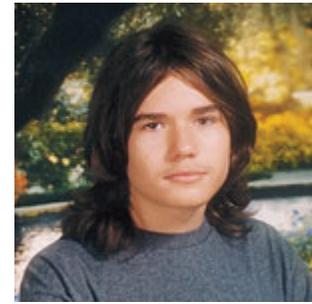


## "I Couldn't Get Them to Stop"

Jeff Johnston, 12, was an honors student at Trafalgar Middle School, in Cape Coral, Florida, with a passion for reading and a wide circle of friends. In the fall of 2002, according to Jeff, "out of the blue, this kid I barely knew started trashing me at school, cursing me out under his breath, and telling everyone I was gay." Within weeks many of Jeff's friends were shunning him; some even joined the taunting. "They were spreading lies and I couldn't get them to stop," he said. "Even my girlfriend turned against me."



+ SHUTTERSTOCK IMAGES

Jeff's mom, Debbie Johnston, an eighth-grade science teacher at Trafalgar, found out about the bullying when her son turned up in her classroom crying and begging for help. According to Debbie, Jeff believed the culprit, a fellow seventh grader, began passing notes that ridiculed him and spreading rumors that Jeff had supposedly made derogatory comments about other students. Debbie complained to John Stephens, then Trafalgar's assistant principal. Stephens confirms that he spoke with Debbie about Jeff but says that Jeff would not name the bully and that the "instant messages" Jeff was getting were not traceable. "I can tell you the teachers were asked to be very vigilant and watch out for anybody who might be speaking directly to or about Jeffrey," says Stephens. Between then and the end of the school year, the taunts subsided from time to time only to erupt again. "Jeff never knew when this boy would come back after him," says Debbie, 48. "He felt like a sitting target."

The next fall, Debbie says, Jeff, then 13, found himself sharing three classes with the bully, and the torment began anew. Jeff and two classmates had designed an online video game and given the Web site address to friends, but someone apparently hacked into it and used the site to post vicious comments about Jeff -- that he was fat and ugly and that he laughed at his friends behind their backs. On the bully's own Web log (which was rife with derogatory and obscene commentary about many students) one entry read, "*...jeff is a fagget [sic]. he needs to die...it seems everythime [sic] i write on the computer i build up rage.*" Another entry read, "*...I've been charged with bullying myself. lol.*" The bully's response to a threat of an out-of-school suspension: "don't care." A school-district spokesperson confirms that Debbie worked with a school resource officer (an employee of the local police who works as security at the

school) but said that the school was unaware of bullying on campus and as a result "there's only so much a school can do." (No individual has been named or charged with bullying in this case.)

"Jeff used to be outgoing and confident in sixth grade and at the beginning of seventh grade," Debbie recalls, "but by eighth grade he began dressing all in black and was introverted and obsessed about his appearance." When it came time for ninth grade, Jeff and the bully went to different high schools; by all accounts, Jeff appeared to be doing well at his new school. At the close of the academic year, in May 2005, Jeff's parents took him and his younger brother, William, now 5, on a weeklong vacation to Disney World, where the 15-year-old again appeared happy. But back home he seemed moody and depressed. Then, on the morning of June 29, Debbie and one of her elder sons, Joe, 22, found Jeff's lifeless body in his bedroom closet, where the boy had hanged himself during the night. Several weeks later Debbie discovered a suicide note, composed on May 2, in the "trash" of Jeff's computer. *"Hello Friends, I'm just writing to tell you all I won't be in school anymore. I decided to commit suicide because my life is too hard...It's just difficult to explain...I hope none of you miss me...I'm really sorry."*

### The Making of a Bully

Cruelty has always been a part of childhood, but many adults are unaware of just how prevalent horrific incidents are. "Bullying -- that is, intentionally and chronically inflicting physical or psychological pain -- has been around forever," acknowledges SuEllen Fried, coauthor of *Bullies, Targets & Witnesses: Helping Children Break the Pain Chain* and founder of BullySafeUSA, a nationwide educational program. "But the violence has increased in the last few years. And there's a far greater spectrum of tactics -- physical, verbal, emotional, and sexual -- than before."

