

## What is Cyberbullying?

Wikipedia defines cyberbullying as, “*Cyberbullying is the use of information technology to repeatedly harm or harass other people in a deliberate manner. According to U.S. Legal Definitions, Cyber-bullying could be limited to posting rumours or gossips about a person in the internet bringing about hatred in other’s minds; or it may go to the extent of personally identifying victims and publishing materials severely defaming and humiliating them.*”

**The National Youth Violence Prevention Resource Center estimates that nearly 30 percent of American youth are either a bully or a target of bullying. However, bullying is no longer a problem that is isolated to the playgrounds, hallways and lunch rooms of schools. Instead, advances in technology have now extended harassment to cell phones, social media websites and other online avenues that are contributing to an alarming number of cyberbullying cases leading to suicide.**

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), suicide is the third leading cause of death among young people with approximately 4,400 deaths every year. The CDC estimates that there are at least 100 suicide attempts for every suicide among young people. More than 14 percent of high school students have considered suicide and nearly 7 percent have attempted it, that is why you will, sadly, read about cyberbullying cases in the media now more than ever.

Unfortunately, without an example, it’s hard to understand exactly what cyberbullying is and how a cyberbully acts. This why it is essential to share recent cyberbullying cases with the world.

**In the past decade, there have been multiple cyberbullying cases that ended with the victims taking their own lives. Here are six stories of cyberbullying cases that garnered national, and in some cases, global attention:**

### **Cyber Bullying Stories: The Ryan Halligan Case (1989 – 2003)**

**The Cyberbullying Story:** the website operated by Ryan’s parents, John and Kelly Halligan, early concerns about Ryan’s speech, language and motor skills development led to him receiving special education services from pre-school through the fourth grade. Ryan’s academic and physical struggles made him the regular target of a particular bully at school between the fifth and seventh grade. In February 2003, a fight between Ryan and the bully not only ended the harassment at school, but led to a supposed friendship.

However, after Ryan shared an embarrassing personal story, the newly found friend returned to being a bully and used the information to start a rumour that Ryan was gay. The taunting continued into the summer of 2003, although Ryan thought that he had struck a friendship with a pretty, popular girl through AOL Instant Messenger (AIM). Instead, he later learned that the girl and her friends thought it would be funny to make Ryan think the girl liked him and use it to have him share more personally embarrassing material—which was copied and pasted into AIM exchanges with her friends. On October 7, 2003, Ryan hanged himself in the family bathroom. After his son’s death, John discovered a folder filled with IM exchanges throughout that summer that made him realize “that technology was being utilized as weapons far more effective and reaching [than] the simple ones we had as kids.”

**Aftermath:** There were no criminal charges filed following Ryan's death because no criminal law applied to the circumstances. Seven months after Ryan's death, *Vermont's Bully Prevention Law (ACT 117)* was signed into law by Governor Jim Douglas. John Halligan also authored *Vermont's Suicide Prevention Law (ACT 114)*, which passed unchanged in April 2006.

### **Cyber Bullying Stories: The Megan Meier Case (1992 – 2006)**

**The Cyberbullying Story:** In December 2007, Tina Meier founded the nonprofit Megan Meier Foundation. The non-profit was named in honour of Tina's 13-year-old daughter who hanged herself in a bedroom closet in October 2006. Megan struggled with attention deficit disorder and depression in addition to issues with her weight. About five weeks before her death, a 16-year-old boy named Josh Evans asked Megan to be friends on the social networking website MySpace. The two began communicating online regularly, although they never met in person or spoke on the phone. "Megan had a lifelong struggle with weight and self-esteem," Tina said on the Foundation website. "And now she finally had a boy who she thought really thought she was pretty."

In mid-October, Josh began saying he didn't want to be friends anymore, and the messages became more cruel on October 16, 2006, when Josh concluded by telling Megan, "The world would be a better place without you." The cyberbullying escalated when additional classmates and friends on MySpace began writing disturbing messages and bulletins. Tina said on the Foundation website that it was about 20 minutes after Megan went to her room after leaving the computer that the mother found her daughter had hanged herself in her bedroom closet. Megan died the following day, three weeks before what would have been her 14th birthday.

**Aftermath:** According to the Associated Press, it was later that fall when a neighbour informed Megan's parents that Josh was not a real person. Instead, the account was created by another neighbour, Lori Drew, her 18-year-old temporary employee Ashley Grills, and Drew's teenage daughter, who used to be friends with Megan. One year later, the case began receiving national attention. While the county prosecutor declined to file any criminal charges in the case, federal prosecutors charged her with one count of conspiracy and three violations of the Computer Fraud and Abuse Act for accessing protected computers without authorization. A federal grand jury indicted Drew on all four counts in 2008, but U.S. District Judge George Wu acquitted Drew in August 2009 and vacated the conviction.

In addition to the Megan Meier Foundation, Tina also worked closely to help Missouri legislature pass Senate Bill 818, unofficially known as "*Megan's Law*" in August 2008. In April 2009, U.S. Representative Linda Sánchez of California introduced the "*Megan Meier Cyber bullying Prevention Act.*", which aimed to end the harassment of a cyberbully seriously – but unfortunately it was not enacted.

