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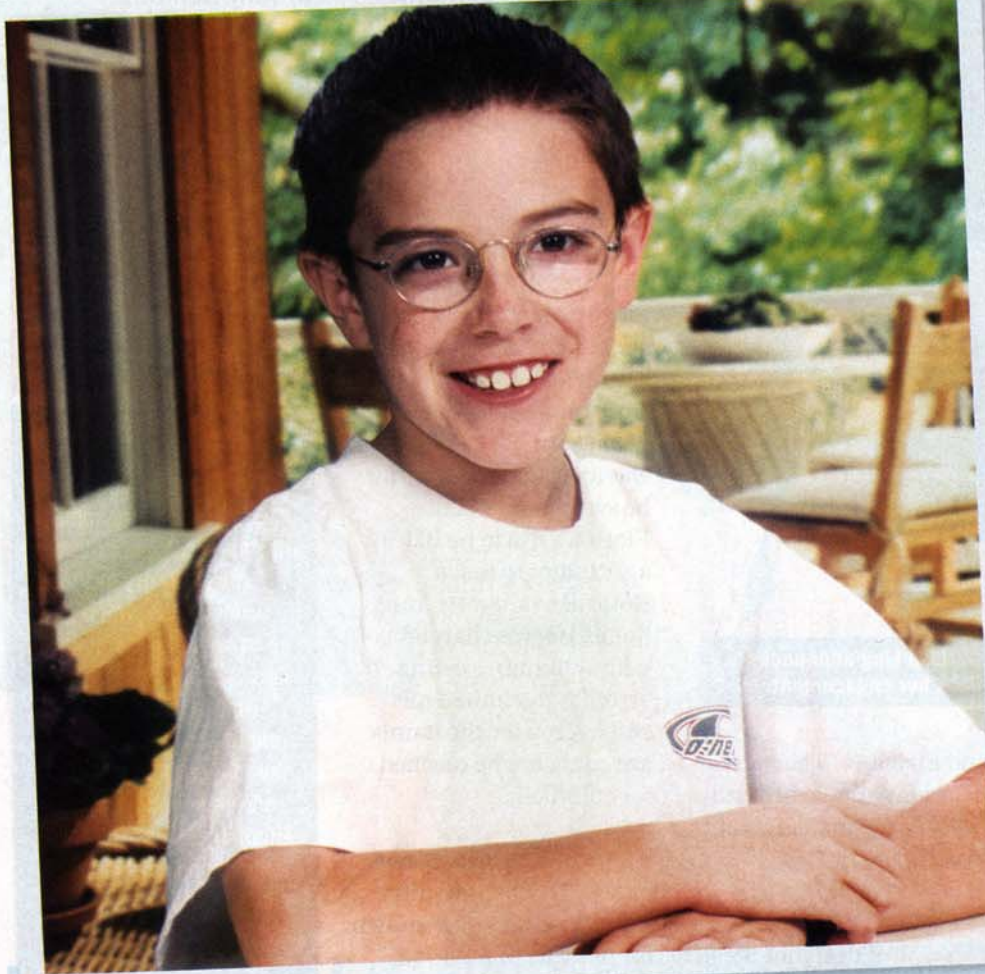


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THE WEB: The Bully

With a new arsenal of Web sites and chat rooms, mean kids can torment their victims 24/7 online —often with devastating results



ALEX Killed Himself After Being Bullied

His mother says he was teased online by classmates before he committed suicide. Alex (above, in an '04 school photo) left a handwritten note: "I'm tired of this. Tell my friends what I have done." Says the guidance counselor at his school: "Kids don't realize the power of the written word."

