

Victim often forgotten in battle with bully

By Kim Zarzour

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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. Snickers and name-calling. Knocked down at recess, held down so that 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.

"It looked like dog prints all over him but it was actually from fists," she remembers.

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

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."

Gradually, Paul grew fearful of other children and afraid to go out for recess.

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. "Next year will be better. Maybe we'll get a new teacher, a new group of kids."

But in December, Paul came home with a painful arm. Turns out, at recess that day, 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 at one point, he couldn't help it. "When he held my face in the ground, I was crying then," he recalls in a matter-of-fact way.

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."

So she called the school again. "I just don't feel like this is being taken very seriously," she said. "I'm thinking I should maybe 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. They never heard from the administrators again.

It's a familiar story. Like many families The Liberal has spoken to 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. And 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.

"I'm still really angry. I was devastated. It was a nightmare. Where is the other kid who's been causing the problems? He's still there."

"What's happening is the victim is being re-victimized," says Burlington MPP Joyce Savoline, the PC's education critic. "They don't understand why their world's changed. 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 there's no safe ground, 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.

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

So the victim can't expect the aggressor to be moved; instead, he has to uproot himself, by switching classes, switching 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 marginalized 12-year-old who brought a knife to his Toronto school last month.

"It's a double jeopardy. They've been maligned and here they go again, being penalized" by having to change their surroundings.

A London Anti-bullying Coalition noticed the same thing and 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, appointed by the Ministry of Education, to advise on bullying prevention in Ontario schools, is trying to remedy that.

In a report released just before Christmas, "Shaping a Culture of Respect in our Schools: Promoting 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 with information 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 alleged victim be moved. Supports must be provided to the student who is required to change schools.

Last week the Ministry of Education introduced an amendment that may tackle the first recommendation. It would force principals to inform parents when their children have been victims of serious assault what plan is in place for their safety, and what discipline the aggressor will be subject to.

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. According to another report presented to the Ministry by the Safe Schools Action Team, being bullied can lead to social anxiety and loneliness, low self esteem, diminished academic performance, phobias, depression, aggressive behaviour and suicide.

While Bill 212 seeks to treat the abuser, it often leaves the victim vulnerable because he has been isolated or uprooted, attempting to fix his pain on his own in a self-destructive way, says Karen Sebben, of Holland Landing, whose son was bullied from Grade 8 through Grade 10.

Mrs. Sebben's son Daniel finally left school for alternative education and the bullying has stopped. But he and his parents say the damage is done.

"My high school life has been destroyed. I just had to get out of there," Daniel says.

"He was this bright, happy, goofy kid, smart, and now he's supposed to spend the next X number of years getting his head around the fact that he's not the loser they made him feel," Mrs. Sebben says.

"What do you do with these students who are all 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."

Newmarket-Aurora Progressive Conservative MPP Frank Klees agrees more needs to be done to help the victim.

"You're talking about a child who needs help, who's been traumatized; he needs reassurance that someone in the school, in authority, says it's all right, we're going to watch out for you, we'll be there for you."