STOP cyberbullying

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Wired Kids Summits: Cyberbullying - Youth-Empowered Solutions

We are all familiar with the schoolyard bullies. Cyberbullying is the online equivalent. It involves young people on both sides of the communications. Cyberbullying is a growing problem, although few parents are aware that cyberbullying even exists. They are rarely aware of the dangers posed by cyberbullying. Unfortunately children carefully keep cyberbullying from their parents, sometimes until it is too late.

Cyberbullying is any kind of harassment, insults and humiliation that uses mobile, wireless or Internet-related technology in some way to hurt another child, preteen or teen. Kids or teens are on both sides of a cyberbullying. (If an adult is involved as either the bully or the victim it is cyberharassment, not cyberbullying.)

Children as young as nine years old are finding themselves harassed via blogs, Web sites, text-messaging and instant messaging. And, many retaliate by becoming cyberbullies themselves.

Cyberbullying can take many forms. It can be a Web site where children can vote for the ugliest, most unpopular or fattest girl in the school. It can involve sending private and very personal information or images to others or posting them online for the public to see. Former best friends can betray the other's trust or passwords. And password hints can be easy to guess for a fellow classmate or young neighbor, leaving their entire account open for vandalism. Interactive-gaming is another way cyberbullies target their victims, setting them up for embarrassment and harassment.

And as new technologies are developed or adopted, cyberbullies can abuse them as well. Blogs, now very popular web diaries kept by children and teens, are a hotbed of cyberbullying and cruelties. And photo and video cell phones are used to shoot pictures of potential victims in locker rooms, shower stalls, bathrooms and dressing rooms. Sometimes they are used to shoot pictures of the victim at a party, kissing their boyfriend or girlfriend. These images are then posted online, sent to classmates or even to parents in an attempt to intimidate or embarrass the victim.

Web site guest books are easy prey, as well. Within minutes of a well-launched cyberbullying campaign, an innocent guest book at a child's Web site can become littered with hateful messages. The ways cyberbullies use to hurt others are limited only by their imaginations (and bandwidth).

Interestingly enough, many cyberbullies are the victims of offline bullies. While often not as big, strong and tough as their offline counterparts, they have the communication and tech skills necessary to make them a formidable foe online. It can often be the real "Revenge of the Nerds," where those with tech skills can take on the school yard bullies of old. Girls tend to cyberbully through communications and offensive messages sent to their victims or posted publicly. Boys tend to send one-on-one messages, pass around offensive images, hack into the other's systems and steal passwords. But both girls and boys cyberbully each other and are victims of cyberbullying, and the problems often begins as young as 8 or 9 years of age and continues until they are about 15 years old. As they get older, most tire of the cyberbullying or the victims are better able to handle it. Only serious retaliatory or romantically-linked cyberbullying continues past that age. And these tend to fall more into the adult-cyberharassment category than cyberbullying.

And it doesn't take much to turn an otherwise mild-mannered preteen or teen into a cyberbully. If they lash out while angry about an e-mail or IM they have received, they may be starting a cyberwar without realizing it. One e-mail is all it takes.

Sometimes, the easiest and most effective way to stop cyberbullying is to ignore it. Most bullies are looking for a reaction. They want to know that they have frightened or embarrassed someone. They

want to see them sweat or cry, even if only virtually. But ignoring something hateful and insulting isn't easy for anyone, especially someone between the ages of 9 and 15. So, the cyberbullying often escalates rapidly of its own accord. Each message becomes worse than the one before it, until adults have to intervene.

When schools intervene they are often on fragile legal ground. Many schools taking disciplinary action against the cyberbully have found themselves defending a lawsuit brought by a civil liberties group or irate parent. And the school often loses or is required to settle on onerous terms.

Schools have very limited authority to react to things that take place off school grounds, outside of school hours and don't directly impact the school itself. Unfortunately, the schools react to a student being tormented by another student without realizing that the cyberbullying frequently takes place from the student's home computer and outside of school hours. Unless a special acceptable use policy exists, signed by the student and parent, giving the school authority over these kinds of activities, the school may be acting outside of its authority in disciplining the cyberbully. (See sidebar on school legal authority)

But the schools can get involved without actually disciplining the cyberbully. They can call in the parents and meet with the students and try and resolve things voluntarily. They can run educational and proactive awareness campaigns. They just can't impose discipline on the student without the parents' consent.

Teaching the kids how to respond to and, more importantly, when to ignore cyberbullying is crucial. Like its adult-version counterpart - cyberstalking and harassment, different motives and kinds of harassment require different responses. Some should be simply ignored and the sender blocked. Others should be reported to parents and teachers. And, in certain instances, sometimes the police have to get involved.

This becomes a serious problem when children are reluctant to get adults involved. Fearing more harassment if they do, they often try to handle it themselves. But they have very little guidance on how to do that safely. And if they wait too long to get adult help, they may find themselves at physical risk.

In cases where physical risk isn't an issue, victims too often find themselves ignored. They may be advised to turn the other cheek or lectured on "sticks and stones" not breaking bones and how words will never hurt them. But words can hurt them. Deeply. There have been instances of children committing suicide after having been targeted by a cyberbully. And there is at least one instance of a child killing another after being involved in a cyberbullying incident. In addition to the physical risks, some emotional scars can run very deep as well.