

<https://apnews.com/article/school-deepfake-nude-ai-cyberbullying-0ead324241cf390e1a7f3378853f23cb>

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THIBODAUX, La. (AP) — The teasing was relentless. Nude images of a 13-year-old girl and her friends, generated by artificial intelligence, were circulating on social media and had become the talk of a Louisiana middle school.

The girls begged for help, first from a school guidance counselor and then from a sheriff's deputy assigned to their school. But the images were shared on Snapchat, an app that deletes messages seconds after they're viewed, and the adults couldn't find them. The principal had doubts they even existed.

Among the kids, the pictures were still spreading. When the 13-year-old girl stepped onto the Lafourche Parish school bus at the end of the day, a classmate was showing one of them to a friend.

"That's when I got angry," the eighth grader recalled at her discipline hearing.

Fed up, she attacked a boy on the bus, inviting others to join her. She was kicked out of Sixth Ward Middle School for more than 10 weeks and sent to an alternative school. She said the boy whom she and her friends suspected of creating the images wasn't sent to that alternative school with her. The 13-year-old girl's attorneys allege he avoided school discipline altogether.

When the sheriff's department looked into the case, they took the opposite actions. They charged two of the boys who'd been accused of sharing explicit images — and not the girl.

The Louisiana episode highlights the nightmarish potential of AI deepfakes. They can, and do, upend children's lives — at school, and at home. And while schools are working to address artificial intelligence in classroom instruction, they often have done little to prepare for what the new tech means for cyberbullying and harassment.

Once again, as kids increasingly use new tech to hurt one another, adults are behind the curve, said Sergio Alexander, a research associate at Texas Christian University focused on emerging technology.

"When we ignore the digital harm, the only moment that becomes visible is when the victim finally breaks," Alexander said.

In Lafourche Parish, the school district followed all its protocols for reporting misconduct, Superintendent Jarod Martin said in a statement. He said a “one-sided story” had been presented of the case that fails to illustrate its “totality and complex nature.”

A girl’s nightmare begins with rumors

After hearing rumors about the nude images, the 13-year-old said she marched with two friends — one nearly in tears — to the guidance counselor around 7 a.m. on Aug. 26. The Associated Press isn’t naming her because she is a minor and because AP doesn’t normally name victims of sexual crimes.

She was there for moral support, not initially realizing there were images of her, too, according to testimony at her school disciplinary hearing.

Ultimately, the weeks-long investigation at the school in Thibodaux, about 45 miles (72 kilometers) southwest of New Orleans, uncovered AI-generated nude images of eight female middle school students and two adults, the district and sheriff’s office said in a joint statement.

“Full nudes with her face put on them” is how the girl’s father, Joseph Daniels, described them. Daniels has spoken publicly with multiple news outlets to draw attention to how the case was handled.

Until recently, it took some technical skill to make realistic deepfakes. Technology now makes it easy to pluck a photo off social media, “nudify” it and create a viral nightmare for an unsuspecting classmate.

Most schools are “just kind of burying their heads in the sand, hoping that this isn’t happening,” said Sameer Hinduja, co-director of the Cyberbullying Research Center and professor of criminology at Florida Atlantic University.

Lafourche Parish School District was just starting to develop policies on artificial intelligence. The school-level AI guidance mainly addressed academics, according to documents provided through a records request. The district also hadn’t updated its training on cyberbullying to reflect the threat of AI-generated, sexually explicit images. The curriculum its schools used was from 2018.

A school investigation hits obstacles

Although the girls at Sixth Ward Middle School hadn’t seen the images firsthand, they heard about them from boys at school. Based on those conversations, the girls accused a classmate and two students from other schools of creating and spreading the nudes on Snapchat and possibly TikTok.

The principal, Danielle Coriell, said an investigation came up cold that day as no student took responsibility. The deputy assigned to the school searched social media for the images unsuccessfully, according to a recording of the disciplinary hearing.

“I was led to believe that this was just hearsay and rumors,” the girl’s father said, recounting a conversation he had that morning with the school counselor.

But the girl was miserable, and a police incident report showed more girls were reporting that they were victims, too. The 13-year-old returned to the counselor in the afternoon, asking to call her father. She said she was refused.

