Cyber-Bullying: Creating a Culture of Respect in a Cyber World

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In the 1990s, many incidents revolved around student-on-student violence, usually involving guns. Schools implemented many programs to keep guns and gangs out of schools. In the 21st Century, school violence is taking on a new and more insidious form. New technologies have made it easier for bullies to gain access to their victims. This form of bullying has become known as cyber-bullying. This article provides a window on this little known world and offers practical suggestions for dealing with this new challenge.

When we think about school violence, events like Columbine come to mind. Looking back at the incident, Andy Carvin for *The Digital Beat* reminds his readers that one of the killers, Eric Harris, had his own web site that contained "conspicuous threats against fellow students" (Carvin, 2000). It was brought to the attention of the police and led to both Harris and Klebold being questioned about the incident and was an early example of what is now called "cyber bullying."

Bill Belsey, a nationally recognized educator from Alberta, Canada, gives this definition:

> Cyber-bullying involves the use of information and communication technologies such as e-mail, cell phone and pager text messages, instant messaging (IM), defamatory personal Web sites, and defamatory online personal polling Web sites, to support deliberate, repeated, and hostile behavior by an individual or group, that is intended to harm others. (Belsey, 2004)

Cyber-bullying, while being similar in its intent to hurt others through power and control, is different due to the use of these new technologies. Nowadays, kids are always connected or wired, and communicate in ways that are often unknown by adults and away from their supervision. This can make it hard for parents and school administrators to both understand the nature of the problem and do something about it.

Several surveys have been taken to get a handle on the number of children across the country who have experienced cyber-bullying. It is estimated that 91% of kids 12 to 15 years old and almost all teens (99%) ages 16 to 18 use the Internet (UCLA Internet Report, 2003). Much of their time online is spent talking with other kids. i-SAFE America, an internet safety education foundation, conducted a nationwide survey of 1,566 students from grades four to eight to find out their experiences with bullying online (National i-Safe Survey, 2004).

The survey found:

- 57% of students said that someone had said hurtful or angry things to them online with 13% saying it happens "quite often"

- 53% of students admit saying mean or hurtful things to someone online and 7% admit to doing it "quite often"

- 35% of students have been threatened online with 5% saying it happens "quite often"

- 42% have been bullied online with 7% saying it happens "quite often"
- 20% have received mean or threatening e-mails
- 58% have not told their parents or another adult about their experiences online

Another survey conducted by the Crimes against Children Research Center at the University of New Hampshire (Wollack & Mitchell, 2000) found that along with sexual solicitations and approaches online (19% of children surveyed received unwanted sexual solicitation), six percent of the young people surveyed experienced harassing incidents, including threats, rumors, or other offensive behavior, and two percent reported episodes of distressing harassment that they described as making them feel very or extremely upset or afraid.

Most parents tend to think that this kind of bullying is uncommon and that their child would never do something this mean. Unfortunately not so, according to Alane Fagin, the executive director of Child Abuse Prevention Services (CAPS). On-line bullying has become very common and is particularly easy for girls to do. This is an example of relational aggression where girls use relationships as weapons. Imagine, she says, a group of girls sitting around a computer. The person being instant messaged thinks she is only talking to one person. Before she knows it, the "target" has said something negative about one of the group. The group then starts gossiping about her. "This leads to social isolation," says Fagin (cited in Wolfe, 2004).

In general, girls inflict virtual abuse more than boys through instant messaging, online conversations, and e-mails. A survey of girls ages 12 to 18 found that 74% of adolescent girls spend the majority of their time online in chat rooms or sending instant messages and e-mail (Migliore, 2003). Boys are more likely to make online threats and build websites targeting others. It can be much more difficult to identify bullies in cyberspace. Online screen names and e-mail addresses can hide a person's true identity. It is easier to bully someone you don't have to face. With no boundaries or tangible consequences, children are using technology to vent normal frustrations in ways that can become very destructive.

Traditionally, home was a place where a kid could go to escape his bully. With advances in technology, home is no longer a haven. Glenn Stutzky, a School

Safety Violence Specialist at Michigan State University, said that today's bullies use technology to spread rumors and threats, making life miserable for their victims throughout the day and night. Today's kids have to deal with bullying in its newest forms: text messages, e-mail, websites, on-line voting booths, and blogs. They cannot escape their bully because he can now follow them home. This is the new reality.

