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Stakes rise as bullying grows more serious

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GARRETSON, S.D. - Jessica Haffer insisted she could handle the bullies.

With a third-degree black belt in tae kwon do, 14-year-old Jessi could have hurt her classmates easily. But she let them hurt her - scratching, pushing, hitting, taunting, excluding.



Former Nebraskan Jessica Haffer endured bullying before taking her life last year at age 14.

Even when Jeri Haffer could see something was wrong, Jessi would tell about the abuse only if her mother promised not to complain to the school. The bullying gets worse, Jessi said, if you tattle.

On a snowy Sunday morning last November, Jessi took her parents' handgun and killed herself on their driveway.

As another school year ends, Hollywood is counting box-office receipts from "Mean Girls" and Midlands towns and schools are trying to heal the wounds of real-life bullying:

- In Malcolm, Neb., students and adults wonder how close they were to a Columbine-style slaughter. Joshua Magee, a 17-year-old junior who was teased by other students, faces a charge of attempted murder after taking explosives and a rifle to school.

- La Vista Junior High is working to prevent a recurrence of a public beating of a 13-year-old girl by six other girls.
- Three Millard North High School students face third-degree assault charges for the videotaped beating of a student.
- In the grieving town of Garretson, school leaders vow to respond aggressively to bullying.

"Maybe I didn't teach her to be tough enough or mean enough," Jeri Haffer said, tears rolling down her cheeks.

Bullying took perhaps its most noticeable toll in the 1999 attack at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colo., and has claimed lives in school shootings since then. A more steady cost, in teenage suicide, draws little notice beyond the immediate circle of grief. The obituary in the Sioux Falls Argus Leader after Jessi's death Nov. 23 merely said that God had called her home.

Bullies have always been part of growing up. No one formally studied bullying until the 1970s, but studies since then indicate it is growing more serious.

"What used to be fists 25 years ago is now a knife and a gun," said Peter Kanaris, a New York school psychologist who helped develop an anti-violence program for the American Psychological Association.

A common feature in cases where bullying turns deadly is guns.

"It's very likely that kids will resort to all kinds of bad decisions," said Joan Duffell of the Committee for Children, based in Seattle. "As they have access to firearms, it just means a bad decision turns fatal."

Keith and Jeri Haffer bought a .38-caliber handgun after a 1992 burglary. They hid the gun in a drawer in their bedroom and kept the bullets in a separate drawer. Until the day she killed herself, Jessi had not shot the gun and her parents didn't know that she even knew where it was.

A 2002 study by the U.S. Secret Service and U.S. Department of Education, prompted by the Columbine attack, examined 37 school-based attacks since 1974 in which a student or former student committed violence with a particular target in mind.

Two-thirds of the attackers used guns they brought from home or from a relative's house.

Seventy-one percent felt they had been bullied, injured or persecuted before they attacked.

Not all childhood aggression is bullying. Educators say bullying has three characteristics:

- An imbalance of power. One child is older, bigger, stronger or higher in a social pecking order.
- Intent to hurt. Bullies know they are hurting other children and take pleasure in it.
- Repetition. Bullies pick on the same child or children over and over.

Boys tend to be more physical in their abuse and girls more verbal, but bullies of both genders use both. And verbal abuse sometimes hurts more.

"In some cases girls are probably worse than boys, especially in middle school," Garretson School Superintendent Robert Arend said.

Even when victims don't physically hurt themselves or others, bullying has a lasting impact.

"They remember the experience of being humiliated and embarrassed and scared," said Susan Swearer, an assistant professor of educational psychology at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

The effects can be profound:

- Children who are bullied are more likely to suffer from depression or anxiety. Bullies also are more likely to be

depressed and suicidal.

- Bullies are more likely to drop out of school and to be arrested as adults.
- Victims become afraid to go to school. Studies show that as many as 160,000 children a day avoid school because of bullies.
- Grades suffer for victims and bullies alike.

Jessi Haffer, an eighth-grader, was in middle school, where bullying hits its peak.

Born in 1989 in Lincoln, she moved to South Dakota when she was 4. Her parents bought a house on 19 acres with 4,500 lilac bushes.

"I loved the idea of a small town, my daughter living in a small town, feeling she would be safe," said Jeri, who grew up in Fairbury, Neb.

Jessi, born when her mother was 47, was the couple's only child. Jeri had four children from an earlier marriage and Keith had one. During most of their time in South Dakota, Jessi was the only child at home.

Keith develops veterinary vaccines. Jessi helped Jeri run a store in downtown Garretson selling gifts and health products.

It's not clear why other children picked on Jessi.

Bullies tend to focus on children who are different in some way, often physically different. Kids called Jessica fat and ugly, her mother says, but photos show a slim, pretty girl with an engaging smile.

Jessi was different, though:

- The Haffers travel frequently and own a large home. Classmates expressed jealousy about Jessi's life. "People perceive us to be very wealthy," Keith said. Though his work pays well, a lawsuit forced the Haffers into Chapter 13 bankruptcy in the 1990s.
- Keith is Jewish and Jessi was the only Jew in her school. A report published in the Journal of the American Medical Association says race or religion is the reason for 9 percent of bullying.
- Jessi might have angered bullies by befriending other victims. "Whoever they were picking on, that person became her best friend," Jeri said.
- Jessi was smart, another common factor in bullying. "She didn't want people to know she was smart," her mother said.

