

# HIGH SCHOOL HORROR

Some teens cannot find solace away from bullying. It follows them everywhere from the halls of high school to their online activity at home. Here's how you can step in and keep your child safe.

BY SHANDLEY MCMURRAY

**D**ARIAN USED TO BE A HAPPY TEENAGER. She had tons of friends, got high marks and loved playing basketball. The day she stepped foot in her Grade 7 classroom, everything changed. The so-called queen bee of Darian's new class took a disliking to her bubbly personality. She spread rumours, claiming that Darian wanted to steal people's boyfriends, made fun of her clothes and mocked her school work. Even gym class wasn't safe. When Darian missed a ball, the mean girls would yell at and shame her. "I had no friends and was being harassed, excluded and made fun of every single day," Darian says of the torment.

Darian is not alone. In fact, according to research conducted by The Public Health Agency of Canada in 2010, one in four students is being bullied; and 21 per cent of Grade 10 boys and 11 per cent of Grade 10 girls are bullying others. Bullying can have serious consequences for both the bully and the one being abused. As a parent, it's a tough situation to deal with, especially if your child won't open up about her problems at school. If you feel your teen is being bullied, here are some signs to look for and tips on how you can help stop your child from being bullied online and in person.

### POWER OF BULLYING

Kids bully others in order to get power, says Joanne Cummings, psychologist and a director at PREVNet, a national network of leading researchers and organizations dedicated to stopping bullying. "The person who is in the position of doing the bullying gets more social power," she says. Often peers watch bullying incidents but won't report them or step in to aid the victim—something the aforementioned study says can

stop bullying within 10 seconds. "If you're not part of the solution, you're part of the problem," Cummings says of kids who don't stand up for or comfort victims.

### THE BEHAVIOUR OF BULLIED TEENS

No one came to Darian's aid. The daily insults, rumours and exclusions took such a toll on her self-esteem that she became depressed and anxious. She skipped more than 50 days of school that year. On the days she did attend class, Darian felt nauseous

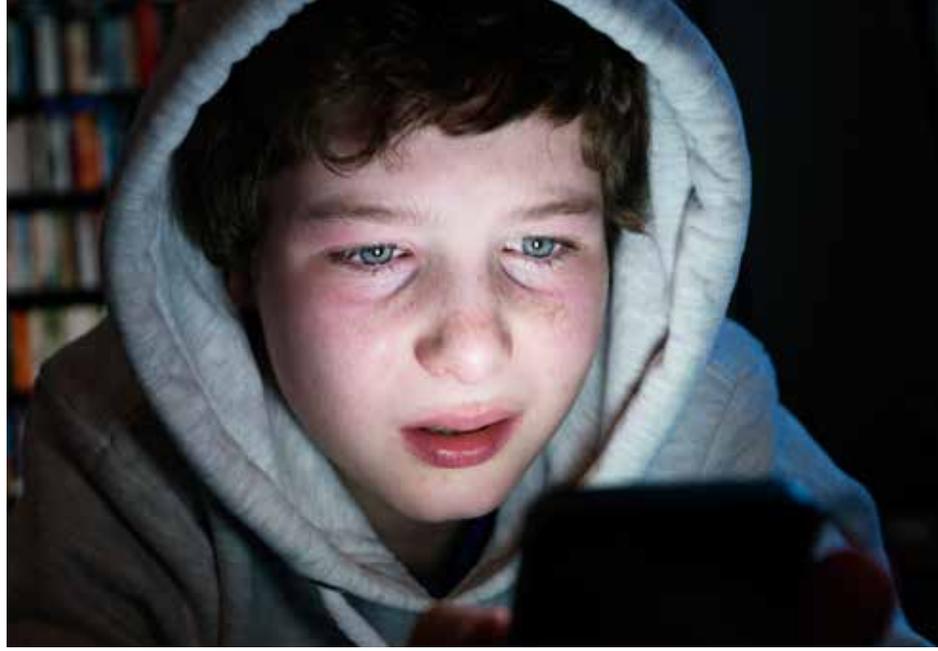
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and wouldn't volunteer to answer questions or participate in gym for fear of being ridiculed. She sought professional help from a therapist, psychologist, psychiatrist and a school counsellor, but nothing worked. "I couldn't be helped by medication or therapy," she says. "I was self-harming and experiencing suicidal thoughts at the age of 13."

