

# Focus On

## Women

### THE GIRL WITH THE SWEET SMILE

A little over a year ago, 15-year-old Phoebe Prince walked home from South Hadley High School, where she was a freshman, and hanged herself in her family's apartment. Her body was discovered by her 12-year-old sister.

In the days following her death, the world learned that Phoebe, a recent immigrant from Ireland, had endured months of relentless and ruthless bullying. The verbal abuse and physical threats had come from a group of students, both girls and boys, at South Hadley High, and began after she had briefly dated a star football player. And even after her death, many crude comments about Phoebe were posted on her Facebook memorial page.

Phoebe Prince's suicide shook South Hadley, a middle-class suburb, and the state of Massachusetts. State lawmakers sped up efforts to pass anti-bullying legislation as a result of her suicide and the measure was signed into law May 3, 2010. Similar legislation was introduced in New York State and passed. In South Hadley, a 300-member anti-bullying task force met, and the high school created 40 pages of rules to crack down on bullying. Six students at South Hadley High have been charged with violating Phoebe Prince's civil rights and criminal harassment. They will be tried later this year.

Phoebe Prince is buried in a cemetery by the sea in County Clare, Ireland, far away from the taunts and slurs.

### FACTS ABOUT GIRLS AND BULLYING FROM NEA HUMAN AND CIVIL RIGHTS

#### Q: Is bullying a serious problem for girls?

**A:** Yes, it can be—more so in fact than was previously assumed by social scientists.

#### Q: Is bullying against girls on the rise?

**A:** We don't have the data to answer that question, either for girls or boys. We see strong indications, however, that the bullying that occurs today seems to be more vicious—and therefore the impact on the child being bullied is more damaging.

#### Q: What kind of bullying are we talking about here?

**A:** Girls are exposed to every kind of bullying. There is *direct bullying* which involves physical acts such as hitting, pushing, tripping as well as overt verbal attacks—name calling, taunting, and threatening. But for girls, a more subtle form of bullying, sometimes called "*relational aggression*," is also a threat. It involves rejection by friends, exclusion for the group and covert verbal attacks, including gossip, and it can be devastating. (Crick et al)

#### Q: Are we talking now of girl-on-girl bullying?

**A:** Yes. Boys are more likely to be both the victims of direct bullying and the perpetrators. And while girls engage in physical confrontations, they are more likely to be victims of relational bullying at the hands of other girls. What's more, girls are more likely to use relational aggression within their own friendship circles, in comparison to boys, who tend to aggress outside their friendship circles.

#### Q: Are girls innately mean?

**A:** No. Girls are innately aggressive. We all are. Our species did not climb out of the primordial swamp without having aggression baked into our DNA. Culture determines how we express and channel our innate aggression. Culturally-acceptable outlets for aggressive behavior that are available to boys and men, however, are not open to girls and women. Aggressive females are considered to be un-feminine, and are labeled shrill and strident. Moreover, our culture demands of girls and young women that they be sugar and spice and everything nice. (Rachel Simmons)

#### Q: Why are some girls victims of bullying?

**A:** A girl can be bullied for any one of a host of "reasons"—or for absolutely no reason at all. The important thing is not to blame the victim. Our goal has to be to alter the behavior of the bullies—girls and boys.

#### Q: What can we do for the student who is being bullied right now?

**A:** Be there for her or him. The research shows that one caring adult in a school can make all the difference in the life of a girl or boy who is being tormented. Listen, care, and do what you can for the bullied student.

#### Q: Is bullying primarily a middle school and high school problem?

**A:** Bullying is a middle and high school problem. But it is also a big problem in elementary schools. Analyzing the data from the largest bullying survey ever undertaken of students (83,330), Professor of Psychology Dan Olweus found that 17.5 percent of second grade boys reported



being bullied and 16 percent of girls; for fourth graders, 13 percent of boys and 11.5 of girls reported being bullied.

**Q: I am an educator, not a school psychologist or a social worker. Why is bullying my problem?**

**A:** Because bullying is an *education* problem. A bullied student cannot learn up to his or her potential. Bullying can lead to depression, withdrawal, and isolation—none of which are conducive to learning. Moreover, bullied students miss more school and are more likely to drop out.

**Q: For school personnel who want to do something about bullying in their schools are resources available?**

**A:** A wealth of reliable information about bullying in school is now available—and there are research-proven measures that can be deployed to counteract and prevent bullying. Check out *Bullying Prevention & Intervention: Realistic Strategies for Schools* or *Olweus' Bullying at School*. Bullying-proofing a school boils down to a matter of will. The adults involved in a school (staff, parents and administrators) ultimately determine how much bullying takes place in that school.

**Q: What about anti-bullying training for school staff?**

**A:** A number of organizations offer bullying prevention training for school staff, including NEA. For more information see [www.nea.org/bullying](http://www.nea.org/bullying).

**Q: Are there girl-specific bullying prevention resources?**

**A:** Absolutely. A good starting point is the U.S. Department of Health and Human Resources' website: [www.girlshealth.gov](http://www.girlshealth.gov).

### TIPS FOR EDUCATORS

✓ If a student comes to you with a complaint about being bullied, take it seriously and listen. No allegation about potential bullying should be ignored because the charge seems improbable or because the behavior is considered a harmless rite of passage.

✓ Immediately report the student's complaint of bullying to the designated authority in your school (often it is the district's Title IX grievance officer). Check back with the student to see if she or he has been informed as to what steps the school system is taking.

✓ If a student seems to be in severe emotional or psychological distress, offer to help the student get in touch with a counselor, social worker, or school psychologist right away; be supportive, but don't give advice beyond your expertise. And if the student seems in imminent physical danger, alert the administration immediately.

✓ NEA Human and Civil Rights offers two, educator-friendly, research-based training programs in how to prevent student-to-student bullying: the National Bullying and Sexual Harassment prevention and Intervention Program and the National Training Program on Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Issues. For more information go to [www.nea.org/bullying](http://www.nea.org/bullying).

## CEDAW IN 2011: BECAUSE WOMEN'S RIGHTS ARE HUMAN RIGHTS

### WHAT IS CEDAW?

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, and it is a landmark international agreement, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1979. It affirms the principles of fundamental human rights and equality for women around the world.

CEDAW has been ratified by 186 out of the 193 countries in the world. The United States, Sudan, Somalia, Iran, and three small Pacific Island nations—

Naura, Palau and Tonga—have not ratified CEDAW.

### WHY DOES CEDAW MAKE A DIFFERENCE FOR WOMEN AND GIRLS?

Because it can be used to: reduce sex trafficking and other forms of violence against women; provide access to education and vocational training; end forced marriage and child marriage; help mothers gain access to maternal health care; and ensure women the right to vote, work, and own businesses.

Before she passed last year, civil rights leader Dorothy I. Height said: "Ratifying CEDAW remains among the unfinished business of the Civil Rights movement.

NEA strongly supports the ratification of CEDAW treaty by the U.S. Senate. It has never been brought to the Senate floor for a vote, and it will take two-thirds of the Senate (67 out of 100). We urge members to contact their Senators and voice their support of CEDAW. President Barack Obama supports the treaty.

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