

1 out of 4 every teens are cyberbullied online, study says

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By Briana Oates

Cheerleading and photographic memories is all that are left. A mother mourns the death of her 13-year-old daughter who committed suicide on July 6.

Rebecca Abbott, mother of Zoe Johnson, wants every parent to learn the lesson from her. According to reporter Josh Sidorowicz from Fox 17 News, "Abbott said she believes that cyber bullying led to her daughter's death."

Prior to Zoe's death, a Facebook post read "tag a b***h you don't like," with her name and many others tagged. It was only a matter of time until Zoe gave up a fight and took her own life. After her death, harsh comments were still posted on Facebook. The comments and powerful words got to Zoe and psychologically; her brain and whole body lost the fight.

It only takes two seconds to hit the buttons known as "send," "enter" and "post." These three buttons are crucial in being able to post a statement about a person that could ultimately tarnish their reputation and/or emotionally damage that person. Cyber bullying is using electronic devices to communicate to a person in a negative way. Social media is a popular use for students to use in order to harass or embarrass a person.

This is a problem among many schools across the country. Studies have been done and, "one in every four teens has been bullied at some point online," said Sidorowicz. According the American Association of Suicidology, rates for suicide among 10- to 14-year-old teens has grown 50 percent in the past three decades." Cyber bullying is a common thing among that generation today.

Youth have always been bullied. But, it was only a matter of time until this issue becomes the topic of discussion for not just parents and teachers. Yet, cyber security analysts have brought this topic to life as well. Jean Muhammad, Ph.D., department chair of Computer Science at Hampton University, is an advocate for the discussion and awareness of cyber bullying. "A lot of school systems are just now starting to catch on to the fact that psychological bullying is just as serious as cyber bullying," she said.

Because it seems everything is done over the Internet, anybody can hide behind a computer and post comments and images online. A National



Institute of Health journal article titled "Cyber Bullying, School Bullying, and Psychological Distress: A Regional Census of High School Students" gives data on victims of cyber bullying and school bullying and its correlation with psychological distress. It offers a unique perspective on how cyber bullying has its own personal characteristics amongst the many dangers that come along with cyber security. "Electronic communications allow cyber bullying perpetrators to maintain anonymity and give them the capacity to post messages to a wide audience," said co-authors Shari Schneider and Lydia O'Donnell.

When dealing with the Internet, it is a free-for-all for the ability to post comments and information out there. Also, the amount of guilt and responsibility is perceived by participants as decreased because acts are anonymous.

In most cases, demographics can play a big role in the understanding of why cyber bullying occurs. Age, gender and even sexual orientation are many factors of why cyber bullying can occur. Even though there is an unclear number statistically as to whether girls are bullied more than boys, "some studies suggest that cyber bullying victimization increases during the middle school years," said Schneider and O'Donnell.

Surprisingly, most cyber bullying action takes place outside of the school environment because of the Internet security being monitored. However, this does not mean that schools are involved and/or liable in certain situations when cyber bullying occurs.

There is a definite parallel between cyber bullying and the effects it has on students. "Psychological harm, including depression and suicidality has also raised concerns about how cyber bullying is related to various forms of psychological distress," said Schneider and O'Donnell. There are also reports that online victimization may be linked with more serious distress, including major depression, self-harm, and suicide."

"Zoe had dealt with bullying for years and suffered minor depression, according to [mother Rebecca] Abbott," said Sidorowicz. Because of the bullying that had occurred prior to her death, depression was Zoe's way of psychological comfort, when it actually damaged her.

All of these effects are dangerous to students being bullied and harmful to students, which can link to their performance in school and social skills in the future. MetroWest Adolescent Health survey did an in-depth study on students for 12 months that suffered with psychological distress and symptoms that relate with depression and anxiety, the results proved to be known that an increasing amount of students were more than likely to suffer with psychological distress, making it prevalent that it is a serious problem.

Students cannot just suffer from mental issues, but also physical issues which can translate into psychological disorders. In the journal on adolescent health, two doctors examined the relationship between bullying, health concerns and how it transpires into the classroom. "Participants indicated how often in the past four weeks they had experienced 10 symptoms including anxiety, problems sleeping, irritability, headache,

tension and fatigue," said co-authors Robin Kowalski and Susan Limber.

With the results announced, the possible negative effects of cyber bullying were most pronounced for the cyber bullying/victim participants, especially the males. These individuals generally reported having more negative physical, psychological, and academic effects from electronic bullying." With cyber bullying being an important topic throughout cyber security, lawmakers are trying to stop the increasing number of cyber bullying cases that are not getting the justice needed.

The safety of students in school environments has become a serious focus with legislative powers, along with cyber security analysts. For example, Michigan, the state where Zoe was from, is one of many states with laws that punish criminals that engage in cyber bullying dealings. "Laws governing the Internet are now beginning to catch up," said Muhammad. "They are not that great but are getting better." With laws being in the works to help combat cyber bullying, states are working with schools to create programs that help discuss the awareness of cyber bullying any its negative effects.

With this issue being a problem around the ages of middle school and high school, should this be a topic among students that are younger? "It starts with education. They have to really talk about it in elementary schools," says Muhammad. The Internet is a powerhouse that has negative effects. Cyber bullying is one of those that can threaten a person's well-being for life.

"Whatever you put on the Internet," says Muhammad, "It is there for eternity."

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