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Kids struggling with mental illness

Book increases awareness and encourages parents, teachers and doctors to take action

Dear Iris: I really miss you but I know people here are trying to help me. They say that when I hear noises in my head and get confused, it is a chemical problem in my brain. They are going to help make it better.

So begins a young boy's expression of gratitude to the wise and gentle swamp dragon who has helped to give his life new meaning.

It is at the heart of *Catch A Falling Star*, a new and exquisitely crafted children's book designed to show kids and grown-ups how to get over the fear of mental illness. Because getting over the fear is the first step to getting help. And the earlier help arrives, the better the prognosis.

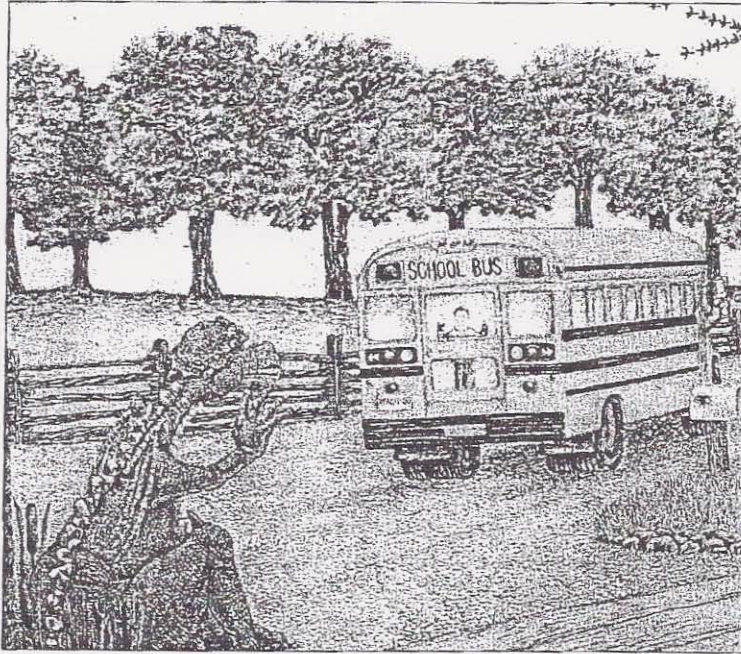
Without help early on, far too many kids struggling with depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder and a whole range of high-risk brain conditions succumb to substance abuse, violence, failure in school and suicide. Young lives ruined in large part because society can't see beyond the stigma and fear.

"One in five children will suffer from mental illness," says Gayle Grass, author of *Catch A Falling Star*. "The numbers are really mind-boggling. Research shows that early intervention makes a big difference, but research hasn't filtered down yet."

The book, produced in partnership with award-winning illustrator Coral Nault, is an attempt to change that.

Nault and Grass each have a child with a brain disorder. They hope the story of Iris the swamp dragon, and Fish, a boy who loves angling from an old wooden bridge, will help parents, doctors, educators and others recognize the symptoms of mental illness and have the courage to take action.

We're eager to cut the risk of



Helen Henderson



children being harmed by things like polio and tuberculosis, Grass notes. "Why don't we screen for the symptoms of mental illness? Why don't we have risk management programs, the way we do for things like diabetes?"

More teenagers and young adults die of suicide each year than from cancer, heart disease, AIDS, pneumonia, influenza, birth defects and stroke combined, according to the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health. Of the 20 per cent of Canadian children who need help for a mental health problem, 80 per cent receive no treatment, it says.

If there were more aware-

ness, Grass argues, more money might be available for badly needed services to help families coping with mental illness. But society has a lot of catching up to do.

Grass shopped the idea for an Iris The Dragon series to publisher after publisher over the course of two years. She was told there wouldn't be enough interest or a big enough market.

So she went another route, incorporating Iris The Dragon Inc. as a family company and getting support from heavy-weight businesses and institutions.

Among backers are Michael Kirby, head of the Senate committee looking into Medicare, Scotiabank, TD Financial, Royal Bank and Onex Corp. Health Canada "pre-bought" 1,000 copies to distribute to agencies that serve children.

Part of the proceeds from sales go to the Iris The Dragon Fund, established by the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario Foundation to help chil-

dren with mental health issues.

Future Iris The Dragon books will take a closer look at more specific areas of mental health, including depression, anxiety and bipolar disorders.

A quarterly newsletter is also planned.

Too many youngsters succumb to substance abuse, violence, failure in school and suicide

And the Web site www.iris-thedragon.com offers, among other things, links to a whole range of sites with constructive ideas for spreading the word about young people's mental health. Reaching teachers and other professionals, who often could be the initial link between a child and treatment, is one of the main goals.

Among links from the Iris site is one to the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill, which

IRIS THE DRAGON:

Coral Nault did the illustrations for *Catch A Falling Star*. In the book by Gayle Grass, a wise and gentle swamp dragon helps a little boy with a "chemical problem" in his brain.

outlines a number of programs operating in the U.S., along with tips on how to start similar groups in your community. NAMI includes information on:

- **Breaking The Silence**, a package designed to help teachers make mental illness ("no-fault brain disorders") part of the curriculum, so the subject can be discussed as openly as, say, heart disease or cancer.

- A video, *Day For Night*, that aims to help young people, teachers, counsellors, pediatricians and other doctors recognize and understand teenage depression.

- A Columbia University "teen screen" program designed to help young people recognize when a friend is at risk of committing suicide and know how to get help.

An order form for *Catch A Falling Star* (\$15.95 plus tax and handling for single copies) can be found at www.iris-thedragon.com.

For more information, contact Iris The Dragon Inc., P.O. Box 923, Smith Falls, Ont. K7A 4W7. Phone 613-284-2049 (voice), fax 613-283-9507 or e-mail info@iris-thedragon.com.

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