

School bullies especially cruel to exceptional kids

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Michael's frustrated parents took case to Human Rights Tribunal

Tidying up one morning before work, pulling the covers over her son's bed, Mrs. Toldo (not her real name) noticed Michael's pillow stained with blood.

She soon discovered the teen's arms were covered in scrapes and he had a big goose egg on the back of his head. "It's nothing, mom," he shrugged her off. "I just fell at volleyball practice."

It wasn't true – but his mom didn't find that out until a few hours later when she received a phone call from the school.

Her 16-year-old son had been "Bertuzzi'd" – jumped from behind – the latest in a long, long history of bullying incidents at school.

This one, though, had been caught on videotape.

School has never felt like a friendly place for Michael. The Vaughan boy has Nonverbal Learning Disorder – a communication disability linked to a complex mix of learning difficulties including impaired social skills.

Like most people with NLD, he's a bright, good-hearted kid who lacks street smarts – and doesn't understand social cues like facial expression and body language.

Bullies are attracted to kids like Michael as bulls to a red flag.

As early as Grade 3, his social awkwardness waved the flag at one boy – a "pied piper" of a kid who thought he was witty. The other kids thought he was witty too, and they all spent a lot of time being witty together – at Michael's expense.

In Michael's differently wired brain, normal dissing didn't make sense; he interpreted their razzing as

BATTLING THE BULLIES: SIX-PART SERIES

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

In recent years we've seen a multitude of reports, statistics, websites and recommendations infused with good intentions to solve the bully issue.

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.

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 – and we'll look at where the system seems to have failed them and what can be done to help.

a grave insult and got upset, which egged the bullies on even more.

"That's what killed him; he just didn't fit," says his mom. "A little tweak would get a huge reaction out of him."

"He was the kind of guy who wanted to be everyone's friend. He tried so desperately to fit in."

But it was not to be.

"He was never included in anything. Never picked for teams because of the social issues, even though he was good in sports. Kids wouldn't pass the ball to him. Poor kid would come home, always defeated."

Throughout elementary school he put up with his lunch being taken, hat pulled off, books knocked from his desk, and perpetually bruised shins from being kicked. When his parents complained, they were told Michael's behaviour brought it on.

In Grade 5, Michael stood in front of the school and gave a speech on what it was like to be different.

"All it takes to stop injustice," he said, "is for one person to stand up and make a difference." His speech won second place. But the bullies were not impressed – and they kept it up.

His parents did what they could – "social skills programs, counselling, we've done it all," says Mrs. Toldo.

The school authorities tried too, with something called "conflict resolution". They had Michael sit down with the ringleader bully over a game of chess – something his father calls "absurd ... like a rape victim being asked to sit down and play chess with her attacker."

It was a dismal failure. The bullying continued into high school "it was like a monkey on his back all the time," his dad says "and the very people who were supposed to sup-

port him, the teachers and school administrators, weren't there."

Instead, they offered him bizarre advice, like "if you didn't act that way, you wouldn't get bullied all the time" ("So all of a sudden he thinks it's his fault. He can't help the way his brain is wired," his mom says.) And later, "if you think you're going to be assaulted, go where the school cameras are."

A privately hired psychologist retested Michael at the start of high school and recommended that the school keep tabs on him, noting that, because of his learning disability and past history, he'd be especially vulnerable to bullying. The high school promised to provide Michael with a "go-to" person and social worker to talk to.

But as far as the Toldos can tell, that never happened. In fact, they discovered several of his teachers didn't even know he had an IEP – a special education plan for identified students.

So the bullies kept up the tripping, the knocking books from his arms – "the little tweaks that happen, subtle things kids get away with," says Mr. Toldo.

By Grade 10, Michael was seriously worn down. That's when the iPod incident occurred.

He was at a volleyball tryout and noticed his \$250 iPod, which he'd paid for himself with money from working at MacDonald's, was gone.

"Anyone see my iPod?" No response.

He asked a boy he thought was his friend to help him track it down. The so-called friend said he knew who had it, and he'd tell him – for \$150.

That, said Michael's dad, a retired police officer, is called extortion.

"In my career I've arrested and convicted guys for less."

Mr. Toldo reported it to the vice-principal. Within a week Michael had his iPod back, the thieves got two-day suspensions, the extortionist got three. No charges were ever laid.

But Michael paid for it: he ran the "gauntlet" in the halls, kids called him snitch, threw papers at him in class, sent threatening e-mails and slammed him into lockers. That's when the Bertuzzi thing happened.

The guy who jumped him was suspended. But Michael asked that charges not be laid; he was afraid of being labeled a "rat" and pilloried in the halls again. He just wanted the whole thing to go away.

It did not though. And here's where the Toldos get really angry.

Throughout his schooldays,

no one ever kept track of Michael's troubles. The bullies' aggression was recorded – but not Michael being targeted. The vice-principals who dealt with the transgressors never shared the information with each other, and so never noticed the pattern of victimization. Michael just fell through the cracks.

And finally, he let loose. One kid said one too many things and Michael whaled him.

Michael was charged, given a 20-day suspension and a hearing to be expelled. The Toldos managed to get that dropped because of "mitigating circumstances" – his learning disabilities and history of being bullied – but by now, the damage was done.

Michael withdrew from his family, turned to alcohol to sleep, drugs and cutting to erase the pain. He was suicidal and landed in hospital.

Mr. and Mrs. Toldo thought they'd done everything right – providing their son with social skills coaching, lodging complaints, and hand-delivering numerous out-of-pocket psycho-educational testing reports to the school. But in the end, they say, the system failed him.

"No one paid serious attention, until my son finally had enough and popped a guy in the beak."

"No one paid serious attention," says Mr. Toldo, "until my son finally had enough and popped a guy in the beak."

That's when the school finally offered Michael the previously promised extra help and social worker.

Those who keep tabs on schoolyard bullying say that Michael's story is not unusual. While there hasn't been a great deal of research done on the link between learning disabilities and bullying, studies so far indicate people with LDs are more likely to be targeted.

Because of that heightened vulnerability, the Toldo family believes Michael's school should have taken special care to protect him.

They took their complaint to the Human Rights Tribunal last month, arguing that Michael's school – and the York Region District School Board



Bullying is not always physical, but can be emotional attacks through gossip, exclusion and ridicule.

- failed to protect him. They hoped the tribunal would require schools to put full reports of victimization in the files of children who have learning disabilities or are designated "at risk".

This, they say, would allow the student with special needs to be monitored and assisted. Currently only the perpetrators receive documentation.

On Feb. 20, they settled their complaint through mediation. They are prevented from disclosing details of the agreement, but say they are satisfied. More importantly, they say Michael is satisfied.

"He feels like he's had his day, and now he's got some closure," Mr. Toldo says. "We told him not to expect them to fall on their knees apologizing, but he feels he's made a difference. We did what we could. Mediation was a form of closure for us."

With the help of Addiction Services and counselling, Michael's turning things around, and plans to attend another high school's co-op program this fall to earn his diploma.

"I admire his tenacity," says Mr. Toldo. "With all that he went through with bullying, he still went to school. Lesser people would have caved in."

They hope that the results of their mediated settlement mean other victimized students at his old high school won't have to go through what he did, and will be better protected.

And they hope this was a lesson, finally, that what Michael spoke about in his Grade 5 speech really does ring true – sometimes all it takes is one person to stand up to make a difference.