A prolific writer who kept a journal, Jessi planned to attend Stanford University, then Harvard Law School (a Harvard pennant still hangs in her bedroom). She wrote about marvelous devices she planned to invent. She

dreamed of being a ballerina, an opera singer, a vaccine scientist, a Supreme Court justice.

Jessi's mother recalls dealing with bullying when Jessi was in second grade. "I could tell by Jessi's face that something happened." But Jessi would only tell her mother, "If you see someone hurting someone and you tell the teacher, you're a tattletale."

In later years, Jeri Haffer asked about scratches on Jessi's neck and a torn coat. "She would say, 'I can handle it.'"

Despite Jessi's pleas, Keith Haffer did seek help at the school once. The next few days were brutal. "Kids took turns punching her, running into her and calling her names," Jeri said.

Jeri's grandson, who is older than Jessi, was visiting once when some boys threw her against a wall, scraping her arm. She held back her nephew, who wanted to go after the bullies. He told Jeri, "Grandma, she won't defend herself and she won't let me go after them."

Her mother asked Jessi why she wouldn't defend herself. She responded, "I didn't want to hurt them, Mom."

The bullying intensified in middle school, Jeri said. "They would push her, call her narc, slut, you can imagine the names."

Like other students, Jessi swapped notes in class. In one note, a boy asked, "How can you be so nice to people who are so awful to you?"

She begged her mother to keep her confidence. "I did nothing because she said, 'If I can't tell you, Mom, then I won't be able to talk to anyone.'"

Despite the bullying, Jessi usually was cheerful, and her parents did not think she was depressed.

She had a lot of friends, including girls who played nicely at parties or Girl Scout meetings at Jessi's home but turned on her at school.

For Jessi's bat mitzvah in 2002, the crowd at Mount Zion Temple in Sioux Falls included many classmates. A framed photo commemorating the occasion sits on the Haffers' living room coffee table next to a ceramic urn that holds Jessi's ashes.

Experts say teen suicides seldom have a single cause. Jessi left no suicide note.

Her parents see the bullying as a leading factor, though, and school officials held a community meeting the month after she died, to discuss bullying as well as suicide prevention.

The superintendent says teachers had no idea how severe the bullying was until after Jessi's death.

Classmates' taunts were not the only conflicts in Jessi's life.

Her parents have filed complaints with the Garretson school district and the South Dakota Department of Education against Julie Mueller, a teacher who they say discriminated against Jessi based on religion. Mueller declined a request for an interview, and Superintendent Arend would not comment.

The Haffers also were battling with city officials over whether they could keep Jessi's two horses inside Garretson's city limits. The Haffers bought the horses last summer, a bay gelding she named Macs and a black mare she called Baby. A letter arrived Saturday, Nov. 22, telling the Haffers of plans for another hearing.

"Why can't they leave us alone?" Jessi asked.

Jessi seemed to be planning, seeking solutions. She asked her parents to home-school her. They said yes. She circled an ad for a home in Sioux Falls and asked if the family could move there. They said they would look.

The next morning, Jessi went outdoors with her father to help clear the 5-inch snowfall. As Keith worked with an ATV farther down their lane, Jessi shoveled up by the garage. Until she pulled out the gun and pointed it at her head.

Her funeral, the day before Thanksgiving, filled the school gymnasium. Classmates came to the Haffers' home to express grief, some confessing their abuse. "They came to my door and told me, wanting me to absolve them," Jeri said.

Mistreatment continued even after Jessi was gone. Children defaced photographs of Jessi and objects of hers at school and even in her bedroom.

Students spread rumors that she was pregnant and using drugs. Dr. Brad Randall, Minnehaha County coroner, said the autopsy showed she was not pregnant or using drugs.

In a Dec. 22 community meeting, school officials started educating staff, parents and students about the impact of bullying and about their new policy. First offenses involve talking with the bully, second offenses involve an in-school suspension.

Jeri and Keith Haffer keep trying to figure out their daughter's life and death.

"The pain doesn't go away," Keith said. "Not knowing why she died - it doesn't make any sense to us."

What schools can do

Adopt anti-bullying programs.

Educate children how to respond to bullies, even if they aren't the victims.

Take bullying reports seriously.

Listen to children who report being bullied.

Don't single out victims. This can bring repeated attacks. Don't say the victim told you about an incident; say you know about it.

Involve the bully's parents in discipline, so they know and can help change the behavior.

What parents can do

Encourage children to talk and don't blame them.

Don't encourage them to fight back. Suggest walking away or seeking help from an adult. Help them practice what to say.

Let them know you're going to help.

Tell your children you're responsible for protecting them. Without promising secrecy, tell them you'll work out a plan to inform the school in a way that doesn't worsen the abuse.

Talk to a teacher, guidance counselor or principal. Most schools have policies that take bullying seriously.

Don't wait to seek treatment for a depressed child, just as you wouldn't for a child with a limp or headache.

Bullies as well as victims may need treatment for depression.

Source: Dr. David Fassler, University of Vermont, American Psychiatric Association

Getting help

If you are considering suicide, please call the Girls and Boys Town National Hotline, (800) 448-3000

Contact the Omaha World-Herald [newsroom](#)

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