

Cyberbullying Crackdown

Recent Tragedies and a New Survey Shine a Spotlight on Online Bullying

For years, 14-year-old Jamey Rodemeyer had been victimized by bullies. The attacks didn't only happen in person but also continued online, where bullies used social media to taunt him day and night. Beset by cyber-bullies, the student from Williamsville, N.Y., took his own life on September 18, 2011.

Yet even Jamey's death didn't stop his tormentors. Just days after the tragedy, his 16-year-old sister attended a school dance. When dance organizers dedicated a song by Lady Gaga to Jamey, the bullies chanted "Better off dead!"

"I don't understand how someone could be so cruel," Jamey's mother, Tracy Rodemeyer, said in an interview with Reuters. "Everybody has a story about bullying, but never, never have I ever seen it where somebody would be happy that someone is dead from their actions."

A Widespread Problem

Jamey Rodemeyer's story is tragic, but shockingly, it's not unique. Fifteen year old Phoebe Prince of South Hadley, Mass., was also driven to suicide by bullies who attacked her both at school and online. After her death, bullies posted nasty comments on her Facebook memorial page.

Schools have long tried to combat the problem of bullying. When the attacks happen online, however, they present a different set of challenges. Unlike a verbal assault in the schoolyard, cyberbullying goes on with no one around to see who's sending the taunting texts and malicious Facebook postings. Without having to confront their victims face-to-face, anonymous online bullies often say much meaner things than they'd ever say in person.

"When I was bullied in middle school, I could go home and slam my door and forget about it for a while," Sameer Hinduja, codirector of the Cyberbullying Research Center, told The Associated Press (AP). "These kids can be accessed around the clock through technology. There's really no escape."

Though recent tragedies have led to growing awareness of issues related to cyberbullying, the problem seems to be getting worse. In 2009, 50 percent of students surveyed said they had been victims of bullies using electronic media. In a survey released on September 26, conducted by MTV and the AP, that figure had risen to 56 percent.

One in four of the 14-to 24-year-olds who responded to the survey said they had experienced digital abuse within the past six months. About 20 percent said someone had written something mean or untrue about them online. About three-quarters of the young people who responded to the survey said they considered digital abuse to be a serious problem. They're not the only people who feel that way.

Battle Against Bullies

Such startling statistics combined with headline-grabbing tragedies of kids who have literally been bullied to death have prompted lawmakers-from state legislators all the way up to the President of

the United States-to act.

U.S. President Barack Obama brought together parents, students, and experts to try to find solutions to the problem. The U.S. Department of Education, meanwhile, hosts an annual conference to help schools combat cyberbullying.



Getty Images

U.S. President Barack Obama and his wife, Michelle Obama, met with parents and teens at the Conference on Bullying Prevention.

"What we've tried to do is provide information and tools for parents and schools to push back," Obama said in a September 28 interview with Spanish language media.

To date, eight states-Arkansas, California, Connecticut, Kansas, Massachusetts, Nevada, New Hampshire, and Oregon-have passed anticiberbullying laws. Many other states have laws that address electronic harassment. New Jersey has one of the toughest such laws in the country. It was passed after 18-year-old Tyler Clementi, a Rutgers University student, killed himself following a particularly abusive online attack.

New York state Sen. Jeffrey Klein is pushing to expand that state's harassment laws to include cyberbullying. The proposed law would make cyberbullying a criminal offense. The change was prompted by Jamey Rodemeyer's untimely death and by the continued bullying that followed it.

"Our laws are not keeping pace with technology," Klein said in an interview with CNN. "No longer is bullying only confined to the schoolyard. It is now piped in an instant through victims' computers and onto the devices they carry in their pockets. This legislation will help provide protections to those who need it, as well as send a strong message about the seriousness of this destructive behavior."

Kids Fight Back

Lawmakers want to send a message that they're taking cyberbullying seriously. However, some people feel that making it a crime goes too far, while others worry that some laws may infringe on the First Amendment right to free speech. Many kids, meanwhile, are exercising that very right to fight

back against cyberbullies.

More than a million young people have signed up to join MTV's A Thin Line campaign, which aims to stop online bullying and encourages teens to speak out against it. Though 14 percent of the people responding to the MTV-AP survey said directly confronting the bully made things worse, 47 percent said that simply asking the person to stop worked.

Recently, 14-year-old Briana Allen attended an antibullying workshop in her hometown of Norwalk, Conn. A victim of bullying throughout middle school, Briana says what started in school ended up online. "I had people writing about me on Facebook," she told Norwalk's *The Hour*.

Things are better now that she's in high school, Briana says, but she makes a point to confront cyberbullying whenever she sees it. "People are taking their lives over this," she says.

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. How many 14-to-24-year-olds who responded to a recent survey said they had experienced digital abuse within the past six months?

- A. one in five
- B. one in four
- C. one in three
- D. one in two

2. This passage describes the problem of cyberbullying. According to the passage, all of the following solutions have been adopted EXCEPT

- A. the Department of Education hosts an annual cyberbullying conference
- B. states have passed electronic harassment and anticyberbullying laws
- C. young people have signed up to join MTV's antibullying campaign
- D. the federal government has made cyberbullying a criminal offense

3. Why does the writer include the last section ("Kids Fight Back") in the passage?

- A. to persuade kids to confront and fight bullies face-to-face
- B. to persuade students to attend antibullying workshops
- C. to describe how kids are working to stop cyberbullies
- D. to explain the First Amendment right to free speech

4. Read this sentence from the passage:

"Unlike a verbal assault in the schoolyard, cyberbullying goes on with no one around to see who's sending the taunting texts and malicious Facebook postings."

In this sentence, the word **malicious** means

- A. combating a problem
- B. continuing online
- C. happening repeatedly
- D. intending to be mean

5. Which statement best describes the main idea of the passage?

- A. For years, 14-year-old Jamey Rodemeyer was victimized by bullies in person and online.
- B. Lawmakers have passed new cyberbullying laws to send a strong message to online bullies.
- C. Recent cyberbullying statistics and tragedies have prompted people to solve the problem.
- D. Online bullies often say meaner things than they would ever say to their victims face-to-face.

6. What is the name of MTV's antibullying campaign?

7. How might 14-year-old Briana Allen have felt after attending an antibullying workshop? Please cite evidence from the text to support your answer.

8. The question below is an incomplete sentence. Choose the word that best completes the sentence.

Some young people reported that they had experienced being the victim _____ someone writing something mean or untrue about them online.

- A. but
- B. or
- C. and
- D. of

9. **Vocabulary Word:** anonymous: done by someone unknown.

Use the vocabulary word in a sentence:
