SETTING THE STAGE

It is a story that has become all too familiar.

A young woman is a victim of cyberbullying. Targeted, taunted, mocked and humiliated online. And when she goes to school, people whisper about her, refuse to be friends with her, and move away from her when she is eating in the cafeteria.

Note to Teachers and Students
This News in Review story deals with the issues of bullying and suicide. Some of the material is very disturbing, and it is important to make sure that a safe climate exists in the classroom before these issues are explored.

She tried to make a new start a couple of times — changing schools in an attempt to leave her past behind and begin again. But in the world of online bullying, it doesn’t matter where you live because information travels everywhere. Students from the previous school tell students at the new school horrible things about her, and the bullying continued.

She was relentlessly bullied for three years. She became depressed and suffered from anxiety and panic attacks. On one occasion she tried to kill herself by drinking bleach.

Her parents were loving and supportive, and they did everything they could to help her. They put her in counselling, moved houses to get her away from local kids who were teasing her, helped her to switch schools, and at one point even moved cities to help her get free of the bullying. But all these efforts failed to stop the tide of the abuse.

Eventually, the parents contacted the police for help in identifying her cyber attackers, but this action came too late. The young woman — Amanda Todd — had given up all hope of anything improving, and she took her own life.

She was 15.

A National Debate is Sparked
Amanda Todd’s suicide on October 10, 2012 set off a national debate. Not only because it was another tragic case of a life cut short as a result of cruel and vicious bullying, but also because before her suicide Todd had posted a nine-minute YouTube video in which she used a series of flash cards to tell her experience of being bullied. After her suicide the video post went viral, receiving over 1.5 million views by October 13, 2012.

The video was heartbreaking, and served as a visual suicide note. The video itself generated discussion and debate, as did the posts that appeared on YouTube. Some people posted comments mocking Todd for her feelings, and calling her ugly and stupid. Some people even made fun of her for killing herself. Some people
also left horrible comments on her Facebook page following her death.

But on the other hand, an avalanche of support for Amanda and her family followed her death. More than a million people have “like” Todd’s memorial page on Facebook, and tributes have been held for her across the country. The RCMP is investigating her death and trying to locate the key people who bullied Todd. And on October 15, 2012 a motion was introduced in the House of Commons to put a nationwide anti-bullying strategy in place.

Amanda Todd’s family does not want her short life and death to have been for nothing. They want Amanda’s YouTube video to be debated in schools and at dinner tables, and they want young people to stop acting in cruel and hurtful ways. They believe that the anonymity of the internet allows people to engage in cruel behaviour that they would never conduct if they had to do it to another person’s face.

Although the debate over how to curb cyberbullying is far from over, it seems clear that the problem is no longer a secret, and that those who engage in this type of cruel and shameful behaviour are going to find themselves persecuted if they choose to bully others.

**To Consider**

1. Everyone knows how bad it feels to be picked on so why do some kids choose to pick on others?

2. Why didn’t anyone stand up for Amanda Todd? How hard would it have been for someone to be nice to her, include her in a group, or eat with her at lunch?

3. Take a moment and write a message to her parents sharing your feelings about their daughter’s suicide.
VIDEO REVIEW

Pre-viewing Activity

Organize yourself into small groups and respond to the following questions and activities. Be prepared to share your responses with the rest of the class.

Context

The issue of bullying is not new. Most people can share stories of when they, or someone they know, was bullied. But cyberbullying — where young people are targeted through Facebook or other forms of social media — is a relatively new phenomenon. It has only really been an issue for the past ten years.

1. Is cyberbullying different than “regular” bullying? Explain.

2. Does the fact that cyberbullying occurs online and is anonymous make it easier for people to become bullies? Provide at least one reason for your answer.

3. Why don’t kids who are being cyberbullied take themselves completely offline? (For example, delete their Facebook page, get rid of their smart phone, and not check social media sites.)

4. Make a list of things that you think teachers, other adults, and schools could do to reduce bullying.
Viewing Questions

1. Explain what was in Amanda Todd’s video.

2. Why do some experts worry that the video might lead to problems for some kids?

3. Why does Professor Hymel, from the University of British Columbia, say that drawing a line between bullying and suicide is too simplistic?

4. What disturbing thing happened to her Facebook page after her death?

5. Why can’t the police do anything about the hateful messages being posted on Amanda Todd’s memorial page?

6. Where were Amanda Todd’s cyberbullies from?

7. Who is “Anonymous” and what does the group do? What did it do in response to Amanda Todd’s bullying and suicide?
8. What is the problem with vigilante justice online?

