

ON THE WEB

Santa Claus is coming to town today. See parade dates and routes in the community section.

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BULLIED

Bullying Awareness Week begins tomorrow. But despite 'zero tolerance,' three parents say their children are still being subjected to taunts, threats, and worse. Here are their stories.



Kristen Gibson says her eight-year-old son Wesley Gibson has been bullied so much that MUMC put him on suicide watch and she's sending him to live with his father in the U.S. so he can go to school there.

Classmates tormented Wesley Gibson so much that he began having panic attacks.

Amy Nash's 12-year-old son came home countless times over the past two years with cuts, bruises and missing clothing.

Jeff Vanuk has pulled his 14-year-old son, Andrew, from public high school and vows he will never go back.

BY NICOLE O'REILLY

Three students, three school boards, three stories and exasperated parents who claim policies and police don't do enough to protect their children and no longer know what to do.

Wesley's mom, Kristen Gibson, says her son's school doesn't seem to be able to handle him - he has attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, oppositional defiance disorder and obsessive-compulsive disorder - and is ignoring a serious bullying problem, putting it off as "mere teasing."

She said he has been bullied since Grade 1. The problem has become so disturbing that last week she pulled him out of school.

Caistor Central Public School principal Mark Bridges describes the case as "an ongoing situation that we have worked on and continue to work on ... We would wish the family an opportunity to continue to be at our school."

Due to privacy and confidentiality restrictions he deferred further comments to the school board, adding: "The specifics would be very,

very interesting to shed some light on why a family in our area would be suggesting something pretty serious."

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A recent survey by the Hamilton public board suggests that 5 per cent of high school students are physically bullied at least once a week. Nine per cent reported being verbally bullied, 7 per cent socially bullied and 4 per cent targeted online or by text message.

Continued on A6

Bullying not going away in schools

Number of victims startling

The numbers are more startling for elementary students, with 8 per cent saying they are physically bullied in any given week, 16 per cent are verbally bullied, 9 per cent are socially bullied and 3 per cent are cyber-targeted.

In 2008-09 – the most recent year for which figures are available – 97 elementary students and 22 secondary students were suspended for bullying. (The 2009-10 numbers will be made public after the report goes to the board later this year.)

In local Catholic schools last year, 27 bullying incidents were investigated, said Des Brennan, the board's manager of social work services. Of those, 12 were at the elementary level and 15 were in high schools.

The Catholic board has what is called "nontolerance" for all types of bullying, Brennan said, including what happens in the hallways, the playground or online. But the way an incident is dealt with varies depending on the case.

Each school has a committee that oversees bullying and there are various educational projects with the aim of prevention, he said. But bullying can never be fully eliminated because the problem is not only in schools.

"If there's not support at the home level, any progress can get undone quickly," Brennan said.

"It isn't just a school problem, it's a community problem," echoed Pam Reinholdt, superintendent of education and safe schools for the Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board.

The public board makes social workers available to victims and bullies, involves parents, facilitates meetings among parties and will suspend students if necessary.

Jeff Vanuk says he hears the phrase "zero tolerance" all the time, but nobody can explain what that actually means.

His son Andrew sits near him in the living room of their quiet Mountain home, wearing a Metallica T-shirt and sporting long shaggy hair.

Andrew has been to various Hamilton schools trying to get away from bullying. He started high school at St. Jean de Brébeuf but didn't like it there and switched to Hill Park this year.

He's a strong boy, trained in boxing and various martial arts. But he says he never starts fights.

Andrew's breaking point came late last month after he was teased and bumped in the hallway and in gym class. One boy kept throwing elbows while playing football.

He came up to Andrew, put his hands on him, and Andrew said he "lost it," punching his classmate and another boy who came running up to them.

Those two boys were suspended for three days, Andrew for five.

"What do you want him to do, take a beating?" his father, Jeff, asks, exasperated. "He can fight, but he doesn't want to."

Things didn't stop there. On Facebook, the social networking site, students called Andrew a greaser, teased that he looks like wrestler Mick Foley. From the messages, it also appeared stu-



Hill Park student Andrew Venuk, 14, shown with his dad Jeff at home, is the victim of bullying, including being targeted online.

What is bullying?

All schools have to follow the Ministry of Education definition of bullying: "Bullying is typically a form of repeated, persistent and aggressive behaviour directed at an individual or individuals that is intended to cause (or should be known to cause) fear and distress and/or harm to another person's body, feelings, self-esteem or reputation. Bullying occurs in a context where there is a real or perceived power imbalance."

