

Soshanguve schoolboy David Hlongwane tied a rope around his neck and hung himself from the rafters of his mother's house in February after being bullied by classmates. What can we do to stop our children from being bullied – or turning into bullies?

BY ISABELLA LO

The bully GENERATION

Bullying is on the rise in our schools and its devastating consequences include depression, anxiety and even suicide. It's an issue that is making headlines with alarming regularity – most recently we heard the tragic story of David Hlongwane. The 16-year-old Grade 10 Soshanguve pupil hung himself in his home in February after being bullied by classmates. David had reportedly been beaten and called names by his peers, and at one point had to run to the school's staff room to escape from them.

Teenagers who take their own lives because of bullying show in graphic clarity how crushing it can be. According to the SA Depression and Anxiety Group (Sadag), bullying is one of the greatest causes of sleeplessness, depression, anxiety and self-esteem problems – and yes, even suicide – among children and teens. And yet it is fairly commonplace in our schools,

institutions, workplaces and society in general.

Girls are more adept than boys at verbal attacks and cyber-bullying (via social forums on the internet and cellphones), but many are also crossing the line to physical bullying. The case of a 15-year-old Krugersdorp High School pupil who was filmed as she attacked a fellow pupil with a glass bottle is a recent example. According to the school's principal, Ivan Bailey, the incident followed a series of 'shocking conversations' on Facebook and Blackberry's messenger service.

Janine Shamos, a teacher and former counsellor at Sadag, says cyber-bullying is 'one of the most destructive forms of bullying because it gives perpetrators enormous power, scope and anonymity.' And it can have drastic consequences. 'Children have killed each other and committed suicide after having been targets of cyberbullying,' notes Janine.

In the US, after classmates spread rumours that

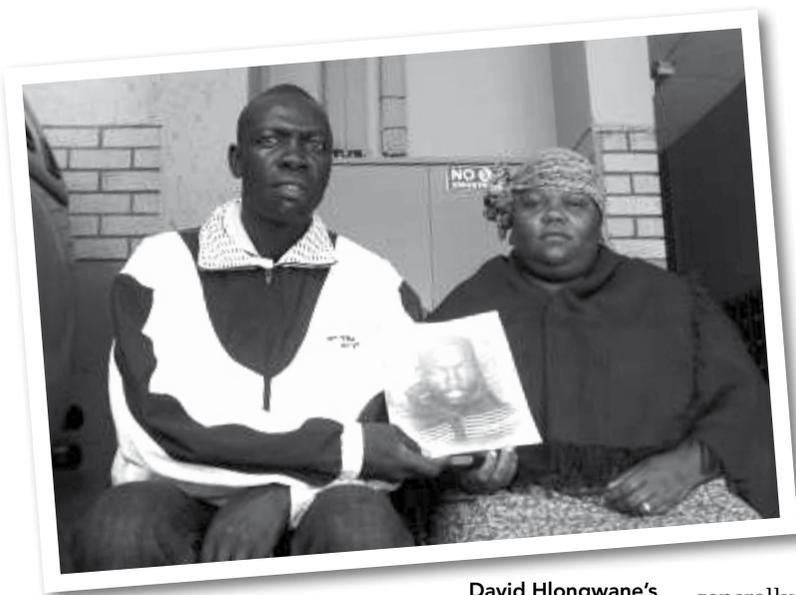
13-year-old Ryan Halligan was gay, a popular girl began chatting to him online, pretending to like him, but then she shared all their personal exchanges with her friends. Unable to cope, he killed himself.

VIOLENCE BREEDS VIOLENCE

Why is bullying so prevalent in our society, and what should schools, institutions and society do to stop it?

'The fact is that we live in a society where violence is often condoned,' says Corene de Wet, a lecturer at University of the Free State's Education faculty, who researches bullying and violence. 'Based on the behaviour of their parents, and even political leaders, children learn that this is how to get ahead. What you're up against is a culture of violence, and that is very hard to beat,' she says.

Children at government schools are by far the most at risk, she's observed, because teachers tend to ignore what's going on. 'My research has shown that about ▶



David Hlongwane's parents are still battling to come to terms with his untimely death.

IT'S NEVER 'NOT SERIOUS'

Educational psychologist Lesley Rosenthal says that every case of bullying should be taken seriously by the school – from its teachers to the principal to the school board. Prescribed steps should be rigorously followed, 'because bullying can do tremendous psychological damage – not only to the victim, but to the bully as well'.

