

# SOURCE LINES

## The Cyber Bully and The Bystanders

### **Social behaviour and the internet**

The Internet has created a whole new method for social communications. Children, and especially teenagers, require ongoing opportunities to socialize with peers as a normal part of their development toward adulthood. For this younger generation constant conversations with many peers on instant messaging like MSN, is preferable to lengthy phone calls. Teenagers stay in touch with one another online where they keep up to date on the latest gossip, hear what happened to a friend in class or who is having a party on the weekend. As parents, we may let it all happen thinking they are on the computer doing research on the internet or writing up a school assignment.

While most interactions are positive or at least harmless, some kids are using the internet to antagonize and intimidate others. This has become known as cyber bullying, a problem that is increasing. It is more serious than traditional bullying, because the cyber bully can remain anonymous, strike without notice of the bullied, and cause humiliation by communicating destructive information to a large audience. For the victim, there is little if any escape. Like traditional bullying, most cyber bullying goes unnoticed by parents and teachers.

According to research, 50 % of teens 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. Twenty five percent of young people say they have seen hateful or hurtful messages about others. Because bullies tend to harass their victims away from the watchful eyes of adults, the Inter-

net is the perfect tool for reaching others anonymously - anytime, anyplace.

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.

The content of most cyber bullying attacks is of a racial or sexual nature. Take for example the Toronto private school boys whose cyber-bullying with anti-Semitic content hit the newspapers about a year ago. They set up an 'invitation only' chat board. Like a teen party out of control, others joined in posting photos of Hitler and prisoners in concentration camps. When one boy objected, the response of another was: "You little f...ing faggot who are you. You proolly (sic) some f...ing jew who doesn't deserve to exist and who should be thrown into an oven with the rest of them..."

Barbara Coloroso, in her book **The Bully, The Bullied and the Bystander**, describes how important it is for people who witness bullying (the bystanders) to take action. By doing nothing, the bystander gives the bully power and allows the ongoing victimization. (See [www.kidsareworthit.com](http://www.kidsareworthit.com) for more information from this author). As parents, we may unknowingly be bystanders who need to take action.

## **Taking action on cyber bullying: What parents can do**

### **Get involved and be aware**

- Learn everything you can about the Internet and what your kids are doing online.
- Encourage your kids to come to you if anybody says or does something online that makes them feel uncomfortable or threatened.

### **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.

### **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).

### **What schools can do**

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

spond to cyber bullying among peers when they encounter it.

### **Guidelines for children and teens**

- Don't give people you don't know your 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.

As parents, we want our children to learn to talk about their problems and to solve interpersonal conflict in a healthy respectful way. Being aware and involved with your children's online communications is an important way to help them learn about the appropriate use of power and teach tolerance and acceptance of others.

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