Raising the Alert on Cyber Bullying

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Bullying in the 21st century is no longer confined to physical threats. Students spend a lot of time in a virtual world. Here, too, they can threaten and victimize, be threatened and victimized. A compromising, humiliating photo snapped in the school shower on a cell phone, for instance, can find its way across the Web – and the world – in seconds. Victims are denigrated and mocked in front of millions of people. Most significantly, some of these people are kids they see every day, students who are in their class and school.

The ramifications of cyber bullying can be widespread. Long-term results include decreasing marks, skipping school, feigning illness, low self-esteem, depression, instigating school violence, or committing suicide.

Not that many years ago, teachers were on top of the rebellious gum chewers or the kids passing notes. Much more is demanded of today's teachers, including identifying the class cyber bully or victim. Where did that handbook go anyway?

Protective software does not alter cruelty or stop its purpose. How do we protect our students in this high-tech playing field? Information and influence, two powerful tools, lend us the opportunity to raise awareness and empower our students with the know-how to prevent and circumvent tragedy.

Studies indicate that girls receive more threats online or on their phones than boys, and both male and female adolescents are in the most vulnerable age group. Exploring their sexuality and/or the need to belong, students try to exert independence by looking for new relationships outside their families. Believing that online guarantees anonymity, some teenagers take undue risks without understanding the consequences. Many kids, bullies or not, don't care about their privacy or about being identified online. If identified, they believe they can blame someone else, reducing their fear of consequences.

A 2005 study out of the University of Calgary reported that 54 per cent of students have been bullied and, of those, a quarter of the students were cyber bullied. The study further found that the majority of cyber bullying victims did not report incidents. Bullies bank on the secrecy of their targets, people who are emotionally traumatized into silence.

Wired

Although little research is available on the traits of cyber bullies and victims, some insight is available from recent U.S. studies. Compared to the general student population, cyber bullies are more likely to have been targets on- or offline, to have acted delinquently and used drugs, and to receive less monitoring from their parents, with whom they have poorer relationships. Half of the victims had above-average grades, while less than 35 per cent of the cyber bullies' school grades were above average.

Bull's Eye

Who Are the Instant Targets?
- students who lack attention or affection;
- lonely and isolated students with no friends;
- students who don't belong or fit in with their peers;
- students who are new to or curious about the rules of on-line behaviour;
- teens who are confused over their sexual identity or who are perceived by others to have a different sexual orientation;
- youngsters who are easily tricked;
- students who are fascinated with subcultures distinct from their worlds;
- loners, both angry and disconnected, who are attracted to on-line hate groups; and
- obese students.

Fighting Cyber Bullying

Begin by initiating an open discussion with your students. Ask them how school staff can prevent cyber bullying and what they think staff should actually do in this regard.

Make sure students understand that they should never give out or share their on-line passwords. Let them know that they must never divulge personal information including their names, addresses, and phone numbers. Suggest they select a gender-neutral name and refrain from completing on-line personal profiles.

All bullies derive enormous satisfaction when victims respond, engage, or interact with them. It lets them know they have yanked their target's chain and are in control. Advise your students to immediately tell an adult if something happens to them online that makes them feel uncomfortable or frightened. Suggest they keep copies of abusive mail in a separate folder to serve as evidence, should they need it.

Awareness and prevention are the best defenses and need to start at an early age.

Students must stand up against cyber bullying. Bystanders have chosen silence and the chant, "Snitches land in stitches," is threatening, frightening, and hardly conducive to getting involved. Many students do not believe the school will do anything about cyber bullying. In fact, they may think they will be implicated if school staff hear about bullying episodes. Establishing a confidential and/or anonymous method for students to report cyber bullying and threats ensures their safety and encourages others to come forward. One good way to do this is to set up a special Web site where students can write in and forward hateful, threatening, or worrying e-mails that they have received. At some schools, for instance, it is commonplace for students to receive e-mailed lists of "the 10 most ugly students," "the 10 most hated students," and "the 10 fattest students," — e-mails that indelibly etch their hateful messages on both the targets and the recipients of the message.

A discussion with younger children explaining the difference between tattling and telling is always a good idea. Let them know tattling gets someone into trouble, while telling can get someone out of trouble.

Before allowing students to go online, take the proactive and preventative measure of developing a set of policies and procedures, including an agreement about safe Internet practices, to be signed by parents and students.

Schools need to build strong and trusting relationships between students and staff. When students provide information, schools should be able to respond with established safety strategies. Schools may also consider working with specialists to develop policies and procedures. Specialists could also be invited to discuss prevention and intervention methods with staff, students, and parents. Such discussions could help to bridge the gap between teachers and parents, many of whom do not know which children are bullies or victims.

Teach empathy for others. Discussions around kindness, tolerance, friendship, and "netiquette" (Internet etiquette, including the line between public and private), get top marks.

Inform students that under Canada's Criminal Code, it's a crime to repeatedly send messages that cause people to fear for their safety or the safety of others. An on-line death threat is a criminal offence. It is also a crime to publish statements intended to hurt and insult people or injure their reputations. When is cyber bullying considered a violation of the Canadian Human Rights Act? When messages of hate and discrimination are spread based on race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, age, sex, sexual orientation, marital status, family status, or disability. Such messages are illegal and punishable.

Cyber bullying among youth has definitely escalated and will, no doubt, diverge in other directions. Then what? What kind of marketing muscle will it take to get behind, or in front of, a campaign that opens the gates to a kinder, gentler way of being? Is it too late to make a U-turn or choose the other fork in the road? Are we at a dead end?

Where Do we Grow From Here?

On the very day of the tragic Columbine massacre, the school had just implemented a sophisticated alarm and tracking system. When someone's mission is to create havoc in a school or public building, no amount of technology can control the problem.

I believe we can help to control the problem, however, by teaching character education and promoting important values at an early age. Even nursery school children may exclude others and act unkindly to one another. They know how to grab each other's toys and inform the next child, "You can't play with us." When we model language and behaviour that champions important values such as respect, tolerance, kindness, and good manners, we give our children the framework to enjoy positive relationships with others—both in and out of the technological arena.

"So, whose problem is it?" you ask. This problem touches me, you, our children, and society. Technology is here to stay. Though he knew nothing about cyber bullying, Theodore Roosevelt was right when he said, "To educate a man in mind and not morals is to educate a menace to society." We need to appropriately inform and influence ourselves and our students to help civilize them and keep them safe—physically, mentally, and emotionally. **T**

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