Cyber Bullying and Internet Safety

As young people embrace the Internet and other mobile communication technologies, bullying has manifested itself in a new and potentially more dangerous way – through cyber bullying. Cyber bullying can generally be defined as sending or posting harmful or malicious messages or images through e-mail, instant messages, cell phones and websites. It is emerging as one of the more challenging issues facing educators, since it has a direct impact on students but often occurs away from school property.

Examples of cyber bullying include
- Sending cruel, vicious and sometimes threatening messages,
- Creating web sites that contain stories, cartoons, pictures and jokes ridiculing others,
- Posting pictures of classmates online with intent to embarrass them,
- Breaking into an e-mail account and sending vicious or embarrassing material to others,
- Engaging in IM (instant messaging) to trick another person into revealing sensitive or personal information and forwarding that information to others and
- Taking a picture of a person using a digital phone camera and sending that picture electronically to others without consent.

Social Networking Sites
Most teenagers visit websites to communicate with friends and meet new people. **MySpace.com** is a social networking site, one of many that has become increasingly popular with students. MySpace allows students to create a personal website (for free), post pictures, add comments and use it to meet "online friends." The website often includes their full name, telephone number, address, school name and a picture. **YouTube** is a similar site dedicated to hosting user video clips.

About 68 million people reportedly use MySpace, and millions more use other social networking sites such as friendster.com, livejournal.com, nexopia.com and facebook.com. According to MySpace, 22 per cent of its users are younger than 18.

The danger lies in that the Internet is vast, public and constantly expanding. And, if students have not developed critical thinking skills, are unsupervised or create websites that are not monitored, they can be at risk of unknowingly communicating with predators, spammers and pornographers.

As such sites proliferate, students should be warned not to post identifying information to the site and never to meet someone in person they have met through the site unless an adult accompanies them. And parents should conduct frequent reviews of the site to ensure that identifying information or pictures have not been posted.

MySpace will cooperate in shutting down a site created solely to harass another individual.

Internet Safety
No action is foolproof, but there are steps students can take to protect themselves online and lessen the chance of being the victim of unsolicited messages:

- Never give out personal information, passwords, P.I.N. numbers etc.
- Remember that personal information includes your name, age, e-mail address, the names of friends or family, your home address, phone number or school name.
- Choose a user name that your friends will recognize but strangers won't (such as a nickname used at school). This will help you to identify yourself to friends and lets you know who is trying to communicate with you.
- Do not submit or post pictures of yourself to any website, including your own. These can easily be copied and posted to any other website.
- Passwords are secrets. Never tell anyone your password except your parents or guardian.
- Do not respond to "spam" or unsolicited e-mail.
- Set up e-mail and instant messenger accounts with your parents.
- Do not respond to, or engage in, cyber abuse.

If you are the victim of a cyber bully
- Don't reply to messages from cyber bullies.
- Tell an adult you know and trust. Just as with any other kind of bullying, ignoring it often leads to escalation.
- If the bullying is occurring through text messaging, use call display or dial *69 to identify the phone number and have it tracked through your cell phone/pager service provider.
- Instant messages (e.g. yahoo instant messenger, Microsoft Messenger) are best handled by blocking messages from certain senders.
- Bullies are likely to register for an anonymous e-mail account such as Hotmail, Yahoo or Gmail using a fake name. If you receive threatening e-mail messages, instruct your e-mail program to block messages from that address. Then inform your Internet Service Provider (ISP).
- If physical threats are made or the bullying escalates, inform your local police.
- Do not erase or delete messages from cyber bullies. You don't have to read them, but keep them as evidence. You may get similar messages from other accounts. The police, your ISP and/or your telephone company can use these messages to help you.
- If necessary, get a new phone number, account or e-mail address and give it out to only one person at a time.

Suggestions for Parents

- Make sure your children understand how vast and public the Internet is. Remind them that anything they post or send in a message is virtually available to be seen or read by anyone in the world.
- Talk to your children about cyber bullying. Make sure they understand what it is. Let then know that cyber bullying is no less serious and unacceptable than other forms of bullying.
- Set up the family computer in an open, common area so that you can monitor what your child is sending and receiving.
- Inform your Internet Service Provider (ISP) or cell phone service provider of any abuse. Although it can take a lot of time and effort to get Providers to respond and deal with your complaints about cyber bullying, it is necessary in order to try to stop it from re-occurring.
- Purchase software that can help track activity. There are parental controls that filter both IM and chat rooms.

With contributions from
Kidproof Child Safety
MySpace.com
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