At 13 Alex* hung with a popular crowd, had a quick wit and got good grades. He was small for his age, so his father says he taught the boy "how to punch and hold his own. I thought he was doing okay." But for Alex the

threat wasn't physical. Unknown to his parents, a group of girls at his school in Chesapeake, Va., had been taunting him for about a month through instant messages, teasing him about his size and challenging him to perform physical activities he couldn't

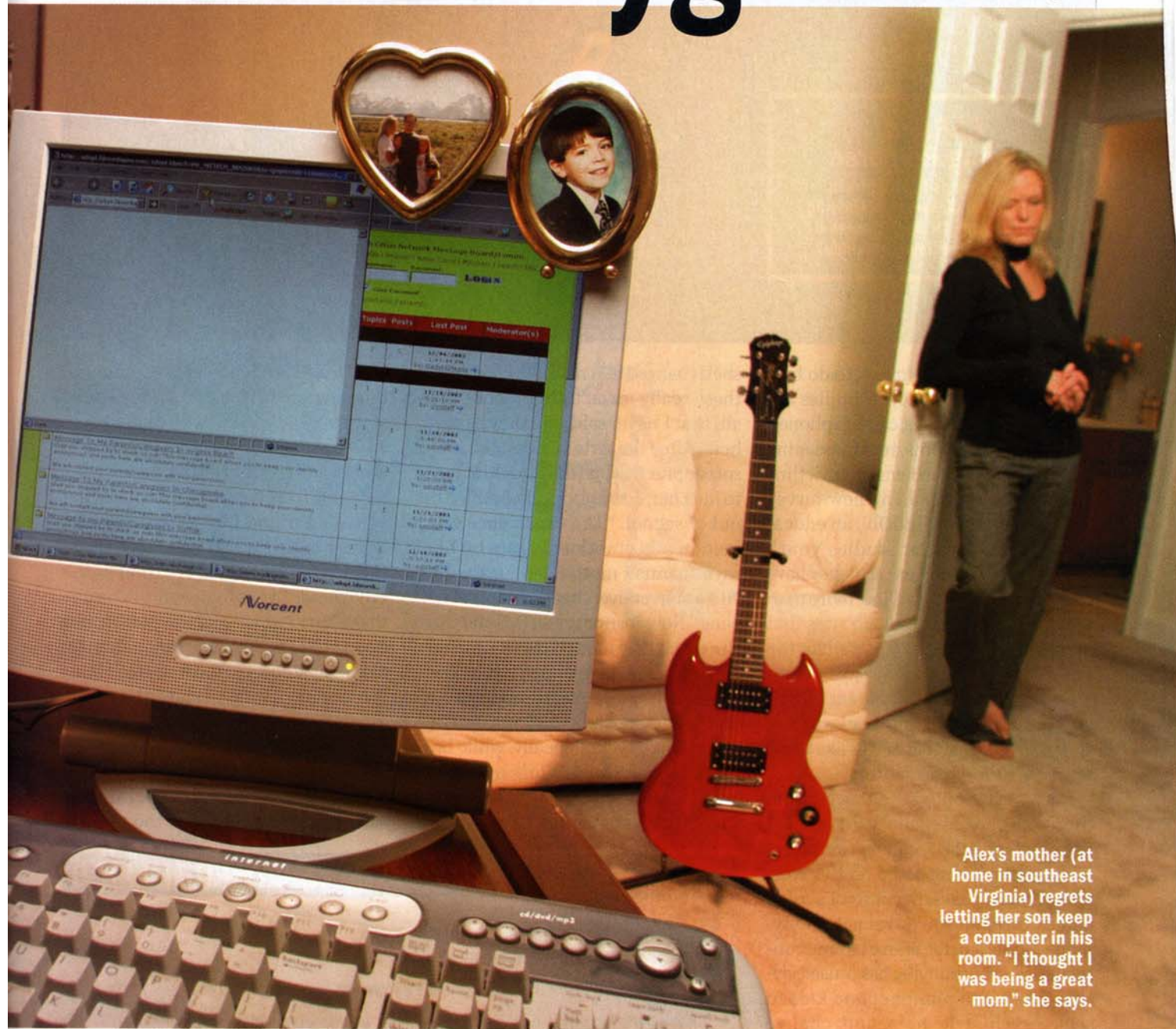
accomplish, like running around the school track in a certain time or jumping across a ditch.