Indeed, Sadag has found that children who bully tend to become aggressive adults, and that almost 70% of school bullies have at least one criminal conviction by the age of 24. Lesley observes that they

generally come from disturbed backgrounds, where the aggressive behaviour is commonly learnt from a parent. This is a major source of frustration for schools trying to deal with the problem. 'The root of bullying is often to be found in the home, where children are imitating the behaviour of aggressive or violent parents,' says clinical psychologist Wendy Hay. 'Lack of social skills, poor tolerance and inadequate role models leave the bully and the victim without adequate skills to cope with feelings of anger and fear,' she adds.

Unfortunately, a school can't intervene in a situation at home, although it can recommend that the parents go for counselling.

'The problem is that you often get parents who will deny their child is a bully and become aggressively defensive if called to the school for a meeting,' notes Corene. 'You can do very little about that.'

GUILTY BY ASSOCIATION

Bystanders who witness bullying are part of the dynamic and if no one steps in to defend the victim, they reinforce the behaviour. Psychologists have identified different types of bystanders – a follower (who takes an active role), a supporter (supports it by, for example, laughing), a passive supporter (approves but doesn't show outward support), a disengaged onlooker (watches but doesn't take a stand), the passive defender (dislikes it but doesn't do anything) and a defender (will try to help the victim).

If a pupil witnesses bullying, Sadag says the best approach is to report it to an adult authority figure

Telltale signs

- Changes in behaviour and appearance
- Making excuses for not going to school – such as stomach aches or headaches
- A desire to be isolated

– a teacher, principal or parent, or any adult that the student trusts. If a violent incident happens during school break, those witnessing the bullying can go to the staff room, or call a prefect or senior pupil who may be better able to intervene. A student who tries to stop the bullying sometimes risks becoming a target themselves, which is why it is important to involve an authority figure who is better skilled at conflict resolution.

Educationists and psychologists agree that to address the problem of bullying, schools need to encourage true leadership and a culture of respect, and this should be reflected strongly in its code of conduct, which should be rigorously enforced. Girls & Boys Town, which helps children at risk, is a good example of a school with respect as part of its formula, and many private schools also uphold these values.

Wendy says peer regulation is vital, though she cautions against a prefect system 'focused on an elitist attitude rather than an attitude of service. Any elitism carries the danger of promoting victimisation.'

She adds that sport, youth groups and religious groups also serve to provide a solid code of conduct and a sense of belonging and achievement.

Parents, meanwhile, also play a vital role in stopping bullying. Sadag recommends that if you suspect your child is being bullied, take it seriously, inform the school and let the school handle it. Good schools are usually aware of bullying, but might need to be alerted to a specific incident.

Parents should also take an active interest in who their children talk to and what websites and social networks they use.

The bottom line is that bullying should never, ever be tolerated. As Janine Shamos stresses, 'bullying is never OK. No one deserves to be bullied'. **i**

40% of teachers at these schools simply walk away when they see a bullying incident. In other words they are condoning what is happening,' says Corene.

To make matters worse, the red tape involved in disciplining a child makes teachers feel disempowered, and they resort to verbal or physical attacks themselves, thus contributing to the vicious cycle of bullying, she adds.

Each school has code of conduct, endorsed by the Department of Education and administered by the school's disciplinary committee, which proscribes bullying. Punitive steps include referring both the bully and the victim for counselling, and, in extreme cases, suspension. Rehabilitation may be recommended for the bully, especially if he or she has been violent.

But dealing with bullying takes unified, collaborative and committed action by the school as well as the parents, and the responsibility for this is often shirked. 'Many teachers don't know what course of action to take, or don't want to escalate the matter to disciplinary committee level because it can get ugly and complicated, with parents at loggerheads with each other,' says Corene.

WHAT PARENTS CAN DO

- If you suspect something may be wrong, ask.
- Listen to your child and take him/her seriously.
- Never blame the child – it is not their fault.
- Reassure them they were right in telling you.
- Don't promise to keep it a secret.
- Discuss practical ways to solve the problem.
- Teach self-confidence, assertiveness and social skills.
- Enrol kids in extramural activities to help them widen their social circle.
- Encourage family discussion rather than just watching TV.
- Never expect kids to work it out on their own.
- Talk to other parents – if there's one bullied kid, there will be others.

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