



BULLYING 2.0

Putting procedures in place helps teachers, parents, and students confront the online form of an age-old problem. **by Carl Vogel**

Bullying, like pretty much everything else, has moved online. And, like everything else online, cyberbullying is easier to do than in the real world, it can have a bigger impact, and it's harder to monitor.

The online playground that kids have today includes an array of electronic communications: e-mail, websites, cell phones, instant messaging, chat rooms, social networking sites such as MySpace, multiplayer online games, and virtual worlds. Cyberbullying can occur in any of these media; the activities include sending harassing messages, denigrating another student on a site, impersonating a classmate by stealing his or her account information, sharing a child's private information with a third party, and excluding a student from a popular forum.

Kids—and adults—might think that in the often rough-and-tumble online world, where flaming is a common blood sport, the regular standards of what constitutes bullying don't apply. But don't be fooled, says National PTA president Anna Weselak. "Communication is still communication with other people. The rules still need to hold, whether you're on the phone, on a blog, or in person."

For teachers and school officials, determining where the line lies between friendly teasing and hurtful or dangerous behavior can be difficult. Harder still is knowing when and how to get involved when cyberbullying occurs off school property. "When it happens, don't panic, but take it seriously," says Parry Aftab, a lawyer who has made her name in helping define cyberspace privacy and bullying issues. "Never underestimate the pain and frustration of being bullied online.

"If you see horrible things said about you in writing often enough, you start believing it. And it never goes away," she adds. "You go to Grandma's house for the weekend and you get a

text message, or you go to play on your Xbox and some other player has killed your character."

THE NITTY GRITTY

Cyberbullying tends to occur in the nine- to 14-year-old crowd, Aftab says. She identifies four general categories of cyberbullies: traditional offline power-hungry bullies; vengeful "angels" who are trying to right a perceived wrong (either in real life or online); mean girls who bully in a group for entertainment; and inadvertent cyberbullies who lash out in anger, send the communication to the wrong person, or are misunderstood in their actions. For older teens, cyberbullying often takes the form of sexual barbs, especially relating to sexual preference.

If a student truly isn't upset by derogatory comments made about them online, then it may not constitute cyberbullying (even if an adult might find the language a bit harsh). But kids should not feel they just have to "take it" if they have been hurt. That's why it's important to get ahead of the problem and put procedures in place at school and at home to deal with these actions before a bad incident occurs. When kids know that bullying is wrong and that the school administration can and will take appropriate steps, they're less likely to bully, and more likely to come forward and ask for help if they're being victimized.

PUTTING A PLAN IN PLACE

But what should those procedures be?

Before you've even heard of a problem, take time to teach students to stop, block, and tell. "If you get bullied, don't respond in anger, don't escalate

EDUCATOR SPOTLIGHT

Mary Lou Handy

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the situation or give the cyberbully materials to make it 'he said/she said,'" says Mary Lou Handy, a teacher at George Washington Middle School in Ridgewood, N.J., whose own daughter was cyberbullied to the point that she almost changed schools. "My experience is mostly with instant messaging, so block that screen name so they can't send you the messages. [Blocking a sender works with other electronic communication as well.] Finally, tell a teacher or parent what's been going on."

If cyberbullying does occur, school officials' first step is to determine whether it happened during school hours. Often, however, cyberbullying takes place away from school and off school time, so administrators must proceed cautiously. "There's a legal standard about how the school can respond," says Nancy Willard, executive director of the Center for Safe and Responsible Internet Use and author of *Cyberbullying and Cyberthreats*. "There can be formal discipline only if the off-campus speech has created a substantial and material disruption or interference with another student's right to be secure, or a threat thereof."

While it can be difficult to determine if that standard has been breached, clues include ascertaining whether the victim has been unable to concentrate or attend class, or if a third party has been enlisted to help with the harassment. "If you find allegations of sexual preference, you have to treat it as a high-risk situation. For the kids who have killed themselves—and there have been many suicides as the result of cyberbullying—all have had that as a factor," says Aftab.

SUCCESSFUL STRATEGIES

Luckily, much of what a school can and should do in response to incidents of cyberbullying is the same, regardless of whether the activities meet the legal standard for formal discipline. "The key point is that those standards apply to formal discipline," Willard notes. In other words, you can have an impact without suspending the cyberbully. The most important issues are removing the harmful online material and stopping harmful online activities.

If bullying persists despite the victim's attempts to stop and block, if the bully comes back with a new screen name or using a different medium, if

the comments are very hurtful, or if the victim is shaken, make a copy of any communication so the bully can't just delete the record, Willard says.

Meanwhile, don't try to fix the problem online. In cyberspace, at best you're on equal footing with the perpetrator. Instead, Willard says, take

the problem offline. Bring the cyberbully's parents into the principal's office to talk with a school official and the student. "The best strategy is to

provide downloaded material to the parents and help them develop strategies to prevent their child from continuing this kind of behavior," Willard suggests. "Explain to them that they face potential financial liability if they don't stop this and the victim's parents decide to sue," she says.

Last, but no less important, help the victim deal with the pain, she adds. Remind her or him that these messages don't reflect how everyone feels, and don't try to brush off the incident with the "sticks and stones" speech.

Be sure the parents of the victim understand that revoking a child's cell phone or Internet privileges is not recommended. This may seem like a logical solution, but taking away a student's online world is more likely to backfire, says Willard. "Kids are more resistant to talking to adults about their time online if they're concerned the adult will overreact or their access will be taken away." ❖

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RELATED RESOURCES

Cable in the Classroom Media Smart
www.ciconline.org/media-smart

Center for Safe and Responsible Internet Use
www.csriu.org

Court TV: Choices: Safe Passage: Voices from the Middle School
www.courtvtv.com/safepassage/harassment3.html

Cyberbullying.org
www.cyberbully.org

STOP cyberbullying
www.stopcyberbullying.org

WiredSafety
www.wiredsafety.org

CYBERBULLYING ACTION PLAN

FOR TEACHERS

Educate students about digital ethics, the law regarding harassment, and their responsibilities as cybercitizens.

If cyberbullying occurs, determine whether it took place during school hours. Formal discipline can be applied only if the bullying has interfered with the victim's learning or is an actual threat.

If it happens, document the incident and any repeat occurrences. Take the problem—and solution—offline. And help the victim deal with his or her feelings.

Bring in the parents of the perpetrator to make them aware of the harm done—and their liability.

FOR PARENTS

Stop, block, and tell—teach kids how to avoid escalating a cyberbullying situation, how to block incoming messages, and why it is important to ask an adult for help.

If your child has been bullied online, be supportive. Try to determine the extent of the communication, then talk to your child's teacher or guidance counselor. If the bullying involves personal contact or physical threat, notify law enforcement immediately.

If your child has cyberbullied someone else, talk to school officials to get help in remedying the situation.