Legislation that came into effect last February mandates all school staff to report any bullying they witness to the principal.

dents planned to attack Andrew when he returned to school.

The Vanuks had considered meeting with the bullies and their parents, as suggested by the school's police liaison officer. But after learning that only the two involved in the fight and not those on Facebook would be invited, they said no.

Amy Nash's son is almost 13 and goes to Prince of Wales elementary. The teen, who has asked that his name not be used, has come home with cuts, bruises and missing clothing too many times over the last two years, she said. At first, he tried to hide his injuries from his family.

Despite the stress Nash says her son still manages to get good grades and is involved with school activities.

He's been beaten up in front of his younger brother, lured to school only to have his shoes stolen. Nash said there are countless other incidents she's called police and the school over.

Nothing's changed, she said.

Once they tried to get together at the school with the bullies and their parents. Nash said one boy's mother sat there "bawling her eyes

Bullying awareness week

As part of Bullying Awareness Week (Nov. 14-20), the Hamilton Coalition for Bullying Prevention and Intervention is holding a free panel discussion in the auditorium of Sir Winston Churchill Secondary School, 1715 Main St. E., on Thursday. The event begins at 6 p.m., with the forum getting under way at 6:30. To register or for more information, contact the city at 905-546-2489.

out" but the bully didn't bat an eye.

"I don't think he's safe the second he walks out the door," she says.

Sitting in his family's Caistorville home, Wesley Gibson's mood quickly changes from bubbly and talkative to upset and withdrawn.

Wesley said he is spit on almost daily – Kristen has the stained jackets to prove it. It got so bad that she started sending him to school in a raincoat.

He is punched and kicked and told he will be killed by the same group of five kids in his small class of 16 students at Caistor Central in rural Niagara.

Perhaps the worst incident was when a classmate brought in a mouldy cow's bone for show-and-tell. He told Wesley that the bone was all his family had left of grandfather, who died of bone cancer.

The boy kept touching Wesley on his face and hands. (As part of his obsessive-compulsive disorder, Wesley is germaphobic.) He taunted Wesley, saying he now had bone cancer and would die. Wesley believed it.

He began to draw pictures of himself dead and buried. In one, his mom is crying, and in another, three of his bullies are standing around his grave, red streams coming from their heads.

One weekend last month, he

began to complain about a racing heart, saying he couldn't breathe. He was having a panic attack.

She called Wesley's family doctor and was told to take him to McMaster Children's Hospital. Doctors there put him on suicide watch for about three or four hours, Kristen claimed.

She doesn't believe he would have hurt himself, but she does believe her son thought he was going to die.

No matter what she does or says, Kristen says the school makes light of the situation. The relationship has turned hostile and she has been asked to stay off school property.

Now she "has made the hardest decision she has ever had to make" and is sending Wesley to live with his father in the United States for the rest of the school year. Kristen, meanwhile, will work to get him into another school district here for next year.

"There are some inaccuracies" in Kristen's version of the story was all District School Board of Niagara spokesperson Kim Yielding would say about the case. But in general, she said, the board follows a "progressive discipline" approach.

If a parent is upset with how a teacher or principal has handled a situation, he or she can contact the school board superintendent, she said.

For privacy reasons, Yielding said schools cannot disclose what happens with a child to anyone but their own guardian, regardless of the interest of another child or his or her parent.

Pam Reinholdt, Hamilton public board's superintendent responsible for school safety, says sometimes parents perceive no action being taken "because they don't know what action was taken."

School board representatives say

depending on the age of the children involved and the severity of injury, they would have no problem calling the police to pursue a criminal investigation.

Hamilton police Constable Perry Mason has worked in schools for the last seven of his 31-year career. Bullying is something he deals with almost daily.

What he sees is cruel, sometimes violent and often chronic. Cyber bullying is increasingly common – Mason calls it "keyboard courage."

The most effective tool he has is gathering all the parties together face-to-face. This holistic method is modelled after the Native American healing circle. It takes the approach of restorative justice, which focuses on community healing over punishment.

This is the same tool that Amy Nash said didn't work for her son and that Andrew Vanuk is refusing.

But Mason has seen it work well many times because the bully often learns to see the victim as a person, not just an object to taunt. It also shows them that their actions hurt more than just the individual victim; there is a "ripple effect."

It is difficult to modify the behaviour of a bully and "the tools available have limited effectiveness," he said.

This is why a multipronged approach that involves families, the community, education and prevention is so important.

Yielding, at the Niagara board, said many of their programs work to build compassion and community involvement.

She adds, "I would like to believe that someday, yes, we could eliminate bullying."

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