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Dorothy Espelage, expert on bullying

Carl Joseph Walker-Hoover was a Boy Scout who loved football and basketball and did volunteer work. But when homophobic taunts from schoolmates became too distressing, the 11-year-old sixth-grader hanged himself at his family's Massachusetts home in 2009. In September, 18-year-old Tyler Clementi, an accomplished violinist and student at Rutgers University, leaped off a bridge to his death after his roommate and another student allegedly streamed video of Clementi's sexual encounter with another man on the Internet. These incidents and others have propelled the issue of bullying – and homophobic and cyber-bullying, in particular – into the national spotlight. Dorothy Espelage, an educational psychologist and renowned expert on bullying, took time out from school visits and a national conference during National Bullying Week, Nov. 15-19, to discuss these issues with **News Bureau writer Sharita Forrest.**

Bullying is receiving a lot of media attention nowadays. Is it becoming more prevalent – or is media coverage itself escalating?



The media are really mis-educating the general population. A lot of my talks during the last two years have tried to put a different spin on what people think about bullying. If they read in the media that sexting and cyberbullying are epidemic, then they think that's the only problem within their schools, and they ignore school-based bullying, which is much more prevalent.

Some of the trends we've been seeing over the last 15 years indicate that bullying is happening earlier, even in pre-school playgroups, when it used to emerge in middle school. The prevalence has not increased, however: 17 percent of kids say they have been bullies, 15-17 percent have been victims, 18 percent have been bullies as well as victims, and the rest have been bystanders or played other roles.

There have been several tragic stories related to sexual harassment incidents, including homophobic harassment, circulating revealing cell-phone photos and gossiping about sexual activity. Are school-bullying programs addressing sex-related bullying?

Since 2004-2005, we've seen an increase in the percentage of kids' reporting being victimized by or perpetrating homophobic harassment. Our research indicates that more than 25 percent of kids are exchanging homophobic banter and rumors regularly, and about 30-50 percent of bullying is composed of homophobic slurs, so bullying is becoming more homophobic in nature.

Since much of the bullying that occurs in middle school is sexual in nature, anti-bullying programs must address it in order to be effective.

On Oct. 26, the Office for Civil Rights in the U.S. Dept. of Education sent a letter to school districts reminding them that some bullying – such as harassment based on sexual orientation, race and disability – is subject to federal antidiscrimination laws and schools have legal obligations to address it, whether it's perpetrated in the school hallway or by cell phones or the Internet.

The OCR has prosecuted several cases where schools were held liable for not adhering to Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, which prohibit sex discrimination and harassment. The courts found that the education of students who were gay or questioning their sexuality was disrupted by gender-based harassment. Those types of lawsuits will probably occur more and more, because very few schools – in Illinois and nationally – are Title IX compliant.



Alumna Josie Chambers named Marshall Scholar



Engineering prof wins Presidential Early Career Award

Every school in the U.S. is required to have a Title IX officer. I recently spoke at a special education conference and asked a group of 100 teachers, principals and superintendents if they knew who was the Title IX officer in their school, and no one raised their hand. That's typical.

The OCR's letter outlined appropriate actions for school officials to take to end harassment and the hostile environment bullying creates without penalizing the targeted children, including providing training programs or intervention, support services and setting policies.

It's very significant that the federal government is making the distinction between bullying – which is not illegal – and discriminatory harassment.

Are school officials becoming more responsive to reports of bullying?

Several states, including Illinois, have passed laws that mandate that schools adopt bullying plans or their funding can be taken away. There's no reason for schools not to respond, but some of them are continuing to resist anyway.

If school officials are being unresponsive, I urge parents to move their child to another school if they can or to pursue litigation. They can also get the child involved in extracurricular activities to build their sense of confidence.

However, my main message to parents is that they promote healthy relationships with their children. They've got to parent, not be the kids' friends. That may mean not allowing the child to have a computer in his or her room or it may mean monitoring the child's Internet access, e-mail messages and phone conversations. Many parents today are reluctant to do those things, thinking it demonstrates a lack of trust. No, it's just being a parent.

How do kids respond to anti-bullying messages? Are they listening and changing their behavior?

During my talks I show video of a young man who has severe brain damage from a suicide attempt that came as the result of his being bullied. The school district he was in lost a big lawsuit several years ago for failing to intervene and protect him. I show video of this young man before his injury when he won several science awards, as well as video of a typical day for him now, which involves being fed through a tube and watching cartoons.

When I spoke about it this week at a school in Deerfield, Wis., a young girl raised her hand and asked, 'So he won't be going to college?' And I replied: 'No, he won't be going to college, getting married, having children or doing anything else.' Kids don't understand the permanency of the damage.

I try as much as possible to present data to kids and not lecture them. If I'm talking about digital and cyber-abuse, I address very clearly how it can impair a person's academics, especially in middle and high school; that it causes lasting harm, and that there are serious consequences for participating in it. They really seem to respond to that.

We did a study of middle and high school students, and half of them said they'd reject a friend if the friend came out as gay. When I asked a group of those students recently if any peers that had come out to them, many brave kids raised their hands and said 'Yes' – and that was in a very conservative state.

Right now, I'm evaluating a social-emotional learning program that leads kids through scenarios so they can process that.

Most of the randomized clinical trials in this country indicate that kids are much more interested in knowing how far they can go with harassment and get away with it – rather than wanting to learn pro-social skills and be nice to each other.

What other areas of bullying are you currently examining in your research?

A statistic that's quoted frequently is that many bullies are convicted felons by the age of 24-25. That's based on Norwegian data about Norwegian men. We don't have much data that's based on Americans or have a good sense of whether these ringleader bullies are criminals in the making or if they grow up to be successful professionals in fields where aggression is acceptable. Nor do we know what bullies' familial profiles were prior to entering the judicial system.

I was the principal investigator on a team that just completed a three-year study of 1,600 sixth- through eighth-graders. We found links between youth bullying experiences and later perpetration of sexual violence. We tracked the students at five different points, looking at things such as child sexual abuse and exposure to domestic violence, so we would have comprehensive information about their lives.

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