

Parents Need to Wake Up and School Officials Must Take Action

When a child dies of natural causes or an accident, we grieve and wish things could have been different. But what are we to do when a child commits suicide to escape her tormentors?

Bullying and hazing have always been a part of life for students, an every day event and a sort of 'rite-of-passage'. Kids who didn't fit in became accustomed to the frequent snide remark or name calling and being last to be picked as a project teammate. Tradition dictated hazing of new members of sports and academic teams, beginning in middle school and notably prevalent in our most prestigious universities.

But ... there was always a safe harbor. Students could go home, be with family and friends and reenergize their self esteem and sense of worth ... a brief respite from the fear of bullying.

Not today. The prevalence of social networking has encouraged a new evolution in the world of bullying. Kids who might never take part in the face-to-face defilement of a classmate experience a sense of empowerment as cyber-bullies. Harassed students go home to face even more vile belittling within their social media spaces – spaces that are open to people who might otherwise have been unaware of the harassment, ultimately creating even more devastating results.

Just a few weeks ago, nine students were charged in connection with the death of Phoebe Prince, a Massachusetts girl who committed suicide in January after enduring merciless bullying from a group of fellow students at South Hadley High School. Phoebe hung herself after months of harassment, punctuated by slurs and physical violence at school. And when she opened the door to her house, she was unable to escape. Contemptible online and text messages followed Phoebe into her private sanctuary.

Parents and schools must become more aware of the signs of bullying. Today's school bullies don't fit the stereotypical norm of a thug stalking smaller, more vulnerable kids on the playground. Kids craving a sense of empowerment and accomplishment frequently fall into bullying as a way to exert their superiority. Victims of bullying exhibit a myriad of symptoms ... everything from a fear of walking to school to withdrawal from friends and family, or frequently complaining of headaches, stomachaches or other ailments.

Florida adopted an anti-bullying, including cyber-bullying, law in April 2008, titled the "Jeffrey Johnston Stand Up for All Students Act". The law is named after a 15-year-old boy, Jeffery Johnson, who committed suicide after being tormented for two years. It is not clear if a violation of the law would include criminal charges in addition to school disciplinary action. However, parents can incur civil liability as a result of their child's participation in bullying. And, of course, we know what parents of a harassed child can expect.

In a recent communication with James A. Richardson, board chair of Girl Scouts of Gateway Council and president of the Florida Girl Scout Legislative Network, he said "This topic remains an important one for

today's youth. The Florida Girl Scouts Legislative Network was very supportive of the Florida bill. Girl Scouts provides a forum where girls have the opportunity to safely discuss the issue with their peers and their leaders. Our Girl Scout Leadership Experience helps them to manage their complex web of relationships and friendships, and teaches them to step up and speak out about things that are wrong ... including bullying."

Phoebe Prince's death was tragic. It can only underscore our need to embrace existing anti-bullying programs and make sure that our schools are taking the issue seriously. So, what is a parent to do?

Begin by contacting local schools and school districts to find out what policies are in place. Schools and PTAs should be encouraged to adopt anti-bullying programs. In addition to becoming familiar with the signs exhibited by a child who is being harassed, parents should talk with their children – let them know that bullying is unacceptable behavior. Teach children to speak up when they witness another child being tormented. And, take advantage of anti-bullying programs offered by community service organizations.

A few years ago, based upon research, Girl Scouts of Citrus Council assumed a strong position in confronting bullying through several programs offered to girls in Florida. Girls learn how to resolve conflict, develop healthy relationships and are empowered to assume a positive role in response to bullying. Florida's girls deserve a safe environment for learning, growing, and building healthy relationships. And, all of our girls benefit from developing courage, confidence and character, while learning to make the world a better place.

Dr. Pam Lennox, EdD is the CEO of Girl Scouts of Citrus Council. Girl Scouting builds girls of courage, confidence, and character, who make the world a better place. Girl Scouts of Citrus Council serves more than 18,000 girls and 7,000 volunteers in Brevard, Lake, Seminole, Orange, Osceola and Volusia counties.