



Bullying and Suicide: The relationship and keys to prevention in schools

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Parents Blame Bullying

KE Supreme Court Case

Phoebe Prince

Tyler Clementi Amanda

Cummings

Billy Lucas

Ryan Halligan

Jamey Rodemeyer

Asher Brown

Matt Epling

Rachel Ehmke

Jay "Corey" Jones

Kenneth Weishuhn

Ashlynn Conner

Would this student be bullied in a large middle school?

- Has an extensive psychological history
- Walks funny and speaks with a lisp
- Has a bad skin condition on his face
- Described as pale and frail
- Identifies as gay
- Identifies as Buddhist

Reality of Bullying

Bullying Facts from U.S. Department of Education Website:

- Bullying peaks in middle childhood
- Studies show 15 to 25% of students are being bullied with some frequency
- Most common forms are being made fun of, being the subject of rumors, being pushed, shoved, kicked, tripped or spit on
- Only 1/3 of the victims told an adult

2013 National YRBS Results

- Surveyed 15,000 H.S students and in the last year
- 17.0% considered suicide (increase from 2011)
- 13.6% made a suicide plan (increase)
- 8.0% made an attempt (increase)
- Data released in 2016 by the CDC shows suicides at highest number in last 30 years with increases in adolescent suicide rates

Hope Witsell Tragedy

- Middle school teen endured months of taunting after she sent a topless photo to a fellow student
- The day before her suicide, she met with a social worker who had her sign a no suicide contract
- No other school staff nor the parents were notified and parents found the contract after she hanged herself
- Do you see a defense in the lawsuit and how do we prevent tragedies like this?

Bullying and Suicide

- Children who have been bullied have reported a variety of behavioral, emotional and social problems.
- Suicide is a leading cause of mortality in children and adolescents.
- Most of the studies reported positive associations between all bullying types and suicidal risks.

Bullying and Suicide Facts

- Bullied children are more likely to be anxious or depressed and more likely to take their own lives.
- Suicide is the second leading cause of death among 15 to 24 year olds and the third cause for those aged 10 to 14. 4600 suicides a year for those 10 to 24 with most significant suicide increase for 10 to 14 year old girls!
- The U.S. Secret Service Study of Targeted School Violence found that 2/3 of school shooters were the victims of bullying and that 2/3 were suicidal
- All states have bullying prevention legislation
- Only 1/3 have suicide prevention legislation

SPRC Brief: Suicide and Bullying

- Both victims and perpetrators are at higher risk than peers
- Personal characteristics such as internalizing problems; low self-esteem; and low assertiveness increase the risk of being bullied and these factors are also associated with risk for suicide
- Children most at risk for suicide are also at risk for being bullied
- It is difficult to control all the risk factors to determine if being bullied was a proximal cause to a youth suicide

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Continued

- Personal risk factors alone do not cause a child to be suicidal as other key components are family, mistreatment, domestic violence, parental depression and personal losses
- Relationship between bullying and suicide is the strongest for LGBTQ youth
- Research on effectiveness of bullying prevention programs is mixed
- Promotion of social support, mental health services and connectedness at school is recommended

Bullying and Suicide Prevention: Common Strategies

- School environment is the key
- Family outreach when necessary
- Education of parents about warning signs and importance of their involvement
- Building relationships with all students
- Identification of students and families in need of services and obtaining services for them

U.S. Eastern District Court

Lance v Lewisville ISD

- 9 year old boy M. hung himself in the school clinic bathroom in 2010
- Special education student with speech, learning disabilities and ADHD
- In 2008 his parents referred him for psychological evaluation due to their concerns that he was suicidal
- ARD in 2008 identified him as Emotionally Disturbed

- The district does not have the psych evaluation that qualified M as ED
- They have BASC raw data only that documents suicide/depression
- He received special education counseling but there is no documentation that service provider ever talked with him about suicidal ideation
- From the start of the school year 2009-2010 and his death on 1/21/10 there were 30 behavioral incidents that resulted in him seeing the AP

- The AP viewed each incident as conflict not bullying as that would have required the incidents to be written up and sent to the Superintendent
- No evidence that the AP reviewed his IEP or his BIP
- M saw the nurse on 16 occasions that year and on 7 of those occasions had physical injuries suffered at school
- On 12/18/09 five students assaulted M in and he pulled a pocket knife from his pocket but did not open it
- M was sent to the DAEP for 10 days and no MDR was held

- His parents appealed the DAEP in writing first to the Principal and then to the Assistant Superintendent stating that he had been bullied
- The appeals were denied
- The DAEP was not notified that M was a special education student
- M was suicidal at the DAEP and a high school counselor interviewed him and called his father but failed to fill out paperwork as per district protocol and did not notify his home elementary school of his suicidal ideation

- M was in trouble on his second day back at his home campus and he hung himself in the nurse clinic bathroom
- The nurse had known for two years that she did not have a key to unlock the bathroom door and M and other students had been known to lock themselves in the bathroom and she had to call custodian for help
- No one ever told the nurse that M was known to be suicidal
- The day after he died a new lock was installed and the nurse was provided a key to the bathroom

Legal Term: Special Relationship

- “In loco parentis doctrine” raises the question of whether a special relationship exists between school officials and students as students are released by parents for control and supervision by school officials
- Critical issues are the age and existence of disabilities for a student and whether or not the district placed the student in harms way

Lance Case: Outcome

- Texas court dismissed the case and placed emphasis on the 2012 Doe v Covington case decided by the Fifth Circuit Federal Court
- Lance case was also appealed unsuccessfully to the U.S. Fifth Circuit Court
- No Special Relationship existed as he was not incarcerated, involuntarily committed, nor in foster care
- He was not discriminated against as the AP failed to implement the bullying prevention policy for all students

Key Points

- Student surveys about bullying needed to determine the extent of the problem
- Hold student meetings and create a task force
- Train all students in bullying and suicide prevention
- Clarify differences between teenage moodiness and depression
- Conduct depression screenings for secondary students
- Establish a means for anonymous reporting of bullying and promote crisis hotline resources

Best Practices: Final Thoughts

- Hold parent meetings and provide training on bullying and suicide prevention and post information on the district website
- Increase staff supervision in areas where bullying occurs the most
- Take immediate action to stop bullying
- Provide consequences for bullies and support for victims
- Engage bystanders in prevention
- Recognize the association between bullying and suicide
- Do not hesitate to ask a bullying victim about suicide

Prevention Is Everyone's Responsibility

- **Suicide in schools (2015) Erbacher, Singer & Poland: Routledge**



www.nova.edu/suicideprevention



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Contact Information

- Email: spoland@nova.edu
- New Book: Suicide in Schools (2015) Routledge Publishing by Erbacher, Singer and Poland
- Articles posted: www.districtadministration.com
- Suicide and Violence Prevention Office Website: www.nova.edu/suicideprevention