

# Ryan's Story - A Father's Hard-Earned Lessons About Bullying, Cyberbullying and Suicide.

## Introduction

- Speaker: John Halligan
- Context: Presentation aimed toward parents/guardians
- Purpose: To share personal experiences related to bullying and suicide, provide insights into prevention, and offer actionable advice for parents and educators.

## Main Topics Discussed

### 1. Personal Story and Advocacy

- Ryan Halligan:
  - Born: December 18, 1989, in Poughkeepsie, New York.
  - Challenges: Delayed speech and motor skills; enrolled in special education.
  - Move to Vermont: Relocated to Essex Junction in 1993 due to job opportunities; Ryan adapted well initially.
  - Bullying:
    - Start: Fifth grade.
    - Nature: Focused on academic struggles and athletic awkwardness.
    - Impact: Emotional distress leading to suicidal thoughts.

### 2. Impact of Bullying on Ryan

- Seventh Grade Incident:

- Ryan confronted persistent bullying, leading to increased distress.
- Attempted self-defense through physical confrontation, which initially stopped bullying.
- Mistakenly developed a friendship with the bully, and shared a personal story with him thinking it was humorous.
- Cyberbullying:
  - Based on the story, the bully spread a rumor that Ryan was gay online and at school.
  - Ryan's attempt to form a relationship online during his last summer with a girl that was met with mockery.
  - Final tragic statement leading to Ryan's suicide on October 7, 2003.

### 3. Lessons Learned

- Underestimation of Emotional Bullying:
  - Emotional and cyberbullying can be as harmful as physical bullying.
- Role of Technology:
  - Lack of monitoring and understanding of online interactions contributed to Ryan's isolation.
- Parental Awareness:
  - Importance of open communication and recognizing warning signs such as self-harm behaviors.

### 4. Definitions and Concepts

- Bullying:
  - Definition: Repeated acts intended to intimidate, humiliate, or ridicule, exploiting an imbalance of power.
  - Types:
    - Physical
    - Emotional
    - Relational (Exclusion)
- Cyberbullying:

- Definition: Bullying through the use of technology, allowing individuals to hide behind screens to harm others.

## 5. Statistics and Trends

- Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance:
  - Suicidal Thoughts:
    - 1997: Over 20% of high school students considered suicide.
    - 2009: Lowest Point
    - Post-2009: Rates began increasing again.
- Impact of Technology:
  - The introduction of smartphones and social media around 2007 contributed to rising rates of cyberbullying and suicidal thoughts as it became popular with teens in 2009. Back to above 20%.

## 6. Mr. Halligan's Legislative Achievements

- Vermont Bullying Prevention Laws:
  - 2004: Vermont passed its bullying prevention law.
  - 2006: Law requiring suicide prevention education in public schools.
- National Progress:
  - All 50 states now have some form of bullying prevention law.
  - Components of Laws:
    - Clear definition of bullying.
    - Response protocols for incidents.
    - Implementation of research-based prevention programs.

## 7. Suggestions for Parents and Educators

- Technology Management:

- Stop giving smartphones to children under the age of 13. Simple wearable devices will allow communication and GPS tracking. They don't need a smartphone!
- No Secret Passwords/Passcodes: Parents must have access to children's devices to monitor usage.
- Parental Controls: Utilize features like Apple's Screen Time or similar controls on other devices.
- App Store Restrictions: Require parental approval for app downloads to prevent access to harmful applications.
- Setting Boundaries:
  - Time Limits: Restrict the amount of time spent on social media and other apps.
  - Bedtime Settings: Ensure devices are turned off during sleep hours to prevent sleep deprivation.
- Open Communication:
  - Backup Plans: Encourage children to have trusted adults besides parents to talk to in crises.
  - Unconditional Support: Make it clear that children are loved unconditionally and can seek help without fear of judgment.
- Promote Resilience and Coping Strategies:
  - Teach children how to handle emotional distress and build resilience.
- Encourage Upstander Behavior:
  - Empower children to stand up against bullying rather than being passive bystanders.

## 8. Action Items

- For Parents:
  - Establish smartphone use agreements.
  - Set up parental controls and monitor device usage.
  - Engage in regular conversations about their children's social experiences.
- For Educators:

- Implement and adhere to bullying prevention protocols.
- Promote a school culture that discourages bullying and supports victims.
- For Students:
  - Foster compassion and forgiveness.
  - Act as upstanders to intervene in bullying situations.

## 9. Follow-Up Points

- Resources Available:
  - Ryan's website with a parent resource page.
  - Books authored by John Halligan for both parents and students.
- Future Meetings:
  - Encouragement to continue dialogues within families and schools.

## Additional Information

### Books by John Halligan

- For Parents: Co-authored with a middle school counselor, providing strategies and insights.
- For Students: Adapted from his presentations to help students understand and apply the lessons learned.

## Final Words

- Emphasis on the importance of an apology, forgiveness, suicide prevention, active intervention, and maintaining open lines of communication.
- Encouragement to use available resources and support networks to create a safer, more inclusive environment for all students.

## Follow-Up

- Support Networks:
  - Engage with school counselors, mental health professionals, and support groups.
- Continuous Education:
  - Parents and educators should stay informed about the latest trends in bullying and cyberbullying.
- Legislative Advocacy:
  - Support ongoing and new legislation aimed at reducing bullying and enhancing mental health support in schools.

## Conclusion

John Halligan's presentation underscores the profound impact of bullying and cyberbullying on young individuals. By sharing his personal tragedy, he highlights the critical need for proactive measures, open communication, and strong support systems to prevent similar losses. His advocacy for legislative action, parental involvement, and educational strategies offers a comprehensive approach to tackling these pervasive issues.