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Fighting the bullies

The recent suicides of five gay teenagers who were harassed were horrific, and highlight the need for stepped-up efforts to protect all children.

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In "Lord of the Flies," William Golding's famous allegory about a group of English schoolchildren stranded on a deserted island, the boys gradually begin to bully, hunt and even kill their weaker peers. In the book, however, it is the boys' isolation from civilization that causes standards of decency to be overwhelmed by primitive group think. The implication is that the students would not have lost their moral bearings if they had been at home in the suburbs, in their dormitories or in school classrooms.

If only that were so. The recent suicides of five gay teenagers who were isolated only metaphorically — by the abuse they suffered — demonstrate the flaw in that theory. Their tragic deaths have cast a light on the abuse and bullying suffered by many young gay students on a regular basis right here in the midst of society; a 2009 report from the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network found that nine out of 10 lesbian, gay, transgender or bisexual students say they are harassed during a given year.

Horrendous as that is, it is important to remember that gays are not the only young people being "bullied to death." The phenomenon is part of a broader problem. Fifteen-year-old Phoebe Prince of South Hadley, Mass., for instance, is one of several straight teens who have recently taken their own lives after being bullied on and off school grounds. Thirteen-year-old Hope Witsell of Florida, for example, hanged herself last year after a topless photo she sent to a boy was electronically "sexted" throughout her school. The suicide last month of Tyler Clementi, an 18-year-old freshman at Rutgers University in New Jersey, falls into two categories — gay-bashing *and* cyber-bullying. Clementi killed himself after two classmates allegedly streamed a video of a sexual encounter he had in his dorm room with another man.

These cases are the most sensational ones, but the reality is that bullying goes on every day. And in many cases, when it is uncovered, school officials fail to deliver the necessary strong statements of outrage, followed by meaningful action. Instead, too often bullying students are allowed to remain on sports teams, go to dances and participate in class.

Good anti-bullying programs have a track record of curbing bad behavior. The best ones engage the entire school community and rely on a system of rewards and punishments (not just prosecutions) to change a culture. Parents too must sign on.

In the end, it is the behavior of the bullies that must be addressed, not the gender, race, weight or sexual orientation of their targets. People from different cultures, backgrounds and religions are not always going to like one another. But bullies must be taught two lessons: that the pain their victims feel can be life-threatening, and that their actions will not be tolerated.