According to a 2001 study published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, around 11 percent of 12- to 15-year-olds are "moderately or frequently" bullied. "Bullying can seriously affect children's mental health, self-esteem, thoughts about suicide, health, and academic work," says developmental psychologist Susan Limber, PhD, a professor at Clemson University's Institute on Family and Neighborhood Life, in Clemson, South Carolina.

Do experts believe that bullying alone could be responsible for a child's

suicide? "It's a chicken-egg question," says Dr. Limber. "Certainly kids who are depressed, who have problems with self-esteem, may react more negatively to bullying than other kids. At the same time, depression and low self-esteem can result from bullying."

One reason the crisis has been hard to contain is that the harassment takes place stealthily, sometimes out of sight of parents and teachers, whether it happens in school bathrooms or in cyberspace. Once bullying is discovered, many adults -- assuming it's a rite of passage that teaches kids to stand up for themselves -- fail to take it seriously and intervene ineffectively or not at all, according to Nancy Mullin-Rindler, director of the Project on Teasing and Bullying at Wellesley Centers for Women, in Massachusetts.

The growing phenomenon of cyber-bullying has exacerbated the problem. Hiding behind the anonymity of computers, bullies can humiliate their victims by sending vicious text messages and posting hateful rumors in chat rooms, on bulletin boards, and on blogs

#### New Ways to Protect Victims

Controlling the problem of bullying remains a challenge, but schools, local communities, and the federal government have stepped up their efforts. In March 2004, Surgeon General Richard Carmona, MD, announced Stop Bullying Now!, a nationwide campaign to combat bullying among 9- to 13-year-olds. To date, 21 states have passed anti-bullying laws, including Virginia, which requires school districts to adopt consistent policies that prohibit intimidation and impose punishments that even range from suspension to expulsion. And in Florida -- Jeff Johnston's home state -- Governor Jeb Bush corresponded with Debbie after Jeff's death and then asked his education commissioner to come up with antibullying proposals to present to the state legislature. The representative from the Johnstons' district, Jeffrey D. Kottkamp, plans to file an amendment to change the proposed legislation's name to the Jeffrey Johnston Act.

Debbie Johnston is gratified by these moves and has devoted herself to lobbying for tougher antibullying laws. "My son's life was sacrificed," she says. "Please let that sacrifice make a difference for someone else."

### **If Your Child Is Being Cyber-Bullied**

**Recognize the Problem** Such online sources as [www.wiredsafety.org](http://www.wiredsafety.org), [www.wiredkids.org](http://www.wiredkids.org), [www.internetsuperheroes.org](http://www.internetsuperheroes.org), [www.stoptextbully.com](http://www.stoptextbully.com) and [StopCyberbullying.org](http://StopCyberbullying.org) explain what constitutes cyber-bullying and outline steps parents can take to protect their children.

**Keep Personal Computers Public** Since many kids will not reveal they are being picked on, parents should be on the alert for negative emotional reactions when their kids are using the Internet. The best way to do so, says Nancy Willard, director of the Center for Safe and Responsible Internet Use, is to "keep the family computer in a public area of the house."

**Crack Down on Abusive E-Mails** If your child gets threatening or harassing e-mails, do not delete them. To take action against a bully, it is imperative to save all evidence. Forward the harasser's e-mails to the sender's e-mail provider (most providers have an address for "abuse") with a request that a cyber-bully's account be terminated. If you have difficulty figuring out who the bully's provider is, software packages (eMailTrackerPro) can trace an e-mail back to the computer that sent it and report abuses to the owner's Internet service provider. Spam filters can also be used to block the receipt of e-mails from "problem" addresses.

**Exercise Your Rights** Sites that host chat rooms or blogs have detailed "terms of use" agreements. These are your best defense in combating derogatory Internet content. For example, if offensive material is posted on AOL, says a spokesperson, "we remove it and take action ranging from a warning to dismissal from AOL service. If the material crosses into illegality, we refer it to law enforcement." -- *K. Emily Bond*

*Originally published in Ladies' Home Journal magazine, March 2006.*