Her father says she sent a text message that said, “Dad,” and nothing else. They didn’t talk. With the mocking unrelenting, the girl texted her sister, “It’s not getting handled.”

As the school day wound down, the principal was skeptical. At the disciplinary hearing, the girl’s attorney asked why the sheriff’s deputy didn’t check the phone of the boy the girls were accusing and why he was allowed on the same bus as the girl.

“Kids lie a lot,” responded Coriell, the principal. “They lie about all kinds of things. They blow lots of things out of proportion on a daily basis. In 17 years, they do it all the time. So to my knowledge, at 2 o’clock when I checked again, there were no pictures.”

A fight breaks out on the school bus

When the girl stepped onto the bus 15 minutes later, the boy was showing the AI-generated images to a friend. Fake nude images of her friends were visible on the boy’s phone, the girl said, a claim backed up by a photo taken on the bus. A video from the school bus showed at least a half-dozen students circulating the images, said Martin, the superintendent, at a school board meeting.

“I went the whole day with getting bullied and getting made fun of about my body,” the girl said at her hearing. When she boarded the bus, she said, anger was building up.

After seeing the boy and his phone, she slapped him, said Coriell, the principal. The boy shrugged off the slap, a video shows.

She hit him a second time. Then, the principal said, the girl asked aloud: “Why am I the only one doing this?” Two classmates hit the boy, the principal said, before the 13-year-old climbed over a seat and punched and stomped on him.

Video of the fight was posted on Facebook. “Overwhelming social media sentiment was one of outrage and a demand that the students involved in the fight be held accountable,” the district and sheriff’s office said in their joint statement released in November.

The girl had no past disciplinary problems, but she was assigned to an alternative school as the district moved to expel her for a full semester — 89 school days.

Weeks later, a boy is charged

It was on the day of the girl's disciplinary hearing, three weeks after the fight, that the first of the boys was charged.

The student was charged with 10 counts of unlawful dissemination of images created by artificial intelligence under a new Louisiana state law, part of a wave of such legislation around the country. A second boy was charged in December with identical charges, the sheriff's department said. Neither was identified by authorities because of their ages.

The girl would face no charges because of what the sheriff's office described as the "totality of the circumstances."

At the disciplinary hearing, the principal refused to answer questions from the girl's attorneys about what kind of school discipline the boy would face.

The district said in a statement that federal student privacy laws prohibit it from discussing individual students' disciplinary records. Gregory Miller, an attorney for the girl, said he has no knowledge of any school discipline for the classmate accused of sharing the images.

Ultimately, the panel expelled the 13-year-old. She wept, her father said.

"She just felt like she was victimized multiple times — by the pictures and by the school not believing her and by them putting her on a bus and then expelling her for her actions," he said in an interview.

The fallout sends a student off course

After she was sent to the alternative school, the girl started skipping meals, her father said. Unable to concentrate, she completed none of the school's online work for several days before her father got her into therapy for depression and anxiety.

Nobody initially noticed when she stopped doing her assignments, her father said.

"She kind of got left behind," he said.

Her attorneys appealed to the school board, and another hearing was scheduled for seven weeks later.

By then, so much time had passed that she could have returned to her old school on probation. But because she'd missed assignments before getting treated for depression, the district wanted her to remain at the alternative site another 12 weeks.

For students who are suspended or expelled, the impact can last years. They're more likely to be suspended again. They become disconnected from their classmates, and they're more likely to become disengaged from school. They're more likely to have lower grades and lower graduation rates.

"She's already been out of school enough," one of the girl's attorneys, Matt Ory, told the board on Nov. 5. "She is a victim.

"She," he repeated, "is a victim."

Martin, the superintendent, countered: "Sometimes in life we can be both victims and perpetrators."

But the board was swayed. One member, Henry Lafont, said: "There are a lot of things in that video that I don't like. But I'm also trying to put into perspective what she went through all day." They allowed her to return to campus immediately. Her first day back at school was Nov. 7, although she will remain on probation until Jan. 29.

That means no dances, no sports and no extracurricular activities. She already missed out on basketball tryouts, meaning she won't be able to play this season, her father said. He finds the situation "heartbreaking."

"I was hoping she would make great friends, they would go to the high school together and, you know, it'd keep everybody out of trouble on the right tracks," her father said. "I think they ruined that."

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