9. Why do some people say that it is easier to bully in person than face-to-face?

10. What steps should parents take to help prevent bullying?

11. Record some of the ways that Amanda Todd’s death has been memorialized across the country.

Post-viewing Activities

With a partner, or in a small group, reflect on the video material and discuss the following questions.

1. Do you think Amanda Todd’s online behaviour was outrageous, or fairly “normal”?

2. How do you think the man that she “flashed” was able to locate her (track her down)?

3. Does it concern you that your online actions can be tracked or traced by another person?
4. Why do you think the man decided to harass and victimize Amanda?

5. Why do you think Amanda’s friends and other kids at the schools she attended joined in the bullying?
ACTIVITY: Digging Deeper

The life and death of Amanda Todd gained widespread media attention. This is because people were horrified at the extent of the bullying she experienced, as well as the fact that she committed suicide. But her case also gained widespread attention because she chose to chronicle her pain in a YouTube video. The video — which some people feel was basically an online suicide note — has been watched by millions of people around the world.

Unfortunately, Amanda Todd is not the only young person who has been bullied and has committed suicide. Review the cases below and complete an organizer in your notebook that identifies similarities and differences between each case and Amanda’s case. These notes will help you complete the discussion questions at the end of this feature.

For example:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case</th>
<th>Similarities to Amanda Todd Story</th>
<th>Differences from Amanda Todd Story</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jenna Bowers-Bryanton</td>
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Jenna Bowers-Bryanton
In January 2011, 15-year-old Jenna Bowers-Bryanton, from Belmont, Nova Scotia, committed suicide after being harassed at school and through a social networking site.

Jenna was not your typical victim. She was a talented drama student and singer. People recall that “she lit up a room” when she entered it. But for some reason, she became the target of bullies.

Girls in her class pretended to vomit when she walked into the classroom. And an older student slapped her on her first back to school in Grade 10. Her mom, Pam Murchison, took immediate action and pulled her out of school.

What her mother didn’t anticipate was that the bullying would continue to reach Jenna at home through social media. Jenna received mean messages via SMS and on forums such as Formspring. Jenna’s cyberbullies ridiculed her looks, her personality, and her singing ability. They told her she might as well kill herself.

In January 2011, she took her own life.

Mitchell Wilson
Mitchell Wilson was an 11-year-old boy from Pickering, Ontario, who suffered from muscular dystrophy and had to use a walker to get around. In 2011, two boys beat Mitchell on the street and stole his iPhone. After the beating, Mitchell suffered from depression and anxiety and lived in fear of another attack. One boy was charged with assault after Mitchell identified him as one of Mitchell’s attackers. Mitchell was terrified when he learned he’d have to face his attacker in court and testify against him. Just before the trial began, Mitchell took his own life.

Without Mitchell’s testimony, and the ability of the defense to cross-examine Mitchell about his certain identification of the boy, the boy was found not-guilty.
Your Task

These are difficult stories to think about. They all involve young people who have been tormented by other kids, and who have chosen to kill themselves. But it is important to reflect on these stories so that you can think about your own life, the lives of your friends, and what these tragedies mean for us as a society.

With a partner, discuss each of the following statements or questions. Record your thoughts in your notebooks. Your teacher may choose to discuss these with the entire class.

(1) "Teen girls tend to be bullied in a different way. While the bullying of males typically involves physical aggression, girls tend to be the target of social and verbal harassment, including exclusion or having others talk — or in many cases now, text — about them behind their backs."

— Shannon Freud, Kids Help Phone (Globe and Mail, October 14, 2012)

To what extent do you agree or disagree with this statement?

(2) "Are we teaching our children through our words and deeds that might does not make right, that stealing is wrong, that one of the bravest things a person can do is own up to his or her mistakes? Taking the time to learn from this case, and working together to ensure that such a tragedy never happens again, is the least we can do to express our sorrow to the Wilson family and honour the memory of Mitchell Wilson."

— Justice Mary Teresa Devlin, after acquitting a 13-year-old boy of beating Mitchell Wilson (The Toronto Star, March 5, 2012)

To what extent do you agree or disagree with this statement?

(3) "Cases of suicides linked to cyberbullying have grown over the past decade, but being tormented over the Internet is rarely the main factor involved, a new Canadian study shows. There have been 41 suicides since 2003 involving cyberbullying in the United States, Canada, Australia and the United Kingdom, but most of the victims were also bullied in school and many suffered from mental illness, including depression."

— John C. LeBlanc, a professor at Dalhousie University in Halifax (CBC News, October 20, 2012)

What point is Professor LeBlanc trying to make? Do you agree with his argument? Why or why not?