

## Kys: bullying's terrifying new shorthand



Relentless: sometimes there's no escaping it. Picture: Getty Images

She was taking her first tentative steps into the new school year – *Year 8 will be different. Put it all behind you. You've got this* – when her mobile phone dinged. A message on her Instagram: *So I heard u was a rape victim who tried to kill herself 1000 times but failed?* Emma\*, 13, had been sexually assaulted, it was true. She'd subsequently wrestled with poor mental health and thoughts of suicide. But she was beginning the first term with a positive mindset, determined to join the throngs of kids who seemed to live so lightly in the world. *Ding*. Emma's response was Pavlovian; she couldn't help but look. Another message: *Just slit ur wrists and drink bleach also jump off a building that should work*. The messages were coming from a fellow 13-year-old, so casual in her cruelty that she hadn't bothered to assume anonymity. A final ding for the flippant sign-off: *Just go kys xo*.

And, just like that, another acronym joins the alphabet soup of texting abbreviations, the hieroglyphic scroll so baffling to parents who can only shrug as their digital-native offspring lol and omg. Kys sounds anodyne, even sweet; it could be shorthand for a kiss. Except it's not. Kys stands for kill yourself, and it's far too sinister and damaging to be used as the throwaway taunt it's become.

"It's their vernacular, I'm not kidding," says Rachel Downie, a former teacher from Queensland who travels the country conveying her anti-bullying message to schools. "In the last two years it has become an acceptable conversational thing to say, 'Why are you here? Go and kill yourself, and here's a link showing how to do it.' I'm nearly 50 and when I was at school if I had told someone to go and kill themselves I would have been expelled and given some kind of counselling because you don't speak to other humans like that."

Some children are creative in their cruelty: the Year 7 boy who brought a homemade noose to school and presented it to another in the playground; the Year 12 schoolgirl who made a Spotify playlist of songs about death and self-harm and dedicated it to a classmate with a cavalier *F..k you*. But more commonly, the suicide prompts arrive in a relentless barrage of hateful messages delivered via SMS,

Snapchat, Instagram and Facebook Messenger, each one a pulse of negative feedback amassing disastrously in young brains.

“I’ve seen the most horrific texts – horrible, horrible, vile stuff,” says Susan McLean, who has been working in cyber safety since the earliest days of the internet. “It’s enough to tip anyone over the edge, let alone a vulnerable young person.” McLean spent 23 years in Victoria Police and is a member of the National Centre Against Bullying and the Federal Government’s cyber-safety working group. It was to her that Emma’s desperate mother turned when she discovered the messages on her daughter’s phone. McLean referred the matter to police, who are now investigating. “I deal with it on a weekly basis,” McLean says. “And by the time it comes to me, it’s not ‘You’re ugly, I hate you’. It’s high-level abuse.”

Just as disturbing as the violent content is that Emma’s tormentor saw fit to mete out her psychological pummelling the week after the suicide of 14-year-old Amy “Dolly” Everett, the young face of Akubra, made headlines around the country. On January 7, Dolly’s father Tick Everett revealed on Facebook the relentless bullying the Northern Territory teen had endured while boarding at Scots PGC College in Warwick, Queensland. He urged his daughter’s bullies to come to her funeral and see the “complete devastation” they’d wrought.



Something about Dolly’s sweet and trusting smile, coupled with the appalling circumstances of her death, struck a chord and reignited national outrage around the vexed problem of bullying. Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull declared himself “heartbroken” and vowed to work harder to stamp it out. A Senate inquiry into whether cyberbullies should attract tougher criminal charges began taking submissions. Queensland Premier Annastacia Palaszczuk established an Anti-Cyberbullying Task Force. And a social media campaign gathered steam as more and more bereaved families went public with their pain. It seemed as if a formerly piecemeal approach was coalescing into something solid; federal and state politicians, law enforcement agencies, schools, medical professionals and parents all newly determined to combat this scourge.

