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## Alarming Rise in School Bullying Leaves Australian Families in Crisis

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Australia is facing a growing mental health crisis among school-aged children, with bullying, both online and in-person, reaching disturbing new highs. Crisis support services report a sharp increase in distress calls from children as young as 10, many expressing suicidal thoughts linked to relentless abuse. Despite years of government policies, families say schools are still failing to protect vulnerable students.

According to *Kids Helpline*, a national crisis counselling service, bullying-related calls and messages have surged, particularly among children aged 10 to 14. Chief Executive Officer Tracy Adams says the intensity of distress reported is now even greater than during the peak of COVID-19 lockdowns. “We’re seeing not only verbal and physical abuse, but also social exclusion and harassment through digital platforms,” Adams explained.

New figures from the *eSafety Commissioner’s Office*, which oversees online safety, show a staggering 456% increase in cyberbullying complaints involving school-aged children over the past five years. Nearly half of these reports in 2024 involved kids under 13. In extreme cases, the office is now dealing with *deepfakes*, digitally altered explicit images, being shared among students. These cases are referred to the *Australian Federal Police (AFP)*, whose *Centre to Counter Child Exploitation* recorded a 27.7% increase in reports involving online abuse between 2022 and 2024.

The experience of 16-year-old Charlie Ford illustrates the human toll. Bullied since age 10, Charlie endured threats of violence, exclusion, and verbal abuse both at school and on social media. Her mother, Serena, said the situation became so serious that she had to sleep beside her daughter at night. “These kids have no fear, and the schools just kept telling us Charlie needed to be more resilient,” Serena said.

Each time Charlie moved schools, her mother found the responses slow and dismissive. At one point, the family was warned they could face legal consequences for Charlie’s absence from school, even as authorities failed to offer safe alternatives. Charlie eventually found some relief through distance education.

Meanwhile, a major national survey, the *Australian Child Maltreatment Study*, found that bullying remains widespread. More than one in four adults reported being bullied as children, with no significant improvement across generations. Lead researcher Dr. Hannah Thomas from the *University of Queensland* said childhood bullying leads to long-term mental health struggles. “These harms don’t stop at childhood, they follow people into adulthood,” she said.

The federal government has launched an *Anti-Bullying Rapid Review*, aimed at developing national standards for how schools respond to bullying. But families like the Fords say change is too slow and too little.

As cases continue to rise, services urge parents and schools to take the issue seriously and provide stronger protections. “We need to ask ourselves if we, as adults, are setting the right example,” Adams said. For families like Charlie’s, real change can’t come soon enough.