Deja Vu?

When relentless bullying at school pushed Massachusetts teen Phoebe Prince to commit suicide this year, many felt they'd heard this tale before. But how common is this tragic response to unkind schoolmates' ugly behavior?

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Despite all the media attention on bullying, teen suicides and anti-bullying legislation, the fact is that young people rarely commit suicide because of being harassed, says Carl Bell, MD, director of the Institute for Juvenile Research at the University of Illinois at Chicago and president and CEO of the Community Mental Health Council. Such deaths are more common among clinically depressed youth, Bell suggests.

But without a supportive environment, many youths are unable to manage the stress bullying creates. As a result, they find themselves experiencing feelings of hopelessness that are symptomatic of depression.

That stress, coupled with the depression it creates, according to a 2008 Yale School of Medicine study, caused victims of bullying to be two to nine times likelier to have suicidal thoughts than other children.

Findings like these have pushed panicked state legislators, schools and parents to find solutions to the growing problem of bullying. But legislation may not prevent every child from being harassed, says Andrew Zitoli, principal of Millis Middle School in Millis, Massachusetts.

Zitoli's school is located about 80 miles from South Hadley, the school where classmates bullied Phoebe Prince, the 15-year-old girl who committed suicide earlier this year. Prince was a victim of technology's pervasiveness, a problem Zitoli says has given children a whole new venue for spreading rumors and gossip. "I call cell phones the weapons of mass destruction," he says. "Before [the new technology], kids could go home to safety. Now if someone doesn't like something about you, they can call you a name and spread a rumor anonymously."

But often help for school-aged kids is found right in their own homes. Family members can act as a child's first defense against bullying, Zitoli says. And there are key signs that alert parents can spot.

For example: If a child who has always been loving suddenly isn't, that's the first clue something is

wrong, Zitoli suggests. Other symptoms include children's belongings disappearing and kids sporting injuries, which may mean they've been in fights.

Parents can do a lot to protect their children, Bell advises. He recommends cultivating kids' coping skills. Teach them to use their emotional intelligence to help them negotiate with others. And build their self-esteem to empower them so they won't feel angry or depressed if bullying occurs, he suggests.

And it's also helpful for children to participate in teamwork and activities that give them a sense of mastery and purpose, Bell says.

"You don't have to raise the toughest kids in America," Zitoli says. "Instead, teach them to be kind to everyone and avoid the drama."

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