

hen she first heard the rumor, she couldn't believe it: Why would classmates think she, a 15-year-old sophomore, had slept with a senior boy she had just gone out with a couple of times? But tongues were wagging, and so were social media sites like ask.fm, on which she received graphic questions about the nature of her relationship.

Fortunately the people who counted most — her close friends and family — knew nothing had happened. And the rumormongers soon lost interest when they realized she wasn't perpetuating the drama with denials or counterattacks.

It could have been worse. Every day, thousands of tweens and teens are the targets of rumors, hurtful comments and bullying — an age-old problem intensified by easy access to social media sites via smartphones, tablets and computers. Social media sites and apps such as Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat and ask.fm allow

rumors to spread more quickly and with more anonymity than by word-of-mouth communication.

These rumors often leave a permanent and painful record of a child's unpopularity. Sometimes, the damage is so great, bullied or harassed students even take their own lives.

Take discipline beyond school boundaries

The period when children enter middle school and have to fit in all over again — not to mention deal with raging hormones and peer pressure — is often when rumors and harassment become a problem. It's also when kids typically have freer access to cellphones, smartphones, tablets and other digital media devices. This time period calls for heightened vigilance.

"Our kids are good kids, but they were doing or saying things online that were shocking," says Jamie Brooks, principal of Community House Middle School in Charlotte. Brooks and her staff learned this the hard way after two students created fake Twitter accounts: one in the principal's name and the other in an assistant principal's name. Both accounts featured crude, inappropriate tweets and attracted many of the school's students as followers.

