

## **Cyberbullying – A Deadly Epidemic**

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What do Ryan, Megan, Seth, Phoebe and Tyler have in common? These are teenagers who committed suicide due to cyber-bullying. These deaths have put the spotlight on the growing problem of cyberbullying and sparked more calls for tougher action. This issue has received so much attention that President Barack Obama held a White House conference on bullying earlier this month and subsequently launched [StopBullying.gov](http://StopBullying.gov), a website to help prevent and stop bullying.

Cyberbullying has become an epidemic in this country. The new generation of kids are growing up on the web and defining their own cultural rules. A recent study by the Kaiser Family Foundation reported that kids ages 8 to 18 now spend an average of seven and a half hours a day “plugged-in”—online, on the phone, or in the thrall of TV or some other electronic device. And in a random survey conducted by the Cyberbullying Research Center, 20% of middle-school students reported that they seriously contemplated attempting suicide. There is an upward suicide trend in the 10 to 19 year-old age group and the correlating factor is bullying and cyberbullying. The death rate is climbing and many are questioning whether or not the digital age has made the younger generation callous.

The effects of cyberbullying can be more severe than those of “traditional” bullying because a child who is targeted may see no escape and no place to hide. When bullying hits the internet, it morphs out of control. There are far more witnesses to cyberbullying and the reality now is that cyberbullies never sleep.

United States Department Education Secretary Arne Duncan is calling bullying a “silent epidemic” and that bullying involving race, religion or sexual orientation may be a federal offense. This issue has become global and as cyberbullying gains more media attention, lawsuits are increasing. Headlines such as “Families seeking \$35 million in bullying lawsuits” and “Court awards bullied student \$800,000” have become common weekly news. Another widely publicized lawsuit was a boy who sued the fathers of three former classmates for \$350,000 after they obtained a copy of a video the boy made for a class project and posted it on the internet. The video depicted the boy using a golf club as a light saber; he was dubbed the “Starwars Kid” and received world-wide ridicule. The suit settled out of court.

The Internet is incredibly powerful and has transformed this generation. However, it’s hard to imagine that such a vast resource could be used for such terrible deeds. Social media has an enormous effect on the lives of young people who often share pieces of their life with their social networking friends that they normally would not bring up during face to face conversations. Internet safety expert and privacy lawyer Parry Aftab said types of bullying amounts to torture for some kids. “The schoolyard bullies beat you up and then go home,” she said. “The cyberbullies beat you up at home, at grandma's house or wherever you're connected to technology.”

Personally, I don't believe kids post derogatory comments with catastrophic intent. However, it’s becoming more and more evident that some kids do not understand the consequences of their actions.

The prosecution of the nine kids in Phoebe Prince's suicide, or the Tyler Clementi's of Rutgers University death, clearly reminds us of the growing dangers of social media.

### Ending this Tragic Epidemic

Social media risks such as cyberbullying and sexting are growing problems facing children, families and schools. As these risks become more prevalent, many are wondering how to police these behaviors. Should a school get involved when young kids bully each other online? They certainly would if the bullying occurred at school and in some cases the school will become involved with bullying outside of school as well. Schools are in a precarious position because we now see many examples in the media where schools have been sued because they took action against a student when they shouldn't have or they failed to take action when they were supposed to.

In the 21st Century, the Internet plays an important part of kid's lives, though the boundaries between real life and virtual life are blurry. It's important to teach kids proactively about the serious risks of social media and the long term consequences of their online behaviors. This requires a coordinated effort of schools, parents and communities to talk about the inherent dangers of cyber bullying, sexting and other social media risks.

We are in the infancy stages of the social media dangers epidemic. Gone are the days when the schoolyard bullies beat you up and went home. Gone are the days when kids teased one another and it ended with giggles and at worst, a few tears. We are living in a world where bullies can reach you anywhere and anytime and where humiliation is shared at the click a mouse to a widespread audience. The 21st Century affords incredible opportunities, but it's also brought us social media dangers and far too many young tragedies. It's time to stop this epidemic.

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