

## Iris the Dragon carries message

By KATHY RUMLESKI, FREE PRESS REPORTER

While student enrolment declines in the Thames Valley District school system, the number of children with mental health issues rises.

The problem is so severe, with about one in five children struggling with a mental health problem, the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario Occasional Teachers has adopted this issue as a prime outreach concern.

"We decided that it was something that touched everyone of us," said Terry Card, the president of the federation's Thames Valley local.

"Whether it was personally or whether it was through our work, that was an area that needed to come to the forefront."

Card said teachers have seen a myriad of mental health problems, including children with attention deficit disorder with hyperactivity (ADHD).

A resource teachers and parents might consider to help explain mental illness to children is Iris the Dragon books, written by a mom with experience of such illness.

The latest book by Gayle Grass is called Lucky Horseshoes and it is the story of a girl with ADHD.

Grass lines up doctors to read her books to ensure the material valid from a medical profession standpoint.

Using a fairytale genre, Grass provides children with mental health issues the opportunity to identify with other kids dealing with these problems through the characters in her books.

The children at the centre of her stories are guided by Iris, a kind of fairy godmother who has become a spokesperson for children's mental health.

A dragon is a good choice for a central figure who guides and helps the kids because children are fascinated by these make-believe creatures.

"(Iris) is the hero. She's the communicator. She's able to understand the child perfectly as to what they're thinking and feeling because most children don't even know how to describe how they're feeling," said the Perth author, who sold 10,000 copies of her first Iris the Dragon book.

Iris has been featured in a puppet show and play and there is a possibility she will star in an animated film.

"She is so much fun to work with," said Grass, who did her University of London master's degree thesis on the power of fairy tales and their ability to provide hope.

She believes Iris's popularity will lead to more discussion and awareness about mental illness.

For children, the greatest hope of improvement is having a proper diagnosis early.

"If you can identify it early, you're going to be such a wonderful help to your children . . . in getting the tools and things they need," Grass said.

She said the main obstacle in addressing and identifying mental illness is the stigma surrounding it.

Education goes a long way in lessening this stigma.

Grass said her experience has shown classmates of children with mental health conditions provide assistance once they understand the issues.

"In most cases, they're very, very helpful and supportive."

Besides the books, Iris the Dragon Inc. has other tools to help educators. A teacher's workbook, lesson plans and school awareness information are available.

For more information, visit [www.iristhedragon.com](http://www.iristhedragon.com) or call 613-267-5601.

The author is working on a third book in the Iris the Dragon series.

This one deals with anxiety disorders, which is the most prevalent mental-health disorder among children.

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