In the past several years, parents have provided cell phones for their children in order to keep track of them and to keep them safe. The same cell phones that make parents feel more connected to their children have become tools of harassment. And the newest forms of cell phones include the ability to send text messages, pictures, and even live video. In the hands of bored teenagers, these additions can become weapons for bullies to spread rumors as well as pictures of unsuspecting kids in locker rooms. Stutzky provides examples of a middle school girl and a straight high school boy. The girl returned from vacation in Canada to find out that someone had spread rumors through text messages that she had contracted SARS. The boy was harassed by text messages implying he was gay. Stutzky states that "(children) are at a very vulnerable time in their development, and while these comments may seem silly to people who have matured, they are very devastating to the young people on the receiving end" (Wendland, 2003).

Websites can provide places where children can gain knowledge and communicate with others who share the same interests. This same benefit can also be used to do harm. Some children are now using Websites to mock, harass, and torment others. Bullies post slurs on Websites where kids congregate, or on personal on-line journals, called Web logs or Blogs. They can post pictures of students they don't like or create online voting booths. An example of the latter was set up by a group of Manhattan (New York) students who decided to create a Website to determine who was the biggest "ho" (Benfer, 2003). Called the Interschool Ho and posted on a free Website called freevote.com, this voting booth accumulated a list of 150 students along with their rank. It took a call by the Brooklyn district attorney to force freevote.com to shut down the site.

Alane Fagin (cited in Wolfe, 2004) also writes about Jay, who, along with some friends, created a "hit list"

of kids from their middle school that they "just did-n't like" and put it on the Internet. Jay describes a bunch of bored, 13-year-old kids who just started "fooling around." They wanted to change their image from being "clean-cut kids" to being "tough guys." On the site, he and his friends wrote about wanting to "weed out the people we didn't like. Anybody that we didn't hang out with was on the list. We titled it 'People We're Gonna Whack.'" When other students started visiting the site, one of the people on the list brought it to the attention of the principal. Initially, Jay and his friends only received a verbal reprimand by the school. Because their names were on the site, though, a parent brought it to the attention of the police. After four months, the police filed no charges. The consequence for the boys was the loss of trust from their parents, teachers, and peers.

An extreme case of Website bullying took place in Dallas (Benfer, 2003). A sophomore at a local high school was harassed about her weight. She was called a "fat cow MOO BITCH" on the school's message boards. Besides making fun of her weight, the anonymous writer also made fun of the fact that she suffered from multiple sclerosis, saying, "I guess I'll have to wait until you kill yourself which I hope is not long from now, or I'll have to wait until your disease [MS] kills you." This bullying escalated to action, with the student getting her car egged and a bottle of acid thrown at her front door, resulting in injury for her mother.

Part of the problem in combating cyber-bullying, say experts, is that parents and kids relate to technology very differently. Most adults approach computers as practical tools, while for kids the Internet is a lifeline to their peer group. "Cyber-bullying is practically subterranean because it lives in the world of young people," says Belsey (2004). "Kids know there is a gap in the understanding of technology between themselves and their parents, and their fear is not only that the parents' response may make the bullying worse, but that the adults will take the technology away."

So what are some signs that your child or student is being cyber-bullied? The Australian Government (2004) lists the following signs as things to look for:

- Spending a lot of time on the computer;
- Having trouble sleeping or having nightmares;
- Feeling depressed or crying without reason;
- Mood swings;
- Feeling unwell;
- Becoming anti-social; and
- Falling behind in homework.

It is a fascinating time in history. Children have opportunities for learning that previously seemed like science fiction. Schools, parents and children gain much from these advances in technology, but at the same time, they create unique challenges. The primary thing that adults need to do is to be more knowledgeable regarding the use of current technology and the ways and means that children are using them. Many parents and teachers, who were not raised in a cyber world, do not feel comfortable with the tools children are using. By guiding children to use the technology in ways that promote respect, understanding, and responsibility, we can lessen the impact of this new form of bullying. (See Figure 1.)

"Andrea,"
by Emily W., Brandon Valley High School,
Brandon Valley, SD. Used with permission.

Figure 1. What You Can Do

Tips for children:

- Never share or give out personal information, PIN numbers, phone numbers, etc.
- Tell a trusted adult.
- Do not read messages by cyber bullies.
- Do not delete messages; they can be used to take action.
- Bullying through instant messaging and chat rooms can often be blocked.
- Do not open a message from someone you don't know.
- Do not reply to the person bullying or harassing you.