Alex spent many hours chatting online in his bedroom. Other kids knew he was thinking about taking his own life, his mother says. "They were trying



* Some names in this story have been changed to protect the privacy of the teens or their families. All full names used are real.

's New Playground



Alex's mother (at home in southeast Virginia) regrets letting her son keep a computer in his room. "I thought I was being a great mom," she says.

to dare him to commit suicide, thinking it was a big joke."

He was deadly serious. One afternoon last June, while he was home alone, Alex pulled his grandfather's antique shotgun out from under a bed, loaded it with shells and killed himself.

He had deleted every file from his computer but left a final message on it that read, "The only way to get the respect you deserve is to die." Only later did his parents learn about the online teasing, when his mother overheard some girls talking about it. "If someone is picking

on you in the school yard, you can go home," says his mother, who is haunted by thoughts that she should have been more vigilant monitoring Alex's Web use. "When it's on the computer at home, you have nowhere to go."

This is the new face of bullying.

Trouble

GERALD Feeling Remorse

He got friends to join him in taunting two classmates who had picked on him. "It wasn't worth it," says Gerald (at home in Tampa).

Instead of fists and threats to do battle after school, teen cyberbullies are using instant messages, camera phones, Web sites, chat rooms, text messaging and Web blogs to torment their victims long after the last bell. In a new survey of 5,500 teens by MindOh!, an educational company that studies youth trends, nearly 80 percent said they have read or spread gossip online; more than half said they had seen Web sites that made fun of their peers. "It's like the bully has gone mobile," says Glenn Stutzky, a clinical instructor at Michigan State University who studies school violence. "One kid told me it's like being tethered to your tormentor."

How is cyberbullying different from the old-fashioned school yard variety? It can happen 24/7, can be excruciatingly public if it's posted on the Web, and in many cases, because of screen names, tormentors can remain anonymous. While suicide is an extreme consequence, cyberbullying has caused victims' grades to plummet and kids to seek psychiatric help and change schools. Joanna*, from Adams, N.Y., left her private school for a public school last year after online threats became a playground reality. In February "I was IMing my best friend, and we had an argument over a guy," she says. "The next day she printed the conversation and handed it to a group of girls, but

she'd changed it. It read like I had said all these really mean things [about them all] that I never said, and they believed her." After the girls surrounded her at soccer practice one day and threatened to hurt her, Joanna's mother pulled her out of school. "The experience was a mental and emotional drain on her," says Joanna's mother. As for the IMs, "it's a subversive, sneakier kind of bullying." Now Joanna rarely IMs and when she does, "My mom sits here to make sure nothing's happening," she says.

MindOh! researchers found that boys and girls cyberbully differently: Girls will attack psychologically, while boys threaten physically. "Girls will isolate one girl in their clique," says Donna Clark-Love, coordinator for the Safe

and Drug-Free Schools and Communities program in Houston. "They'll send a rumor: 'Did you know so-and-so slept with so-and-so?' Pretty soon, it gets everywhere." Charlotte*, an athletic, outgoing teen, became the target of her so-called friend Liz* three years ago while living in Nacogdoches, Texas. After the pair argued over Charlotte's boyfriend, Liz spread rumors online that Charlotte, now 16, was performing oral sex. Soon, Charlotte says, a stranger from a neighboring town started IMing her, saying she was "a slut." Her mother recalls comforting her during the night when she couldn't sleep for crying. The bullying stopped after Charlotte's mother took printouts of the IM transcripts to the school and the campus

WHAT TO DO IF YOUR CHILD IS CYBERBULLIED

Experts offer these pointers for parents:

