

Victim often forgotten in battle with bully

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Julie Caspersen's first clue that her boy was having trouble: He stopped wearing his favourite T-shirts – the ones with Scooby Doo, SpongeBob and Spiderman. Only plain fabric would do.

Why? Because that's all "Robert" would allow.

Sometimes he'd come home sweaty with his fall jacket zipped up to the neck. He'd worn it that way all day so that Robert wouldn't make fun of his clothes.

It bothered the Richmond Hill mom enough to mention it to his teacher, who promised to speak to the class without identifying Paul.

But nothing changed. Paul still insisted he couldn't show Robert his favourite shirts. And his water bottle, apparently, was all wrong and had to go. Robert had made that perfectly clear.

Mrs. Caspersen reluctantly let it go. After all, this was a big year for Paul – a full day of school in Grade 1, first year in French immersion. There were bound to be a few blips along the way.

But that wasn't the half of it. Quietly, day after day, Paul was putting up with a whole lot more.

Papers being tossed at him. Snick-

BATTLING THE BULLIES: FIVE-PART SERIES

You'd think by now this old dodo would have gone the way of the principal's strap.

The schoolyard bully has been around forever. So, it seems, have attempts to solve the problem.

In recent years we've seen a multitude of reports, statistics, websites and recommendations infused with good intentions. Schools have been deluged with poster campaigns, parent workshops and teacher training sessions – all with the lofty long-term goal of transforming old-school attitudes.

The problem is, bullying keeps happening – once every seven minutes, experts say. Young people are still hurting young people. Parents are still reeling with helplessness and kids are still being damaged – sometimes for life.

When you're in the thick of things, when your child is hurting and you're seeking justice, all the long-term prevention programs in the world don't make a whit of difference.

You just want your child to feel better, now.

Over the next few weeks, we'll look at several families and courageous students who have decided to speak out to try to make a difference, who have battled the schoolyard bully and emerged feeling bruised, belittled and bitter. We'll look at where the system seems to have failed them and what can be done to make things better.

ers, name-calling, knocked down at recess, held so he couldn't get up. Little things Paul kept to himself.

But one day – Halloween – Mrs. Caspersen picked Paul up after school to find the shirt he'd worn as part of his trick-or-treat costume covered in mud.

"Robert stomped me," Paul explained. At recess, his classmate had pushed him to the ground and punched him in the stomach. "He grabbed me by the arms and legs so I couldn't get up," Paul explained.

Furious now, Mrs. Caspersen stormed into the school office.

They said they'd deal with it. And she trusted them.

But each day after school, when Mrs. Caspersen asked her son about his day, she heard about how he'd got hurt: his hand slammed in a door, an elbow to his head, his foot stomped on. She came to dread his answers. Paul came to see it as part of school life.

"It was like, in his mind, he goes to school, he speaks French, he goes out for recess, he gets hurt, he comes back in and goes to art class ... It was just part of his day."

She mentioned her growing concern to the teacher. Well, if Paul didn't act so silly, she was told, he wouldn't attract this negative attention.

Mrs. Caspersen bit her tongue and told herself to be patient.

But in December, Paul came home with a painful arm. Turns out, at recess Robert had held him down on the icy ground and jumped on it.

Paul had tried not to cry, having learned that tears just make things worse, but he couldn't help it.

The arm hurt all night and the next morning; Mrs. Caspersen took him to the hospital for X-rays.

"This is assault," the emergency room doctor told her, as he outfitted Paul with an arm cast. "You should contact police, press charges."

She called the school. Yes, they were aware that Paul hurt his arm, but hadn't thought it was that serious. Mrs. Caspersen asked if her son could be moved from Robert's class. No, they said, that wasn't feasible; the school was too full to be messing around with class assignments.

Could she at least tell her son that the bully was being punished? "Don't worry about that," she was told. "It's being taken care of." How? They couldn't say. Privacy reasons.

"It felt like a brush-off," Mrs. Caspersen recalls. "We just got the feeling it's not about people, it's about administration and bureaucracy and processes."

Concerned that the school would not protect their son, the family contacted police. The police officer was adamant "you need to stand up to this, because it sounds like no one else has."

She called the school again. "I just don't feel like this is being taken very seriously," she said. "I'm thinking I should take Paul out of the school."

"That's fine," said the principal. "But just make sure you understand you're not taking him out for safety; it's because he's not fitting in."