Amy 'Dolly' Everett. Picture: AAP Victoria Racing Club Limited

Even the most optimistic acknowledge it will be hard. Just days after Dolly’s funeral, an anonymous Snapchat user messaged the dead girl’s grieving 15-year-old friend: *Why don’t you just go cut your wrist until you bleed out. Go do what dolly did.*

**The law of the jungle has long held sway in schools:** the strong prevail, the weak are preyed upon. Many adults have painful memories of being ostracised or teased by peers, hiding in the toilets at lunchtime. But there’s been a generational shift in the type and severity of bullying that goes well beyond the indignity of having a lunchbox stolen or backpack hidden. *You’re an ugly, fat bitch. Your dad probably killed himself because he couldn’t stand to look at you.* This is recreational nastiness, hosted on social media, where anonymity lowers inhibitions, the impersonal nature of text spells the death of nuance, and social cues are easily missed. *Nobody actually likes you. You should just kill yourself so we don’t have to pretend any more.* A pack of hyenas howling for blood on the open savannah would be less terrifying.

“We know kids’ brains aren’t fully developed and won’t be until their mid-20s,” says child psychologist and bullying expert Michael Carr-Gregg, also part of the Federal Government’s cyber-safety working group. “And we know that a unique characteristic of young people is an inability to predict the consequence of their actions. The technology has created a scenario where kids who are impulsive, subject to peer influence, who do make errors of judgment, can now do so in the wink of an eye, press send and cause devastation.”

Via smartphones and laptops, the taunts follow children beyond the school gates and into their bedrooms, becoming an unending hum of low-grade hostility that sporadically detonates into flying

invective. *You wanna be a slut? You've got a lot of girls coming for you. Dead meat.* And the derision is online for every one of the victim's peers to see, their humiliation broadcast to other friendship groups and sporting circles, other schools, in other states.

"This is the thing adults don't always understand," says McLean. "They are relying on their own memories of bullying to believe that is what's happening today in Australia. They say, 'Just ignore it, words can't hurt you, suck it up, you'll be fine.' Of course, that's not how it works. It continues 24/7 and there is no respite."

This constant, grinding domination can strip a vulnerable young person of confidence and dignity, whittling away their self-worth to nothing. "It's round-the-clock harassment," says Queensland child and adolescent psychiatrist James Scott. "Kids who have no peer connections, who are maybe too ashamed to tell their parents, these kids internalise it. They start to take it in and believe what is being said." And if what is being said is *No one thinks you're worth anything, the world would be better off without you?* "That's where it starts to get dangerous," he says.

Earlier this year, researchers at the Murdoch Children's Research Institute reviewed admissions to the mental health unit at Melbourne's Royal Children's Hospital over a 12-month period and found that 212 of the 271 adolescents were admitted because of suicidal behaviour. Three in five had been bullied. Of course, not every bullying victim takes their own life and no empirical evidence of causation exists, although a hastily convened Senate inquiry earlier this year determined "there may be some degree of link". Suicide is complicated. But Lifeline figures show it is now the leading cause of death of children aged between five and 17, and child psychologists say the cruel taunts of peers are often the trigger for kids made vulnerable by mental health issues.

Government statistics show cyberbullying, which often occurs in tandem with real-world bullying, is on the rise. The eSafety Commissioner last year found that about one in five Australians aged eight to 17 had been cyberbullied, and in 2016-17 serious complaints jumped 63 per cent on the previous year, with schoolchildren aged between 12 and 16 the primary targets.

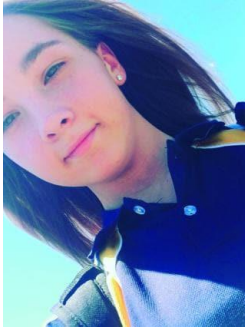


**During the course of researching this article,** I've waded through a toxic soup of online threats and taunts that makes me long for the days of "Carrot Top" and "Four-Eyes", before the age of anxiety ratcheted everything up to 11. Before Brisbane's Tyrone Unsworth, 13, was driven to end his life after two years of torment from homophobic schoolyard bullies. Before Jessica Cleland, a 19-year-old from rural Victoria, went for a run and didn't come back after being bombarded with nasty Facebook messages. Before Adelaide surf lifesaver Libby Bell, 13, took her life following a sustained campaign of online and real-world bullying, which allegedly included an incident in which footage of her having a drink poured over her head at a fast food restaurant was posted online. Before we lost Amanda Grennan, 14, Allem Halkic, 17, Kodi Pearson, 14. Before curly-haired, animal-loving Jessica Tolhurst, 14, of