- Always print out and save cyberbullying messages
- Teach children never to post anything they wouldn't want others to read
- If the bully attends your child's school, meet with school officials to help resolve the conflict
- Have kids change their screen name and give it only to people they trust
- If threats are made, call the police and the Internet service provider
- For tips on preventing your child from being bullied, checking their online activity, educating them about Internet safety and more, go to: i-safe.org, mindoh.com or cyberbully.org



Photograph by DONNA TEREK

ONE GIRL'S STORY

A group of girls bullied Heather Simpson so badly she switched schools

On Feb. 20 Heather Simpson, 14, was chatting online with her sister when she says an instant message popped up from a screen name she recognized: "You're a slut I hate you you stupid bitch." The note was no surprise. According to Heather and her family, and acknowledged by school staff, she has been cyberbullied by a cluster of girls at her former middle school in rural Michigan since fifth grade. The harassment has at times caused Heather to wake up in the middle of the night too anxious to sleep. Five days after the Feb. 20 encounter she finally switched schools. "Some of the girls we're dealing with don't have a lot," says a counselor at her old school, who couldn't stop all the cyberbullying because it happened off campus.

The girls have spread rumors about Heather performing oral sex. One changed her own screen name to "I HATE HEATHER SIMPSON SHE IS A FAT WHORE!!!" "I'm so used to it," Heather says. But because of the bullying, she says, "I barely get online. Usually my friends and I find something better to do."



Heather (top) says cyberbullies have sent messages like this (above) and have told her to kill herself. "Why would anybody say that to me?" she says.

police officer mediated. "They were hurting my daughter's reputation, spreading rumors about what she was doing with guys," says Charlotte's mother. "Girls today are a lot meaner."

It's not just girls. Last spring police charged six eighth graders (four boys, two girls) in Warren, N.J., with harassment and four of them with making terrorist threats after they derided classmates about their weight and threatened students online, telling one, "You'll be needing an intraocular lens when I stab a skewer through your head." They were sentenced to community service and probation. When caught, the kids "said, 'I didn't know any of this was going to happen,'" says Warren Township school superintendent James Crisfield. "They believe IM is private and fleeting. It's not."

That's a common problem. Gerald Joseph, 14, who is African-American, was a good student who had never been in serious trouble. But after a girl at his private Catholic school in Tampa called him a "n-----," and another boy called him "Big Head," Gerald retaliated, writing on a Web site popular with kids at his school that the girl was sexually promiscuous and the boy was gay. "I probably wouldn't have said those things in person," admits Gerald, who stands about 5'5" and has a slight build, "but it was a lot easier to say them [online]." The harassment ended last October after school officials learned about the site. "I lost friends and lost self-respect

because of it," says a contrite Gerald. His mother, Renee Joseph, 52, took away his computer privileges for a month. "I had to show him that we have no tolerance for this type of thing," she says.

All parents should be as conscientious, says Lauren Krone, a senior at a private school in Wellesley, Mass. She cofounded an Internet safety club at her school this year, partly to combat online bullying. "Kids are getting trashed online, and parents don't even know it," she says. While students may gripe about limits, they're actually grateful parents are paying attention. "It's easy to be frightened [when bullied]," Lauren says. "It's a lot worse if you can't go to your parents."

And it's even worse for some parents in the long run. In the case of Alex, the boy who committed suicide, "no one knew what was going on," says a guidance counselor at his school. "Not his Sunday school teachers, not his school teachers, not his parents. If this could happen to him, it could happen to anyone."

By Bob Meadows. Jenni Bergal in Washington, D.C., Steve Helling in Tampa, Jennifer Odell in Pittsburgh, Ellen Piligian in Birmingham, Mich., Caroline Howard and Molly Lopez in New York City, Darla Atlas in Fort Worth and Len Hochberg in Los Angeles

CHARLOTTE
Threatening IMs
 For three months two sisters threatened her and spread rumors about her online. "I just wanted them to go away," says Charlotte (in her bedroom in Pittsburgh).



Photograph by JIM JUDKIS