And so that's how it ended. The Caspersens pulled their son from the French immersion school and never heard from administrators again.

It's a familiar story. Like many families who've battled schoolyard bullying, Paul's parents were left feeling bitter and belittled.

"Victims aren't treated as victims. They're seen as a nuisance that schools don't want to have to deal with," says Mrs. Caspersen.

Their son now happily attends the local public school; their dreams of a French immersion education dashed by a bully's fists.

"Where's the other kid who's been causing the problems? He's still there," says an angry Mrs. Caspersen.

That, to the Caspersens and others who have been through this bully battle, is the biggest injustice of all.

When it comes down to it, they say, the victim is on his own.

It's a familiar refrain echoed by countless parents: their child is bullied, they fight to persuade the school there is a problem, and in the end it's the victim who bears the

blame, shame and responsibility for making it stop.

"What's happening is the victim is being re-victimized," says Burlington MPP Joyce Savoline, the PC's education critic. "They didn't do anything wrong ... and suddenly they're separated from their familiar surroundings and their friends."

"Students who confide in their parents are told 'don't worry, we'll help', and then find themselves taken out of class and don't see discipline happening to the bully," says Ms Savoline. "It's the wrong lesson to be teaching children. They are learning that nobody helps you, and it drives them further underground."

There's another lesson bullied children are learning, says Jennifer Krizel, a Richmond Hill mom whose daughter was bullied in both public and separate schools.

"Victims aren't treated as victims. They're seen as a nuisance schools don't want to have to deal with."
- angry mom Julie Caspersen

"We've learned the bully's right to an education outweighs the victim's right to feel safe."

The aggressor is rarely moved, she says. Instead, the victim has to uproot himself by switching classes or bus stops, staying in for recess, getting rides to avoid bus troubles, or ultimately, switching schools.

It's no wonder, says Stuart Auty, president of Canadian Safe School Network, that some students eventually "crack" – like the 12-year-old who brought a knife to his Toronto school last month.

London Anti-bullying Coalition is lobbying to fix the problem. "The forgotten victim is the biggest travesty" of Ontario's new Bill 212, according to coalition president Corina Morrison.

Morrison says there are some hopeful elements in Bill 212 – an amendment to the Education Act introduced in 2007 to address the root causes of problem behaviour. The bill replaced Zero Tolerance – and its emphasis on removing students with negative behaviour from school – with a more "progressive" approach to discipline.

It's good that Bill 212 makes bullying, including cyberbullying, a suspendable offence, Ms Morrison says, but "in the entire bill, there is no mention of the victim, no support whatsoever."

The province's Safe Schools Team is trying to remedy that.

In a report released just before Christmas, "Shaping a Culture of Respect in our Schools: Promot-

ing Safe and Healthy Relationships," the Team recommended more attention be paid to the victim. Among key areas for "priority action", it recommends:

- Schools provide parents of victims with information regarding discipline/management of aggressors/perpetrators when asked, and about the steps being taken to protect the victim from future victimization.

- If a school must separate students after an alleged incident, it is preferable that the alleged aggressor/perpetrator rather than the victim. Supports must be provided to the student who is required to change schools.

Last week the Ministry of Education introduced a bill that may tackle the first recommendation, forcing principals to inform parents when their children have been victims of serious assault, what plan is in place for their safety, and how the bully will be disciplined.

But even when the bullying stops – whether through discipline or separating students – the pain continues, and that is not addressed in Bill 212 either, parents say.

Says one mother, who did not want her name used, "The school is filled with anti-bullying posters and yet, when very real problems arise, the administration refuses to deal with them. Now my daughter is in counselling because her self-esteem has been destroyed, and the other child continues her rampage. No one cares!"

Many parents *The Liberal* spoke to have spent thousands of dollars on therapy to help their children deal with the painful after-effects.

Says Jennifer Krizel, "the scars are there. They don't just go away."

Studies bear that out: being bullied can lead to social anxiety and loneliness, low self esteem, diminished academic performance, depression and suicide.

While Bill 212 seeks to treat the abuser, it often leaves the victim isolated and vulnerable, attempting to fix his pain in a self-destructive way, says Karen Sebben of Holland Landing. Her son Daniel finally left school for alternative education after years of bullying.

"My high school life has been destroyed," Daniel says.

"What do you do with these students who are happy and then boom – suddenly they're damaged and children at risk and some kill themselves because of it? There has to be someone to help them climb out of it," his mother says.

