Cyber Bullying: The New Frontier

Loucrecia Collins and Janice Patterson

As she rushed to turn on the computer, her heart pounded. Clicking on the web site, <Fingerpopping.com>, her worse fears were confirmed. Shelia Frazier was mortified as she gazed at the message board. “Sheila is a fat cow,” read the first message. “The slut of Baker High is Shelia Frazier,” another message screamed at her. “Hey guys and gals for a good time call the freak of Baker High at 222-3030”, read the next message. Tears streamed down her face. “How can I go to school tomorrow and face all those awful girls?” She remembered the words of Ashton, “You’ll be sorry you didn’t join our club. You think you are better than us. We’ll show you!” As her cell phone began ringing, fear and dread wrapped around her like a cold wet wool blanket. Panic stricken, she wondered if she had a prank call. Sobbing softly, she felt alone. Worry, fear and dread engulfed her as she thought about the lies posted on the Internet web site. Internet bullying is a modern menace for school children (Leishman, 2002).

The purpose of this article is to provide an overview of issues associated with online bullying. This article will define cyber bullying, explore the emerging vocabulary of cyberspace, examine the psychological effects of such harassment, present statistics regarding on-line bullying, and provide guidelines to support teachers, parents, and school administrators in combating this form of emotional violence.

Cyber Bullying Defined and Explored

How can an entity designed to promote open communication become a haven for brutal teasing and destructive lies? What is cyber bullying? According to Kapoor (2003), cyber bullying involves the use of information and communication technologies. These bullies harass, ridicule, and torment their peers in cyberspace. Electronic mail, cell phones, pager text messages, instant messaging, message boards, and online personal polling web sites provide a venue for these bullies.

In Canada, David Knight experienced the horrors of cyberspace bullying. An abusive message board designed to target this teenager compelled him to complete high school through homeschooling. Cruel messages posted on this site included harsh comments about David and his family. Malicious written comments accused David of being a pedophile, gay, and using the date rape drug to seduce young boys. (Leishman, 2002)

Students attending an exclusive east coast school decided to explore cyber bullying through <www.freevote.com> They constructed a virtual voting booth to poll students to identify who in their opinion was the biggest whore in their school. The Interschool Ho voting booth listed and ranked 150 students before parents and teachers intervened and had the site shut down (Benfer, 2001).

In one of the most malicious incidents of cyber bullying, a youngster in England committed suicide “after she was bullied for being fat” (Aftab, 2000). This author implies that there is a huge
problem with kids harassing kids online. She contends that technology provides a new haven for youth to slander and ostracize their peers.

Young people today exhibit savvy in the use of technology. Aftab (2000) notes the expertise of cyber bullies. She cites that many youth are knowledgeable enough to create their own Web sites and post insults, build phony sites pretending to be someone else, corrupt the personal profile of another user, or get a peer kicked of an Internet service provider by creating repugnant comments using that person’s name.

Although bullying has been a problem for prior generations, past bullies have not had the power of technology to help them torment others. The possibilities for today’s cyber-bully include a broad range of options. Belsey, (2001) identifies the most common forms of cyber-bullying.

**Electronic mail**

Electronic mail, or e-mail as it is popularly identified, is one of the original forms of communication through cyber space. Through e-mail, the transmission of written messages over communication networks fosters the rapid conveying of ideas. Written remarks are entered from the keyboard or electronic files stored on disc. The brisk transmission of ideas coupled with massive access to audiences provides users with an instant infinite audience.

**Instant Messaging (IM)**

IM enables users to create a private chat room with another individual. Typically, the instant messaging system alerts users whenever someone on their private list is online. The user can then initiate a chat session with that particular person.

**Small Text-Messages (SMS)**

The Short Message Service provides users the ability to send and receive text messages to and from mobile phones. The text can comprise of words or numbers. Another name for this communication is text messaging.

**Message Boards**

Message Boards are web sites created by individuals. Users can post information anonymously. Each site contains a home page, which is the first document users see when they enter the site.

**Voting/ Polling Booths**

Some web sites offer users the opportunity to create online polling/voting booths. Individuals can use these Web sites to create pages that allow others to vote online for various categories.

**Flaming**

Flaming identifies the sending of electronic mail that contains malicious spiteful comments.

The power of these technologies may be amplified in the victim’s mind through the feeling that there is no escape from email, cell phones, etc. As technology has inserted itself into our lives, there are few escapes. To further perpetuate the trauma many victims experience, there is the constant threat that the tormentors will somehow use the technology to assemble quickly in one place and confront the victim as a mob.

**Cyber Bullies... A Growing Problem**

Technology provides communication connections for many young people today. The UCLA Internet report showed that 91% of kids 12-15 years old access the Internet regularly. Almost all teens (99%) ages 16 to 18 use the Internet. Their time online is spent talking with other kids. A recent survey of girls ages 12 to 18, showed that 74% of adolescent girls spend the majority of their time online in chat rooms or sending instant messages and e-mails (Berson & Ferron, 2002).

The increased time on the Internet fosters another level of communication. Unfortunately, the opportunity for tormentors to harass victims becomes part of the extended culture of school life. Slander and ridicule through print in cyber space provides the vehicle for the tormentor to ride the victims back into submission.

One in every 17 children reported being threatened or harassed while using the Internet (U.S. Department of Justice, 2001). A 2002 British survey found that one in four youth, ages 11 to 19, had been threatened via computer or cell phone. (Crosbie, 2003) Cyber bullying is a problem for young people in many cultures. As the use of technology expands, cyber bullying provides a new frontier for aggressive anti-social behavior. This new form of harassment fosters fear in victims and leaves parents and school officials grappling for answers. The following guidelines promote safety on the Internet:

1. Does your school include online bullying in their anti-harassment policies? Many school policies only cover communications sent through the school’s computer network. In most cases, schools can quickly discover the identities of students using their computers to send odious e-mail or host abusive sites. Parents should check with schools to see what their policies are regarding electronic harassment (Migliore, 2003).

2. ISP - An electronic harasser can be reported to the Internet service provider. The victim can request that
the abuser’s account is suspended or blocked. In addition if your child is the subject of an offensive site, you can request that the site is removed from the Internet. Keep all copies of negative emails and spiteful message board which are posted.

3. Contact the police department. There may be state laws in place that address cyber bullying. If violence or abduction is promoted in electronic communication, law enforcement should be notified immediately.

4. Encourage your school to promote character education through conflict resolution programs. The “Don’t Laugh at Me Program” and the “Resolving Conflict Creatively Program” are programs that explicitly promote social-emotional learning.

The emerging trend of cyber bullying poses additional stress for young people. Verbal threats on cell phones, text messages containing negative comments, and explicit hurtful message boards exacerbate the intimidation and fear many young people experience through this new form of cyber violence. Parents, teachers, and school administrators must rally to support victims of such harassment. We must acknowledge this emerging trend of cyber violence and seek solutions to protect youth from this mental anguish. The salient question we pose is, “Do you know what your child (student) is sending and receiving while visiting cyberspace?”

References

What Children Should Do
Do not answer back with verbal violence
Try to ignore the insults by walking away with your head up high
If you are witness to or a victim of bullying immediately refer what has happened to an adult.

What parents Should Do
Discuss the problem with your child and try to obtain the name of the bully
Discuss the problem with the teacher and the principal of the school
Advise the child but try not to do everything in his or her place
Guide the child towards out of school activities
Do not encourage verbal or physical violence as a suitable means of defence
Do not trivialize the problem
(Source Mia Lambert, Jeunesse j’écoute and Ann Fernandez, Le Journal de Quebec September 3, 2002)