Wollongong, missed Christmas. Just last month, the parents of Angelina Joyce, a 13-year-old high-schooler with autism spectrum disorder, pulled her out of a Sunshine Coast school after she talked of suicide over bullying taunts that included a threat to slash her throat and an anonymous Instagram message: *Go kill yourself u bitch.*

Jessica Cleland. Picture: Jay Town

Bullying expert McLean says the reported cases are the tip of the iceberg. "I can tell you that for every Dolly that makes the front page, there are 20 suicides that don't," she says. "I went to a Victorian school last week where they'd had one Year 10 suicide and four attempts in the last two weeks. That doesn't make the news."



When Emily Stick made the news, the photo they used was heart-breaking: a teenager with long brown hair, teetering on the brink of womanhood but still young enough to want to take selfies through Snapchat's puppy-face filter. Just 13 years old, she had been struggling to get a toehold on life: difficulties with her schoolwork, a history of self-harm, home life a tangle. Her unhappiness put a target on her back. A group of bullies at her Gold Coast high school allegedly pursued her through Year 7 and into Year 8, waging a relentless campaign of verbal, physical and online abuse through Snapchat and Instagram. "They kept telling her to cut herself and were saying nasty things like, 'Just go kill yourself'," says Emily's mother, Sharlene Scott. "One boy wrote that he was going to cave her teeth in."

### Emily Stick

In February this year, Emily switched schools and enjoyed two weeks there before the technology that underpinned her life betrayed her. "She took a photo in her new school uniform and posted it: that's how the bullies found her," Scott says. "They found her at her new school on the Monday; the next day she was gone." It wasn't until the following morning that Scott realised she had missed her daughter's final cry for help. "There was a message on my phone saying 'I want to kill myself' – no 'hello', no nothing – but it didn't come through until the next day," she says. "The next day I saw it but it was too late."

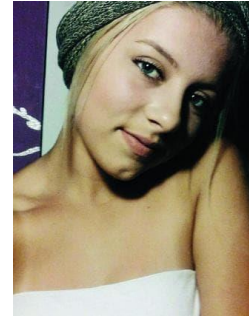
Police are investigating and Scott wants the bullies punished. "They obviously feel no remorse," she says. "I've been told that since Emily's passed away, the kids have written some really nasty stuff on the walls of the school. The cleaner who had to clean it up was devastated by what he saw."

Deb Langshaw is another mum whose debilitating grief is now streaked with anger. Her daughter Amanda Grennan was 14 when she took her life last August after being physically bullied at school in Cobram, Victoria, and subjected to vicious online attacks. "I was hoping the bullies would see what they've done to us as a family and that would be the lesson," Langshaw says through the tears that accompany each day. But, she says, the teen girls have moved on to bullying others. "If you don't wear a seatbelt or you drink-drive there's a consequence. But there are kids still bullying and there are absolutely no consequences."

Langshaw wants schools to get tougher on bullies so victims can be confident they will be taken seriously. "I'm more than happy for my story to be told at school assemblies all over Australia," she says. "Let them see my pain. Let them see that all I have is a little wooden box on a coffee table with a candle; that's what I've got left of my little girl."

Cyberbullies can be prosecuted under various state and territory stalking and harassment laws, or using a federal criminal law that prohibits the misuse of telecommunications and carries a maximum penalty of three years' jail. In March, a Senate inquiry found that, although the existing laws were sufficient, they were not being adequately enforced and recommended police "appropriately investigate and prosecute serious cyberbullying complaints". The Law Council of Australia and children's charity the Alannah & Madeline Foundation were among those expressing fears that criminalising children as young as 10 would cause more harm than good, particularly as recent research shows that, of the 900,000 bullying incidents every year in Australia, a third involve kids who are both victim and perpetrator.