### **Cyber Bullying Stories: The Cyberbullying Cases of Jessica Logan (1990 – 2008) and Hope Witsell (1996 – 2009)**

**The Cyberbullying Story:** Jessica Logan was an 18-year-old Sycamore High School senior who sent nude photo of herself to her boyfriend, but the Cincinnati Enquirer reported that the photo was sent to hundreds of teenagers in at least seven Cincinnati-area high schools after the couple broke up. According to the University of Alabama's cyberbullying website, the cyber

bullying continued through Facebook, MySpace and text messages. Jessica hanged herself after attending the funeral of another boy who had committed suicide.

A little more than one year later, 13-year-old Hope Sitwell hanged herself after a picture of her breasts that she “sexted” to her boyfriend was shared amongst students at six different schools in area of Ruskin, Florida, friends and family told CNN. Hope never told her parents about the “Hope Hater Page” that was started on MySpace that led to additional cyber bullying.

**Aftermath:** The Enquirer reported that Jessica’s parents, Albert and Cynthia Logan, filed a lawsuit against Sycamore High School and the Montgomery police for allegedly not doing enough to keep their daughter from being bullied and harassed following the nude photos of her being widely shared. In February 2012, Ohio Governor John Kasich signed House Bill 116, also known as the Jessica Logan Act, into law. The legislation addresses cyber bullying and expands anti-harassment policies.

Reuters reported that Hope’s parents filed a lawsuit in April 2011 against Hillsborough County school officials for allegedly failing to take appropriate action after learning the teen had suicidal thoughts.

### **Cyber Bullying Stories: The Tyler Clementi Case (1991 – 2010)**

**The Cyberbullying Story:** It was during the summer after his high school graduation that 18-year-old Tyler Clementi began sharing that he was gay. Clementi’s roommate during his freshman year at Rutgers University, Dharun Ravi, used a webcam in September 2010 to stream footage of Clementi kissing another man. According to the Tyler Clementi Foundation, the teenager learned through his roommate’s Twitter feed that he had become “a topic of ridicule in his new social environment.” On September 22, 2010, Clementi committed suicide by jumping off the George Washington Bridge.

**Aftermath:** Less than a week after Clementi’s death, Ravi and Molly Wei, the roommate whose computer Ravi used to spy on Clementi, were charged with invasion of privacy. In May 2011, Reuters reported that Wei entered a plea deal requiring that she testify against Ravi. A jury convicted Ravi on 15 criminal charges, and he earned early release 20 days after beginning a 30-day jail sentence.

The *Tyler Clementi Higher Education Anti-Harassment Act* would require colleges and universities to have anti-harassment policies and expanded bullying prevention programs. In February 2013, the Star-Ledger reported that the bill was reintroduced in both the U.S. Senate and the U.S. House of Representatives.

### **Cyber Bullying Stories: The Amanda Todd Case (1996 – 2012)**

**The Cyberbullying Story:** In October 2012, ABC News reported that the video Amanda Todd had posted to YouTube had been viewed more than 17 million times. In the video entitled “My story: Struggling, bullying, suicide, self harm,” the British Columbia teenager uses flash cards to tell about her experiences of being blackmailed and bullied. A little over a month after posting the video on September 7, 2012, Amanda hanged herself in her home on October 10, 2012.

Amanda began using video chat in the seventh grade to meet new people online, and one stranger convinced the teenager to bare her breasts on camera. However, the stranger attempted to use the photo to blackmail Amanda, and the picture began circulating on the internet, including a Facebook profile that used the topless photograph as the profile image. “The Internet stalker she flashed kept stalking her,” Amanda’s mother, Carol Todd, told the Vancouver Sun. “Every time she moved schools he would go undercover and become a Facebook friend.”

**Aftermath:** Less than a week after Amanda’s death, Canada’s CTV News reported that lawmakers would consider a motion seeking to lay the groundwork for a national bullying prevention strategy. The Amanda Todd Legacy, the official blog administered by the teenager’s family, strives to “serve as a bulletin board for all special events and initiatives to support anti-bullying education, help young people struggling with mental health issues and support educational programs that help people with learning disabilities.”

**Unfortunately, these are only some of the stories that are occurring all around us on a daily basis. These cyber bullying cases demonstrate that there are actions that many members of the community can take to prevent additional harassment. Parents, educators and other school officials need to recognize signs of cyberbullying, and we must all make a more concerted effort to help cyberbully victims.**

The cyberbully victim is not going to declare “I am a cyberbully victim”, instead they are going to assume no one can understand them and help them and resort to self harm or even suicide. It is up to parents and educators to remind each cyberbully victim that help is available and understanding is available if they feel victimized by a cyberbully. It is up to you to tell them that the cyberbully doesn’t control their lives.

It also feels appropriate and more than essential to mention the underlying danger of young teenage porn viewers. When there is young teenage porn involved, a teen’s idea of violence, sex and relationships changes drastically and influences his/her interactions with the community.

**Although these are very sad cyberbullying stories, they serve as a reminder that bullying and cyberbullying are not to be taken lightly. If you or someone you know are being bullied or cyberbullied speak out now and get some help.**

**If you are not a victim, spread awareness about bullying and cyberbullying by sharing these tragic stories, you might be helping someone out!**

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