

Talking points

Online bullying: Charging kids with felonies

When a 12-year-old is tormented to death, said Keith Ablow in *FoxNews.com*, it should be considered a serious crime—no matter who does the tormenting. Finally, law enforcement agencies seem to be taking “psychological assault” as seriously as physical assault: Polk County, Fla., officials have brought felony charges against two girls in connection with the September suicide of seventh-grader Rebecca Sedwick. Police say Guadalupe Shaw, 14, and Katelyn Roman, 12, taunted Rebecca online and face-to-face for a year, telling her to “drink bleach and die”—until, one day, after changing her online username to “that dead girl,” Rebecca threw herself off a cement plant in Lakeland, Fla. In a stunning demonstration of heartlessness, Shaw later allegedly posted a taunting confession on Facebook that read, “Yes IK [I know] I bullied REBECCA and she killed herself but IDGAF [I don’t give a f---].” Someone that sick needs enforced psychiatric care, even if she is 14.

Charging middle schoolers with a felony may be viscerally satisfying,” said the *Chicago Tribune* in an editorial, but it’s also a “clear overreaction.” Yes, Shaw’s apparent lack of remorse for allegedly bullying Rebecca to death is horrifying. But anti-



A memorial to Rebecca

stalking laws are usually reserved for physical harassment; the First Amendment “protects even vile and offensive statements meant to wound.” Shaw and Roman should be punished—but not by a felony conviction. It’s hard to feel “compassion” for girls who drove an apparently troubled classmate over the edge, said Emily Bazelon in *Slate.com*. But vicious online

speech is sadly quite common, and singling out two kids for criminal charges isn’t the answer. Instead, why aren’t we holding “the adults around them—their parents!—responsible?”

Good question, said Mark O’Mara in *CNN.com*. If a teen kills someone while recklessly using the family car, the parents can be legally responsible. Why should using a computer or cellphone provided by the parent be any different? In the Internet era, parents should no longer be allowed to plead ignorance; they “need to understand that the technology they give to their children can be used to break the law and inflict harm.” Suicide is the nation’s third-leading cause of teenage deaths, and bullying plays a direct role in that terrible toll. “Before we lose another child,” laws should be passed to hold parents responsible if their kids use online tools as weapons.