

## **Cyber Bullying**

The Internet has created a whole new world of social communications for young people who are using e-mail, Web sites, instant messaging, chat rooms and text messaging (STM) to stay in touch with friends and make new ones.

While most interactions are positive, increasingly kids are using these communication tools to antagonize and intimidate others. This has become known as cyber bullying.

Today's young Internet users have created an interactive world away from adult knowledge and supervision. MNet research shows that 50 per cent of kids say they are alone online most of the time, and only 16 per cent say they talk to their parents a lot about what they do online. Because bullies tend to harass their victims away from the watchful eyes of adults, the Internet is the perfect tool for reaching others anonymously – anytime, anyplace. This means for many children, home is no longer a refuge from the cruel peer pressures of school

The anonymity of online communications means kids feel freer to do things online they would never do in the real world. Even if they can be identified online, young people can accuse someone else of using their screen name. They don't have to own their actions, and if a person can't be identified with an action, fear of punishment is diminished.

Technology can also affect a young person's ethical behaviour because it doesn't provide tangible feedback about the consequences of actions on others. This lack of feedback minimizes feelings of empathy or remorse. Young people say things online that they would never say face-to-face because they feel removed from the action and the person at the receiving end.

There are several ways that young people bully others online. They send e-mails or instant messages containing insults or threats directly to a person. They may also spread hateful comments about a person through e-mail, instant messaging or postings on Web sites and online diaries. Young people steal passwords and send out threatening e-mails or instant messages using an assumed identity. Technically savvy kids may build whole Web sites, often with password protection, to target specific students or teachers.

An increasing number of kids are being bullied by text messages through their cell phones. These phones are challenging the ability of adults to monitor and guide children because, unlike a computer placed in a public area of a home, school or library, mobiles are personal, private, connected – and always accessible. Kids tend to keep their phones on at all times, meaning bullies can harass victims at school or even in their own rooms.

Built-in digital cameras in cell phones are adding a new dimension to the

problem. In one case students used a camera-enabled cell phone to take a photo of an overweight classmate in the shower after gym. The picture was distributed throughout the school e-mail list within minutes.

Schools are struggling to address the issue of cyber bullying among students, especially when it occurs outside of school. When real world bullying occurs in a schoolyard or classroom, teachers are often able to intervene, but online bullying takes place off the radar screen of adults, making it difficult to detect in schools and impossible to monitor off school property.

### **Cyber bullying and the law**

Young people should be aware that some forms of online bullying are considered criminal acts. Under the Criminal Code of Canada, it is a crime to communicate repeatedly with someone if your communication causes them to fear for their own safety or the safety of others.

It's also a crime to publish a "defamatory libel" – writing something that is designed to insult a person or likely to injure a person's reputation by exposing him or her to hatred, contempt or ridicule.

A cyber bully may also be violating the Canadian Human Rights Act, if he or she spreads hate or discrimination based on race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, age, sex, sexual orientation, marital status, family status or disability.

### **The role of Internet service providers (ISPs) and cell phone service providers**

Internet service providers (ISPs) are the companies that provide Internet access to consumers. Most ISPs have Acceptable Use Policies (AUPs) that clearly define privileges and guidelines for those using their services, and the actions that can be taken if those guidelines are violated.

ISPs and cell phone service providers can respond to reports of cyber bullying over their networks, or help clients track down the appropriate service provider to respond to.

### **Taking action on cyber bullying**

Cyber bullying is everyone's business and the best response is a pro-active or preventative one.

#### **What parents can do:**

- **Get involved and be aware**

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- Learn everything you can about the Internet and what your kids are doing online. Talk to them about the places they go online and the activities that they are involved in. Be aware of what your kids are posting on Web sites, including their own personal home pages.
- Encourage your kids to come to you if anybody says or does something online that makes them feel uncomfortable or threatened. Stay calm and keep the lines of communication and trust open. If you “freak out” your kids won’t turn to you for help when they need it.
- **Encourage kids to develop their own moral code so they will *choose* to behave ethically online.**
  - Talk to your kids about responsible Internet use.
  - Teach them to never post or say anything on the Internet that they wouldn’t want the whole world - including you - to read.
  - Create an online agreement or contract for computer use, with your kids’ input. Make sure your agreement contains clear rules about ethical online behaviour. MNet’s research shows that in homes where parents have clear rules against certain kinds of activities, young people are much less likely to engage in them.
- **Take action if your child is being bullied online**
  - Watch out for signs that your child is being bullied online – a reluctance to use the computer or go to school may be an indication.
  - If the bully is a student at your child’s school, meet with school officials and ask for help in resolving the situation.
  - Report any incident of online harassment and physical threats to your local police and your Internet Service Provider (ISP).
  - If your child is bullied through a mobile phone, report the problem to your phone service provider. If it’s a persistent problem you can change the phone number.

### **What schools can do**

- Integrate curriculum-based anti-bullying programs into classrooms.
- Educate teachers, students and parents about the seriousness of cyber bullying.

- Change the school or board's bullying policy to include harassment perpetrated with mobile and Internet technology. There should be serious consequences for anyone who doesn't follow the guidelines.
- Update the school or board's computer Acceptable Use Policy (AUP) to specifically prohibit using the Internet for bullying.

### **What kids can do**

Because most incidents of bullying occur off adults' radar screens, it's important that young people learn to protect themselves online and respond to cyber bullying among peers when they encounter it.

Guidelines for children and teens:

- Guard your contact information. Don't give people you don't know your cell phone number, instant messaging name or e-mail address.
- If you are being harassed online, take the following actions immediately:
  - Tell an adult you trust – a teacher, parent, older sibling or grandparent.
  - If you are being harassed, leave the area or stop the activity (i.e. chat room, news group, online gaming area, instant messaging, etc.).
  - If you are being bullied through e-mail or instant messaging, block the sender's messages. Never reply to harassing messages.
  - Save any harassing messages and forward them to your Internet Service Provider (i.e. Hotmail or Yahoo). Most service providers have appropriate use policies that restrict users from harassing others over the Internet – and that includes kids!
  - If the bullying includes physical threats, tell the police as well.
- Take a stand against cyber bullying with your peers. Speak out whenever you see someone being mean to another person online. Most kids respond better to criticism from their peers than to disapproval from adults.