Teen Falls Victim to Cyber Bullying

Being bullied and humiliated at school in front of peers can be a difficult experience for children and adolescents, but they usually can escape the ridicule when they leave the school building. With the increased use of the Internet and cell phones by young people, bullying can now follow them wherever they go, even to their own homes, and the messages can be easily shared with a wide audience. It is no wonder that youth who experience cyber bullying may feel trapped and depressed, and seek drastic measures to escape such as ending their own lives.

Rachael Neblett, a 17-year-old from Kentucky, was a typical teen who communicated with her friends on the Internet. She began receiving extremely threatening anonymous e-mails and became frightened. The person apparently attended Rachael’s school, as the e-mails noted where Rachael went during the school day. Eventually her parents found out about the e-mails and informed Rachael’s school principal. School officials watched out for her at school, but the bullying did not stop. One day Rachael received an e-mail that said, “I am not going to put you in the hospital, I am going to put you in the morgue.” Not long after she read that e-mail, Rachael ended her life.¹

Why Should State Legislators Be Concerned About Cyber Bullying?

- **Cyber bullying is damaging to victims.**
  - Electronic aggression may be linked to depression among victims. Cyber bullying can be very damaging because negative messages can be forwarded to a wide audience and cannot be taken back.²,³
  - Victims who experience bullying in school and electronic aggression by the same bullies have the highest risk of experiencing distress.⁴

- **Cyber bullying is increasing.**
  - Twice as many children and youth were a part of cyber bullying as a victim, bully or both in 2005 compared to five years earlier.⁵
  - Since about 80 percent of teenagers own a cell phone, personal digital assistant or computer with Internet access, cyber bullying is a convenient method of harassment and intimidation.³

- **Cyber bullying extends into the community.**
  - Using computers and cell phones, bullying is no longer limited to the physical location of school. Cyber bullying extends into the community at-large and into people’s homes.
  - A telephone survey of children and youth ages 6 to 17 found that they cyber bullied at school, at home and other places.⁵,⁷

- **Cyber bullying is underreported.**
  - Researchers believe underreporting occurs because youth participants are unaware of what cyber bullying entails or that their actions are harmful.⁸
  - Teenagers may be hesitant to report cyber bullying for fear of losing their cell phone or Internet privileges.⁹
What are Cyber Bullying and Electronic Aggression?
Bullying is characterized by aggressive actions taken repeatedly against another who is perceived to be weaker, causing physical or psychological harm.9

- **Cyber bullying** uses new communication technologies and differs from other forms of bullying because it can occur at any time, the aggression can be repeated over and over since the bully’s message can be forwarded electronically to others and posted on social networking Web sites, and the cyber bully can remain anonymous. The victim may not know who their bullies are, which causes increased fear and anxiety.10

- **Electronic aggression** includes harassment or bullying, including teasing, telling lies, ridiculing, rude or mean or threatening comments, and spreading rumors. It occurs through e-mail, chat rooms, instant messaging, Web sites, or text messaging.

How are States Responding to Cyber Bullying?

- **Arkansas:** House Bill 1072 (2007) requires school districts to address cyber bullying in their anti-bullying policies.11 Current law requires school districts to define bullying, prohibit bullying on school property, at school-sponsored activities and on school buses and clearly indicate the consequences for bullying. In addition, bully prevention programs for students will be provided by school guidance counselors.12

- **New Jersey:** Senate Bill 993 (2007) addresses electronic aggression in schools and requires school districts to include the definition of electronic aggression in their bullying and harassment policies.13

- **Oregon:** House Bill 2637 (2007) defines bullying and includes cyber bullying in anti-bullying and harassment laws.14 School districts are encouraged to adopt policies that prohibit acts of cyber bullying and include procedures for reporting cyber bullying.

- **Washington:** Senate Bill 5288 (2007) requires the Washington State School Directors’ Association and the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction to develop a model policy to prohibit cyber bullying by students at school. This policy will require that parents are educated about cyber bullying through various materials and the school district’s Web site.15

What Can State Legislators Do?

- **Include cyber bullying in your state’s policies to reduce bullying.** New legislation or policy changes can define cyber bullying and how it should be addressed. Schools can develop model policies to prevent cyber bullying and electronic aggression. Cyber bullying can be addressed in other programs offered by neighborhoods and communities.

- **Support funding for state systems to monitor cyber bullying.** By tracking information on how prevalent cyber bullying is in your state, states can learn more about how cyber bullying affects victims and plan initiatives to reduce and prevent cyber bullying.

- **Support school education on cyber bullying.** Students need to understand what cyber bullying is and how to report it. School staff and parents need to learn about the effects of bullying and ways to address it in school and at home.

- **Get involved in state efforts to prevent cyber bullying.** Work with state and local education and health officials and provide leadership to motivate school districts and communities to work together to reduce cyber bullying.

If you would like more information or references:

- Send your inquiry to healthpolicy@csg.org or
- Call the CSG Health Policy Group at (859) 244-8000

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