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Two girls, 12 and 14, arrested in Florida cyberbully suicide

Two girls are charged with felony aggravated stalking in connection with Rebecca Ann Sedwick's suicide

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Thanks to the anonymity on the Internet, cyberbullying can be difficult to fight but there are tools that can help.

By **Arelis Hernández and Jerriann Sullivan,**
Orlando Sentinel

9:01 p.m. EDT, October 15, 2013

WINTER HAVEN — For more than a year, Rebecca Ann Sedwick's bullies tormented the girl by calling her ugly and urging her to drink bleach and die.

The harassment didn't stop — even after Rebecca's parents moved the 12-year-old Lakeland girl to a different middle school. The bullies reached her on her smartphone.

Rebecca brought it all to an end by jumping to her death from a silo at an abandoned concrete factory Sept. 10. But even after her suicide, the cruelty didn't cease, family members and investigators say.

"Yes ik [I know] I bullied Rebecca nd she killed her self but IDGAF [I don't give a (expletive)]."

That message — posted Saturday on Facebook by Rebecca's 14-year-old persecutor — ended with a heart symbol. And resulted in an arrest.

On Monday, Polk County deputies charged the author of the post and another 12-year-old girl with aggravated stalking. The online remark goaded detectives into arresting the two girls earlier than they had anticipated.

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"That post was the tipping point," Polk Sheriff **Grady Judd** said during a Tuesday news conference. "She forced this arrest."

The 14-year-old instigated the bullying after she started dating Rebecca's ex-boyfriend, Judd said. The 12-year-old girl was once Rebecca's friend — but the other girl turned her against Rebecca.

The girls "repeatedly and maliciously" harassed Rebecca while all three attended Crystal Lake Middle School in Lakeland, investigators said.

"Several students corroborated stories of both girls bullying Sedwick on different occasions, through name-calling, intimidation, threats to beat her up, and at least one actual physical fight," a Sheriff's Office report said.

Judd said neither family cooperated with investigators, so the girls were placed under arrest Monday and charged with the third-degree felony. The 12-year-old was released to her parents because she demonstrated remorse to the judge, but she can't go back to school.

The 14-year-old is in the custody of the Department of Juvenile Justice until her next hearing.

After their arrests, Judd said, the girls admitted the abuse. The 12-year-old is on house arrest, and the Orlando Sentinel is not naming them because of their ages.

Under Florida law, a range of options is available to punish juveniles convicted of felony aggravated stalking.

Brian Haas, State Attorney's Office spokesman for the judicial circuit that includes Polk County, would not talk about the case specifically. But he said the charge carries a maximum penalty of juvenile probation or placement in a residential-commitment program for five years or until the 19th birthday — whichever comes first.

Judges have a variety of options for sentencing, including counseling and rehabilitation.

According to investigators, the 14-year-old had several arguments with Rebecca via Facebook, as well as verbal confrontations with her at school.

Witnesses said that the girl sent messages to Rebecca, calling her ugly, telling her to drink bleach and die, and saying Rebecca should kill herself.

Rebecca was jumped in school and later bombarded with such hateful messages via a cellphone application as "You're ugly," "Why are you still alive?" and "Go kill yourself."

In February, the 12-year-old was suspended from school after allegedly attacking Rebecca physically, Judd said.

Rebecca's mother decided to home-school her, and eventually Rebecca transferred to Lawton Chiles Middle Academy, but detectives found evidence that the bullying continued on her cellphone.

The morning Rebecca took her life, she posted a message to a North Carolina boy whom she reportedly met once at the airport: "I'm jumping and I can't take it anymore," the text read.

Judd said bullies must be held accountable, especially in today's instant-message, social-media environment.

"As I child I can remember my mother telling me, 'Sticks and stones can break your bones but words can never hurt you,'" Judd said. "Today, words stick, because they're printed. And words are as hurtful — and sometimes more hurtful — as sticks and stones.

"Ask Rebecca's family."

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10 tips for responding to cyberbullying

Talk about it: Tell someone if you're the target of cyberbullying — your parents, a friend, teacher.



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Ignore them: Cyberbullies who do not get a response from their target may just move on.

Never retaliate: Retaliation does nothing to solve the problem and could get you in trouble.

Tell them to stop: Let them know that what they are doing is hurtful, lame and uncool.

Laugh: Try to laugh it off — maybe they are just trying to be funny and not hurtful.

Save the evidence: Print out Facebook messages, emails; save text messages.

Block access: Most websites and programs allow you to block certain users from messaging or even "seeing" you online.

Report it: If you don't know who the cyberbully is, contact the content provider (Facebook, [Google](#), YouTube) and make a report.

Never pass it along: If you receive hurtful or embarrassing messages or photos of someone else, delete them and don't share them with friends.

Call the police: If you think you are in danger, call authorities.

SOURCE: Cyberbullying Research Center

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