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By Janet Kornblum, USA TODAY

Ricky Alatorre doesn't know which classmate surreptitiously hoisted a cellphone camera and snapped his picture or exactly when it happened.

All Ricky, 16, knows is the fuzzy yet distinguishable portrait of him in English class showed up on MySpace, on a page that claimed to be his. And the fake profile, titled "The Rictionary," not only identified his school but also said Ricky loved dictionaries — a swipe at his school smarts — and was gay (he's not), one of the most common schoolyard taunts.

Tall, big and bookish, Ricky, who lives on a farm in Lake County, Ind., had been picked on since he was in kindergarten.

Insults flung in the heat of anger always inflict some pain. But words — and pictures — posted on the Internet, where they can be seen by anyone, have taken bullying to a whole new level.

"I was completely devastated," Ricky says.

As younger and more kids get their hands on cellphone and digital cameras and nearly ubiquitous high-speed Internet connections, cyberbullying is ramping up and taking new forms.

No longer are threats, taunts and insults relegated to the written word in chat rooms and instant messages. Now teens, children and sometimes adults are adding pictures and videos to their bullying arsenal and posting them on sites such as MySpace, Facebook and YouTube, where anyone can see them.

And bullying has led to real consequences — from fights to teen suicides, or what some label "bullycides." States are beginning to take action with tough new laws targeting those who use electronic means to bully.

#### Kids don't always report it

Online harassment of American young people ages 10 to 17 increased 50% (from 6% to 9%) from 2000 to 2005, according to the latest research available, a watershed report by the University of New Hampshire's Crimes Against Children Research Center. And the number of young people who said they had "made rude or nasty comments to someone on the Internet" increased from 14% to 28% in the same period.

But there hasn't been nearly enough research on the subject, says Corinne David-Ferdon, a health scientist at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Compounding the frustration is that children often fail to report bullying. They fear that tormentors will become angrier and bully them more or worry that if they report being bullied over the Internet or on a cellphone, their phone and Internet privileges will be revoked.

"This is an emerging public-health problem" that needs attention, David-Ferdon says. The problem gained visibility with news about high school girls getting in trouble after posting school fights on YouTube.

Five girls from Lakeland, Fla., face charges over an incident March 30 in which they are accused of participating in the beating of a 16-year-old acquaintance in retaliation for her saying nasty things about them on MySpace. They videotaped the beating and planned to post it on MySpace and YouTube, says Chip Thullbery, state attorney spokesman in Polk County.

The sheriff decided to release it to deal with news media interest, the Associated Press reported.

"Girlfight" videos have become so ubiquitous that the search term "girlfight" brings up thousands of videos on YouTube.

"You're bullied twice," says Nancy Willard, author of *Cyber-Safe Kids*, *Cyber-Savvy Teens* and *Cyberbullying and Cyberthreats*. "You're bullied in the real world with a physical attack, and then you're bullied online with humiliation. It's very hurtful. Very, very hurtful."

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### The world sees what is said

In another publicized case, 13-year-old Megan Meier killed herself in 2006 after receiving devastating messages from someone masquerading as a teen boy who had developed an online relationship with her. Authorities prosecuted an adult, Lori Drew, 59, of Dardenne Prairie, Mo., on charges that she was behind the hoax. Drew pleaded not guilty last month in Los Angeles federal court.

"Cyberbullying is getting much worse, and it's affecting a lot of kids," says Bill Bond, a former principal who tours the country speaking to principals about school violence on behalf of the National Association of Secondary School Principals.

"Cyberbullying can be even more destructive" than face-to-face bullying "because you get a sense that the whole world is being exposed to what is being said to you."

That's just how Ricky feels.

"When they put it on the Internet, it's like they took everything and multiplied it by an astronomical number," he says. "It's one thing if it's a mean thing that somebody put in my school paper because that's contained within a small area. Only a certain number of people will see that. But when you put it on the Internet, you are opening it up to everyone in the world."

Ricky called his mother the spring day he discovered the profile and had her pick him up from school. He didn't have many friends to begin with. But soon he found himself more alone than ever.

"I had thought about suicide," he says. "It looked very welcoming at certain times." But he says his family is helping him cope.

His mother, Peggy Alatorre, 44, tells her son he just has to make it through two more years of high school. But she's worried. "Does it hurt him forever? You bet. Ricky has been crushed."

In the past few months, Alatorre has done everything she could think of to remedy the situation. She talked to school officials. She contacted the police, the FBI, local politicians. "I even e-mailed (President) Bush."

MySpace eventually removed the profile — only after several weeks of pestering the site, she says. Other than that, "everybody is passing the buck."

Mike Chelap, assistant vice principal of Lowell High School, where Ricky attends, says he can't discuss personal matters about students, but the school began an anti-bullying program and will implement it in the fall.

### Some are fighting back

Barbara Paris, now principal of Canyon Vista Middle School in Austin, became an activist against cyberbullying after a girl at another school where she worked had become suicidal after she was the victim of racial and sexual taunts online. "When ... I had a child who was suicidal because of people like me not doing anything about it, I had a paradigm shift right there."

Politicians are starting to take note. Thirty-six states have anti-bullying laws, according to Paris' watchdog group, Bully Police. And several are specifically starting to address cyberbullying. On June 30, Missouri Gov. Matt Blunt signed an anti-Internet harassment law in the wake of Megan Meier's death.

Also last month, Florida Gov. Charlie Crist signed the Jeffrey Johnston Stand Up for All Students Act. The tough anti-cyberbullying law came after the 2005 suicide of 15-year-old Jeffrey, who his mother says had endured three years of torturous harassment over the Internet.

To those who say bullying is just part of childhood, Jeffrey's mother, Debbie Johnston of Cape Coral, Fla., says that's "like saying rape is part of marriage."

Jodee Blanco, who grew up the victim of bullies, agrees with the sentiment. An author of two books on her own bullying experience, she now is a consultant who travels the country to talk to schools — including Ricky's.

"It's not that bullying is any worse today," she says. "The impulse for cruelty is the same impulse. The only difference is that the tools to achieve that have become more sophisticated."

But all the attention over cyberbullying is "a double-edged sword. In one respect, America is finally waking up. And yes, it's due in large part to the Internet. The flipside of that is it's also motivating a lot of kids to be meaner. Because in their minds, it is such a cool tool to show off how mean they can be."

**READERS: What kind of advice would you give kids who are getting 'cyberbullied'? What did adversity of this kind teach you when you were younger? Share with us in the comments.**

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