

## Target cyber-bullying



By Peter Menyasz

The new year is underway, but if you have a child who is being victimized by cyber-bullying, it's just the same old, same old – another year of degradation, humiliation and self esteem-killing abuse.

Schoolyard bullying has been a problem for as long as there have been schools, and it's unlikely that it will ever be completely eliminated, but zero tolerance policies have put a huge dent in the problem.

It may be tempting to think of on-line bullying as pretty much the same kind of problem, but it's a completely different breed of animal. The potential for anonymity, and even the use of someone else's persona through identity theft, makes cyber-bullying so much easier.

It is particularly easy to launch virulent attacks on someone else's character in the absence of the immediate, direct negative feedback that comes with a face-to-face confrontation. That encourages young people to say and do things on-line that they might never consider doing in person.

Just as they have taken action on schoolyard abuse, schools are taking steps to try to deal with cyber-bullying, but it's difficult given that much of the activity occurs outside school hours. And the anonymity issue can make it difficult, if not impossible, to identify the culprits involved.

How big a problem is it? A 2007 study in the United States suggested that fully one-third of all teenagers using the Internet reported having been the target of cyber-bullying – from threatening messages to having their private e-mails or text messages distributed without their consent, to having embarrassing photographs of them posted without their permission, to having rumours spread about them on-line.

It was a slightly bigger problem for girls, with 38 per cent saying they had been bullied on-line, than for boys (26 per cent), with girls aged 15-17 reporting the highest rate of cyber-bullying, 41 per cent.

And it's not just teenagers. Teachers are also prime targets for cyber-bullying, and a 2007 poll by the Ontario College of Teachers found that 84 per cent of those responding had been targets for their students, with the rate even higher (93 per cent) for French-language teachers.

Schools are doing their best, including through their efforts to educate children, and particularly teenagers, about their responsibilities as on-line citizens and what to do if others are abusing them on-line, but parents must play a major role.

In addition to teaching them how best to protect their privacy on-line, which is a major step toward addressing issues about improper use of personal information, messages and images, you can teach them the four-step STOP process for responding to cyber-bullying by others:

- Stop the activity, immediately leaving the online environment where the abuse is occurring;
- block e-mails or instant messages received from a cyber-bully, and never respond to them;
- record all harassing messages and forward them to your Internet service provider, as most providers have strong harassment policies; and
- talk about the situation to a parent or other trusted adult, and absolutely inform police if the bullying includes physical threats.

There is also good news for parents in the fact that cyber-bullying is now being taken very seriously at all levels, from the on-line community to schools to governments to law enforcement, and there are plenty of resources available to educate, inform and assist you in addressing the issue.

The federal government's SafeCanada.ca site offers a range of links to sites that deal with cyber-bullying, including a parent's guide ([http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/resources/educational/teaching\\_backgrounders/cyberbullying/cyberbullying\\_avatars\\_h1.cfm](http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/resources/educational/teaching_backgrounders/cyberbullying/cyberbullying_avatars_h1.cfm)), teacher's resources and other useful information.

There's a link to <http://www.cyberbullying.ca>, which provides good information on examples of improper on-line behaviour, prevention, and responding to incidents. It even includes a list of common on-line acronyms, just in case you're having trouble understanding what someone is saying to your son or daughter.

There is even a link to the Media Awareness Network's site, funded by Industry Canada's SchoolNet program, which offers a series of educational games on using the Internet. The CyberSense and Nonsense: The Second Adventure of the Three CyberPigs ([http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/games/cybersense\\_nonsense](http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/games/cybersense_nonsense)) game provides an introduction to authenticating on-line information and the rules of "netiquette". Other games include: CoCo's AdverSmarts; Privacy Playground; Jo Cool or Jo Fool; The Target is You! quiz; and Allies and Aliens.

As always, one of the most important elements of protecting children on-line is carefully monitoring their behaviour. If you keep an eye on what they're doing, and watch out for unusual behaviour patterns, which often indicate a developing problem, that will go a long way toward keeping them safe and ensuring that the Internet provides a positive experience.

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