitoba woman, 23, dies following dental procedure

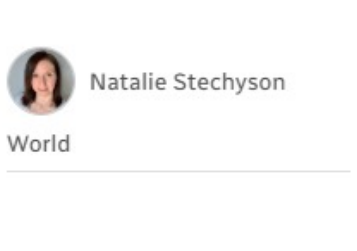
QUEBEC
ONTARIO
VERMONT
NEW YORK
15:14

VIDEO
Is Trump right about the Canadian border? | About That
About That With Andrew Chang

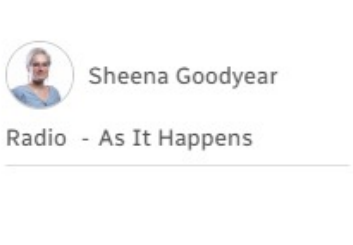
VIDEO
Taylor Swift arrives in Vancouver for final 3 Eras Tour shows
The National

RECOMMENDED FOR YOU

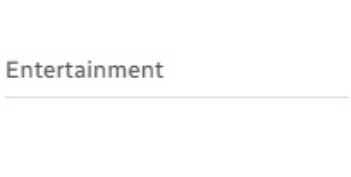
Police arrest suspect in UnitedHealthcare CEO killing
World



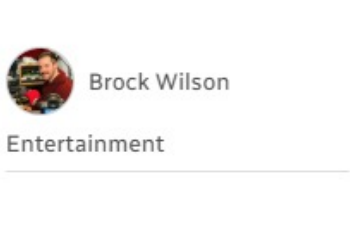
It took just 2 weeks for Syria's 50-year Assad regime to crumble. Here's how it happened
Natalie Stechyson
World



She posted about her PhD, and went viral in the worst possible way
Sheena Goodyear
Radio - As It Happens



Jay-Z calls lawsuit alleging rape at Sean Combs-hosted party a 'blackmail attempt'
Entertainment



The 2025 Golden Globes nominations include nods for Canadians Pamela Anderson, Martin Short
Brock Wilson
Entertainment

COMMENTS

Comments are typically open between 6 a.m. and 11:30 p.m. ET, Monday - Friday (excluding holidays). Comments may be unavailable based on different considerations, including moderation capacity, the type of moderation needed, and legal concerns.

To encourage thoughtful and respectful conversations, full names will appear with each submission to CBC's online communities. CBC does not endorse the opinions expressed in comments.

Comments are moderated according to our Submission Guidelines. To learn more about commenting, visit our Getting Started guide or the CBC Help Centre.

Become a CBC Account Holder

Join the conversation Create account

Already have an account? Log in

The conversation is now closed

ALL COMMENTS 537 NEWEST

Maureen Guay · 4 DAYS AGO
So one hundred years from now do you think we will still be blaming every perceived social ill on the 2020 Covid Pandemic?
20

Bob Leeson · 4 DAYS AGO
There are an increasing number of children that haven't been brought up to believe in Santa, and perhaps that's part of the problem. We were always well behaved when I was a kid, mainly because getting on the naughty list would have been the worst outcome we could ever imagine.

/s

1 REPLY 13

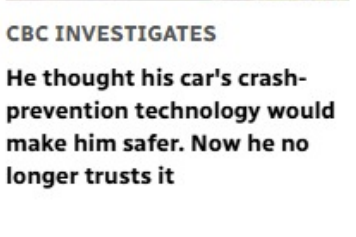
hs fisher · 4 DAYS AGO
Reply to **Bob Leeson**
dont think Santa has anything to do with this
9

Ken Dodds · 4 DAYS AGO
Rudeness, temper tantrums, vulgar language, failure to follow rules and whatever else brat kids do in school starts at home.
34

LOAD MORE COMMENTS

DISCOVER MORE FROM CBC

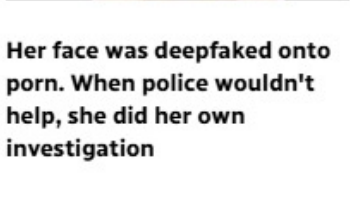
VIDEO
Trump repeats tariff threats, talks Trudeau visit in NBC interview
The National



CBC INVESTIGATES
He thought his car's crash-prevention technology would make him safer. Now he no longer trusts it
Leah Hendry
Canada - Montreal

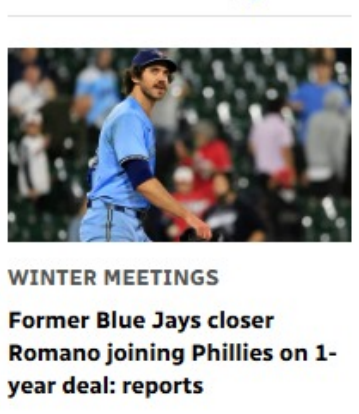
COMMOTION
Why this Indigenous Hawaiian journalist will not be watching Moana 2
Amelia Eqbal
Arts - Commotion

As Canada Post strike drags on, frustration mounts over 'prohibitive' courier costs
Gabrielle Huston
Canada - Ottawa



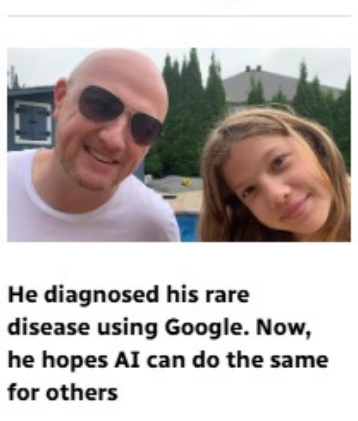
Her face was deepfaked onto porn. When police wouldn't help, she did her own investigation
The Passionate Eye

What to cook in December: Crowd-pleasing recipes that are deceptively simple
Jamey Ordolis
Life - Food



WINTER MEETINGS
Former Blue Jays closer Romano joining Phillies on 1-year deal: reports
Sports - Baseball - MLB

Ex-Marine acquitted of negligent homicide after applying chokehold on NYC subway car
World



He diagnosed his rare disease using Google. Now, he hopes AI can do the same for others
Radio - White Coat - Black Art

Igor Shesterkin deal with Rangers said to be richest for goalie in NHL history
Sports - Hockey - NHL

My Account
Profile
CBC Gem
Newsletters
About CBC Accounts

Connect with CBC
Facebook
X
YouTube
Instagram
Mobile
RSS
Podcasts

Contact CBC
Submit Feedback
Help Centre
Audience Relations, CBC
P.O. Box 500 Station A
Toronto, ON
Canada, M5W 1E6
Toll-free (Canada only):
1-866-306-4636

About CBC
Corporate Info
Sitemap
Reuse & Permission
Terms of Use
Privacy
Privacy Preferences
Jobs
Our Unions
Independent Producers
Political Ads Registry
AdChoices

Services
Ombudsman
Corrections and Clarifications
Public Appearances
Commercial Services
CBC Shop
Doing Business with Us
Renting Facilities
Radio Canada International
CBC Lite

Accessibility
It is a priority for CBC to create products that are accessible to all in Canada including people with visual, hearing, motor and cognitive challenges.
Closed Captioning and Described Video is available for many CBC shows offered on CBC Gem.
About CBC Accessibility
Accessibility Feedback

CBC Radio-Canada

©2024 CBC/Radio-Canada. All rights reserved.