According to Cummings, children who've been bullied are more likely to experience high-risk behaviours such as cutting, promiscuousness and substance abuse and, in more extreme cases, suicide. "[Adolescents] really want their friends and the people they respect and hang out with to admire them, respect them [and]... include them," Cummings says. "When those doors are closed, when you feel everyone's laughing at you, it's very, very damaging." ►



Darian's mother, Susan, became worried when her daughter's behaviour changed at home. Darian retreated to her room to avoid family activities, became withdrawn and refused to go on a family vacation. She became so anxious that even walking across a parking lot became too overwhelming. Susan tried to talk to Darian's principal, but didn't receive much support. "I felt terrible for Darian as she's a good kid with a very kind heart," Susan says. "I was also very angry at these kids and the school's lack of ability to do anything about it."

### THE REALITY OF CYBERBULLYING

Later the next year, Darian did a school project on Amanda Todd, the 15-year-old who committed suicide as a result of being bullied online in October of 2012. According to PREVNet, 20 per cent of Canadian kids report being cyberbullied and 65 per cent of them have been victimized for over a year. During her research, Darian made contact with Todd's mother, Carol, an anti-bullying advocate and member of the advisory board for stopitcyberbully.com, a company that provides software to help monitor a teen's online experience in an effort to minimize, prevent and control bullying.

Todd says parents need to keep the lines of communication open with their teens. "Parents need to be able to listen to kids if they are coming at them with a problem and not be mad. Not be judgmental," she says. "If you just tear a strip off a kid, they are never going to come to you again...you break the trust. You have to make it so your kid isn't afraid to tell you anything, anytime."

### TEACHING CYBER SAFETY

Since cyberbullying has become so prevalent, parents need to get to know the online world, recommends Stu Auty, president of Canadian Safe School Network.

"Teach children about the problems and pitfalls of the cyber world," he says, adding that teens are impulsive and they do, say (and post) things before thinking. "Parents really need to educate kids that when you put something in writing and send it out there, it could have consequences that are way bigger and more important than you think," Cummings says. Consequences like: damaging another person's self-esteem, limiting their prospective job choices, expulsion from school or even imprisonment (if they threatened someone online).

Now 16, Darian still struggles with anxiety and depression. "When it came time to walk into her new high school, she was hysterical and couldn't do it," Susan says. Today she is enrolled in an online school ([www.virtuallearning.ca](http://www.virtuallearning.ca)) which is partnered with the Ministry of Education and eLearning Ontario. Her weekly sessions with a LGBT youth group have helped boost her confidence, as have frequent visits from a few close friends and her volunteer work at the Humane Society and a local hospital. "I'm a lot happier and am able to do things like talk in front of others with little to no anxiety," says Darian. Her next goal: to attend college and become a nurse.

*\*Last name is omitted for privacy*

## WHAT TO DO IF YOUR CHILD IS BEING BULLIED

### • TALK TO THEM

“Find out what the issue is,” says Stu Auty, president of Canadian Safe School Network. Remain calm. Don’t get angry. “Wrap support around your child,” adds Joanne Cummings, director of PREVNet. Make them feel protected and loved, then plan your next step.”

### • EDUCATE YOURSELF

If the bullying is happening online, learn about the cyber world, says Auty. Get to know the world that they’re in and see what you can do about it.” One helpful site is [mediasmarts.ca](http://mediasmarts.ca). If something extremely offensive (like a crude photo or horribly offensive remark) has been posted, complain to the site administrator, suggests Cummings. They should be able to take it down if it is obviously harmful or horrendous. Try clicking the “Remove Post” button on Facebook, make sure privacy settings are on and report abusive comments.

### • MONITOR THEIR ONLINE ACTIVITY

When they’re first starting out, Cummings says parents should have all passwords to their kids’ accounts. “Children should have no illusions that they’re private online.” They need to know their parents can look at what they’ve been posting at any time. Depending on the child, gradually increase their privacy until their accounts are wholly their own. “You withdraw the monitoring as they earn your trust,” Cummings says.

### • TELL THE SCHOOL

Don’t approach the other child’s parents, Cummings advises. If the bully is a student, allow the school to mediate between you and his/her parents. “Each parent wants to defend [and protect] their own child...and they’re in such a conflict of interest that emotions are often really high,” she says. If the bullying is happening online, the school

should know so they can help support the child and possibly investigate it.

### • REPORT IT

If a criminal offence has been committed (physical violence, online or verbal threats, etc), contact the school and the police.

### • ENSURE THEY HAVE SUPPORT

Whether it’s you, a friend or a trusted adult (a teacher, aunt or family friend), it’s important to have social support, says Cummings. “The worst thing [for a child to do] is to become isolated and withdrawn. The most important thing is to connect,” she adds.

### GET HELP

You can’t always solve problems on your own so if your child is visibly suffering, visit your GP or a psychologist. You could also talk to a counsellor or school staff. ■