When you're the parent of a child who has been bullied to death, however, these statistics mean little. In Adelaide, Crystal and Ryan Bell have called for even tougher laws to combat bullying after losing their girl Libby. "It's beyond comprehension that you thought this could be a solution to end your pain," Crystal wrote in a Facebook tribute after the 13-year-old took her life in August last year following what her family allege was a campaign of abuse from her high-school peers. "I would have backed you the whole way and given my life for you to be at peace with yours. Those that bully and so-called friends that didn't speak up... they failed you gorgeous girl and we won't stop fighting for you until they are held accountable."



Libby Bell, 13. Picture: Facebook

After meeting with the Bells, South Australian MP Dennis Hood, who has an 11-year-old daughter, was moved to act. He has proposed new bullying-specific legislation, dubbed Libby's Law, which would include penalties of up to 10 years' jail. "It's all very well to say there are adequate safeguards in place but the example of Libby and others suggest more can be done," he says. Hood hopes the tough new state law, modelled on Brodie's Law, the anti-bullying legislation Victoria introduced in 2011, would serve as a deterrent. "Ultimately, these matters are for parents and schools and any legal intervention should be an absolute last resort," he says. "But to change the law to reflect the seriousness of these matters sends an unambiguous signal that this is not how our society is going to function."

**Karen\* has a full-time job but her primary focus** at the moment is ensuring her 17-year-old daughter makes it to the end of high school. Yasmine\* was in Year 6 when classmates first urged her to jump off a bridge and she's since struggled with low self-esteem, depression and an eating disorder. She is quiet and empathetic; bespectacled, gentle and bookish. Last year, she spent two weeks in a mental health unit before returning to finish Year 12 at her blue-chip private girls' school, where her fragility seemed to spur the bullies on. "She's always been targeted and she takes it to heart," Karen says. "Unfortunately, she doesn't have the ability to push it aside, like her sister does. It's just her; we can't change her."

The bullying recently reached its nadir when Yasmine discovered an entire class had sided with her chief tormentor to laugh at an online slur behind her back. "I had to go and pick her up from school and she was sitting on the footpath in the rain crying," Karen says. "We got home and she was so distraught she was vomiting. Kids are entitled to not like things or even people – but this is harassment."

Karen and I meet at an inner-city coffee shop. Her mobile phone dings regularly: it's her husband sending through score updates from a younger daughter's sporting match. Cool and composed, she carefully sips her tea, but then talk turns to the school's response to Yasmine's bullying. "For the life of me I can't understand why schools can't have a backbone!" she says, a suddenly fierce lioness whose cub has been threatened. "There is all this airy-fairy wording; they need to be careful with what they say. I get all these emails from the school saying 'Yasmine is such a brave girl' but I want them to take action against the bullies." The school has done nothing more, she says, than arrange to keep her daughter off the playground during lunch. "You don't need to protect the victim if you're taking the right action against the perpetrators," she says. "I've been up to the school and made it very clear: I send my child to school to learn. I need you to get rid of this crap so she can learn."

Every public and private school in Australia has a legal responsibility to provide students with a safe place to learn and it's not enough simply to have an anti-bullying policy in place. In a landmark 2011 ruling, Jazmine Oyston was awarded more than \$100,000 after successfully suing St Patrick's College at Campbelltown, in Sydney's south-west, for negligence. Oyston suffered mental health problems and was suicidal following years of bullying that included physical attacks and name-calling: *Slut*.

*Bitch. Dog.* She reported these incidents in writing to a teacher who, contrary to school policy at the time, took no further action.

Another school alleged to have breached its duty of care is Somerville Secondary College in Victoria, where teenager Nathan Whitmore claims he was mercilessly bullied between 2013 and 2015, leading to depression and a suicide attempt. Late last year, Whitmore filed a writ in the Supreme Court claiming the school did nothing when he complained and accusing the Department of Education and Training of negligence.