Tips for parents:

- Pay attention! Know how and when your children are using the Internet.
- Become more tech savvy.
- Install blocking or filtering software.
- Encourage your child to talk to you if they are being bullied.
- Limit your child's time using the Internet.
- Develop a family online agreement including:

  Where kids can go online and what they can do there

  How much time they can spend on the Internet

  What to do if anything makes them uncomfortable

  How to protect their personal information, stay safe in interactive environments and behave ethically and responsibly online.

Tips for schools:

- Develop school policies for acceptable Internet and cell phone use. Enforce them.
- Zero tolerance for bullying in any form.
- Ensure that children and young people are aware that all bullying concerns will be dealt with sensitively and effectively.
- Ensure that parents/guardians expressing bullying concerns have them taken seriously.

Glossary of Some Common Terms Taken from www.webopedia.com:

E-mail: Short for electronic mail, the transmission of messages over communications networks. The messages can be notes entered from the keyboard or electronic files stored on disk. Most mainframes, minicomputers, and computer networks have an e-mail system. Some electronic-mail systems are confined to a single computer system or network, but others have gateways to other computer systems, enabling users to send electronic mail anywhere in the world. Companies that are fully computerized make extensive use of e-mail because it is fast, flexible, and reliable.

Instant Messaging: A type of communications service that enables you to create a private chat room with another individual. Typically, the instant messaging system alerts you whenever somebody on your private list is online. You can then initiate a chat session with that particular individual.

Chat rooms: Real-time communication between two users via computer. Once a chat has been initiated, either user can enter text by typing on the keyboard and the entered text will appear on the other user's monitor. Most networks and online services offer a chat feature.

Text-messages: Sending short text messages to a device such as a cellular phone, PDA (personal digital assistant), or pager. Text messaging is used for messages that are no longer than a few hundred characters. The term is usually applied to messaging that takes place between two or more mobile devices.

Websites: A system of Internet servers that support specially formatted documents. The documents are formatted in a markup language called HTML (HyperText Markup Language) that supports links to other documents, as well as graphics, audio, and video files. This means you can jump from one document to another simply by clicking on hot spots. Not all Internet servers are part of the World Wide Web.

Voting booths: Some Websites such as www.freevote.com offer users the opportunity to create online polling/voting booths.

Blogs: Short for Web log, a blog is a Web page that serves as a publicly accessible personal journal for an individual. Typically updated daily, blogs often reflect the personality of the author.

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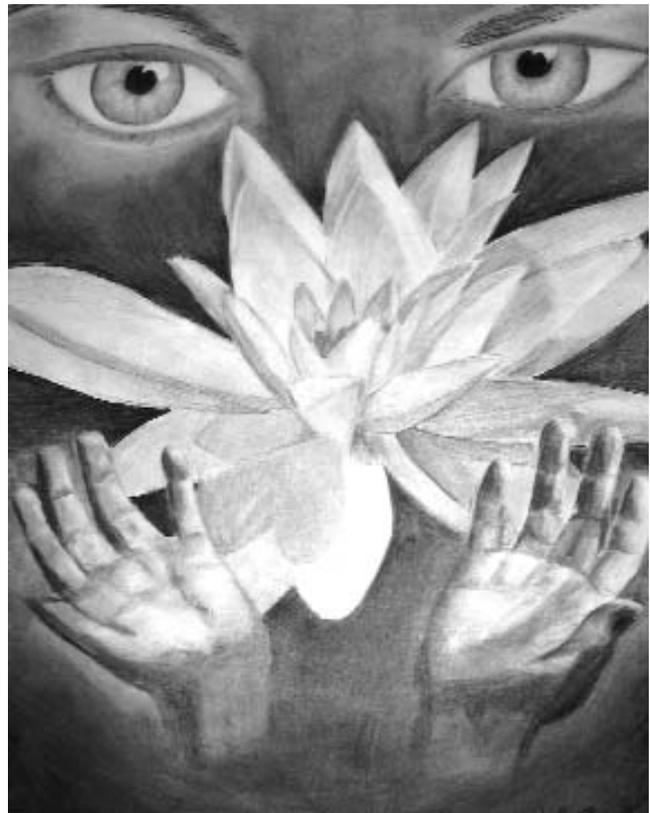
"Eyes of Peace,"
by Jill B., O'Gorman High School, Sioux Falls, SD.
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