



'I Hate My Life'

From Taunts to Teasing, Emotional Bullying Scars Grade Schoolers

ABCNEWS.com

Feb. 17— Starting in the third grade, Felicia Flores, now 11, was tormented for two years by a girl she once considered a friend.

A recent study estimates that 160,000 students skip school every day just to avoid the painful harassment that makes each school day unbearable. ABCNEWS.com

What started as demands to do her bidding escalated into taunting and teasing by the bully and her followers.

"They said that I sucked, I was a jerk, I was a liar," said Felicia, who attends school in northern California. "They called me Miss Prissy Perky Piggy. When they call you names, it hurts really bad. And sometimes you just wonder why they're calling you that."

Seeing children being physically bullied while their schoolmates do nothing is difficult. Last week, the story of a 12-year-old beaten on the school bus shocked the nation and left many people wondering how young bullying starts.

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A Cry for Help

In a letter found by her mother, Felicia cries out for help.

"I hate my life, I wish I were dead because no one cares or understands me," Felicia wrote. "My friends were the only people that I can talk to, but now I can't. Lately I have thought about killing myself. Nobody cares except my mom."

Her mother, Gloria Valdez, can never forget the day she read Felicia's letter.

"I saw the note that she wrote," Valdez, said, crying. "That she hated her life because the school didn't understand her, that the principal didn't understand, that she had no friends, and that I was the only one who understood her."

Felicia used to tell her mother that she didn't want to go to school, or pretend that she

was sick to avoid doing so.

"I couldn't go to school because my eyes were so red from crying and puffy, because I got no sleep," Felicia said. "I was angry because I couldn't stick up for myself. It was really hard for me."

'Kids Will Be Kids'

Eventually, the stress of the bullying did make Felicia physically ill — with painful migraines and chronic stomachaches. "The hard part was when I addressed it with the school, no one understood," Gloria Flores said "They basically said 'Oh, kids will be kids.'"

Not only did Felicia's school minimize her pain, but they ultimately asked Gloria to find another school for both of her children.

From the start of kindergarten to the end of first grade, children are bullied every three to six minutes — and those young victims are more likely to be depressed and suicidal later in life, according to a study from Wichita State University published in the Nov. 2003 edition of *Child Development*.

It was second grade when Allie Ludwig, now 10, was surrounded on this playground by six girls and terrorized because she refused to listen to schoolyard gossip. One girl said, "We've got her, we've got her," making Allie feel as though she could not escape.

"I felt really scared," said Allie, whose family lives in Portland, Ore. Allie said. "I felt sick to my stomach also. Because you don't know what's going to happen. "I got mad because I said stop and they didn't."

Her mother was angry too.

"I was really mad because the kids that were doing this to her were her friends," Trudy Ludwig said. "And I just didn't know how to deal with this. I needed to figure out how to help my child deal with the kids rather than me fighting her battles."

An Anti-Bullying Curriculum

Frustrated by the lack of information on young bullies, Trudy researched and wrote her own book *My Secret Bully*. She has traveled to dozens of school districts to drive home her message of empowerment. Luckily for Trudy and Allie Ludwig, her school, has a conflict resolution program, but Trudy says schools and parents need to recognize that emotional bullying is far more complex and insidious than fights, especially when it goes undetected.

"I think schools really need to pay attention more to defining bullying as name calling, insulting, gossiping, spreading rumors," Trudy Ludwig said. "Those are blatant forms of aggression that kids think are normal."

Allie says she has learned how to stand up for other kids, instead of just letting bullies have their way.

"I've learned that it's good to stand up for kids and not just be there and watch," Allie said. "You have to do something. Otherwise it's going to happen again and again."

Felicia knows that feeling.

"Emotional bullying is way harder than physical bullying," Felicia said. "Because if you just get hit, then you can go home and it's over with. But emotional bullying stays with you."

Tackling the Problem

According to a study by the U.S. National Educational Association, 78 percent of bullying in schools is verbal, so it must be actively addressed by teachers, administrators, parents and children.

■ **Schools:** One extremely successful program at an Illinois school district addressed bullying head-on, by first identifying which children are being targeted. The students themselves were asked to anonymously write down the name of a bullied child, which ultimately created a confidential list of victims. Teachers can work with that information, keeping an eye on the children being bullied, pairing them with a more popular friend and changing seat assignments to get them away from their tormentors.

■ **Parents:** When they become aware of bullying, parents should respond immediately, alerting the school to see what their bullying policy is. Make sure the school is pro-active in addressing the problem.

■ **Students:** Your child should know that it's not OK if someone says, 'I'll only be your friend if you do my homework,' or worse. They should know the difference between getting mad and being mean. Friends can have arguments, but bullies are abusive. Let children know that when they come up against bullies, it's OK to tell an adult.