Meanwhile, the parents of Breannah Piva, who killed herself in May 2015, are preparing to sue Queensland's Department of Education and Training over the bullying at a North Queensland high school. Joanne and Michael Piva allege the school failed to take adequate steps to discipline those involved or to stop the bullying, which included Breannah, 16, being pushed in front of a car, chased home from school and told she was "too fat" to model. "There are certainly some warnings there for all organisations," says Shine Lawyers' Lisa Flynn. "It is one thing to have a policy about bullying and cyberbullying but it must be promoted and needs to be acted upon appropriately. If it isn't there is risk of legal action."

Michael Carr-Gregg is routinely called upon to examine school bullying policies, and too often finds them woefully inadequate. The National Safe Schools Framework has clear guidelines about what they should contain, he says, including a recommendation they be developed in collaboration with parents and students. "We also need a uniform, mandatory cyber-safety education policy in schools – that seems to be stating the bleeding obvious," he says. Parents aren't let off the hook either. "I think basic cyber-safety education is now as important as teaching kids to cross the road," Carr-Gregg says. "It is fundamental parenting and I'm not sure it's happening. Parents are happy to outsource responsibility to the schools on this but it's not the schools giving them the mobile phones."

Meanwhile, the debate about allowing smartphones at school continues. In France, a nationwide ban comes into force in September, and Britain and Ireland may follow suit. In Australia, the decision is left to individual school principals, although NSW Education Minister Rob Stokes, for one, is seeking a more unified policy, recently appointing Carr-Gregg to head a review into the pros and cons of smartphone use in schools.

Julie Inman Grant, Australia's eSafety Commissioner, agrees that parents are the frontline defence against cyberbullying. In the wake of Dolly Everett's suicide, she penned a heartfelt plea to parents to check in regularly with their children, teach them their rights and responsibilities when using technology, and help to build and encourage resilience. "There is no substitute for being actively involved in their online lives, just as we are in their offline, everyday lives," she wrote.



Rachel Downie.

**Rachel Downie spent 23 years as a teacher** and is comfortable with the bright fervour and erratic energy that animates young people in a group. On this brisk late-autumn morning she's at Erskine Park High School in western Sydney where, over the course of the day, she'll stand before 1000 students in her sneakers and jeans and teach them how they can save lives. "I am here today because I care about you," she begins, looking out at a sea of navy and white uniforms and young, upturned faces. "We are struggling as grown-ups to help you because we don't get to see this sort of stuff. But we know that sometimes some of you do."

In fact, experts estimate that peers are present as onlookers in 85 per cent of bullying incidents. To Downie, these bystanders represent an opportunity, one that first occurred to her when she was teaching at a Queensland high school. After a Year 9 student took his life, staff discovered a number of students knew he was being bullied but were too afraid to say anything. Downie was devastated: if only the teachers had known.

In 2014, she founded Stymie, a website where students can anonymously notify their school of bullying, illegal activity, self-harming or suicidal tendencies. She has since introduced the online reporting tool to schools around the country and reports an increased flurry of interest in the wake of Dolly's high-profile death. "We actually give kids a lot of education on bullies but what we don't leave them with is tools," she says. "Stymie empowers the students as change agents."

The students assembled in the gym at Erskine Park High are surprisingly attentive. The sticks-and-stones brigade would have us believe that words have no power. But here are some that do: Compassion. Empathy. Kindness. "The 'go kill yourself' won't stop unless the kids are the ones that jump in the middle and say, 'Hey, we don't talk like that here'," Downie says during lunch break, the playground a churn of rough-and-tumble around her. "That has nothing to do with the technology. It's about being a good person."

*\* Names have been changed.*

*Lifeline 13 11 14; Suicide Call Back Service 1300 659 467; Kids Helpline 1800 55 1800.*

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- **MEGAN LEHMANN**



Feature Writer  
Sydney  
@meganlehmann