

## Cyberspace invaders Internet harassment can be a kid's virtual nightmare

By Sandy Coleman, Globe Staff | March 30, 2006

When men started showing up at the home of a Marshfield teenager, expecting the "date" he had supposedly sought online, the 16-year-old and his father were shocked and confused. The boy didn't even own a computer. One of his friends then told him he had found a website on which someone was posing as the boy and soliciting men for sex.

That imposter turned out to be a neighbor across the street, who had been watching the confusion as entertainment, said Mary Lee, a Plymouth assistant district attorney, who warned: "This is the world your children are growing up in."

Lee told the story recently to a roomful of educators and law officials gathered at Bridgewater State College for a conference on cyberbullying and cyberthreats, to illustrate the complex dangers children face in the virtual world. The information age that has brought convenience at the click of a mouse has also delivered danger, harassment, identity theft, and fraud.

The fake sex solicitation, which was meant to harass and harm, occurred in 2000 and is just one of many kinds of cyberbullying. It is also a form of fraud -- the Marshfield neighbor was charged with personal identity fraud, and the case was continued without a finding -- that youths are making easier for criminals by handing out personal information on many of the popular Internet social networks, experts say.

Strangers and classmates alike are using technology as a weapon against youths to commit crimes, damage reputations, make threats, and damage young psyches, Lee and other specialists stressed at the conference, which was sponsored by the Plymouth district attorney's office and the Massachusetts Aggression Reduction Center, based at Bridgewater State College.

The Internet is "making life a lot easier, but it's making it more complicated," said Lee. "It's not a bad place. But, the question is, how do we keep everybody safe?"

Elizabeth Englander, director of the Aggression Reduction Center, said education is key. "Educators see what's going on, and often parents don't. So we're trying to show how educators can bring this information to the parents," she said. "The fact that we have all this behavior in children, combined with the technological knowledge, is overwhelming."

In Plymouth County, more than 90 percent of middle school children have access to the Internet. Nationwide, 62 percent of teenagers have access, Lee pointed out. "Children have the technology. So, who's teaching them the proper use?" she asked.

A 2004 survey of 1,556 students in grades 4 through 8 by i-SAFE America Inc., a nonprofit that provides Internet safety education, found that 42 percent had been bullied online and 35 percent had been threatened. Also, 53 percent had said hurtful things to others.

The bad behavior isn't limited to the United States. In 2005 in the United Kingdom, a survey of 770 youths ages 11 to 19, by the National Children's Home charity and Tesco Mobile retail chain, found that 20 percent had been bullied via electronic means. Nearly three-fourths, 73 percent, knew the bully. Ten percent said someone had taken a picture of them using a cellphone, making them feel uncomfortable, embarrassed, or threatened.

One of the main problems leading children to trouble on the Web, Lee said, is a false sense of security, which makes them ignore all the real-world safety tips they have learned. That same false sense of security also leads them to think they can't get caught when they harass and bully others. Youngsters are using Internet blogs to display pictures of others they don't like.

They are creating online "polls" that ask such questions as, who's the ugliest guy in the school, and using cellphones to take embarrassing photos, often without the knowledge of the subjects. Teachers are not excluded

from harassment. One teacher told Lee that a student snapped a photo of his wedding photo, in which he was wearing a kilt, and posted it on the Internet to provoke ridicule.

Several of the 130 teachers, social workers, and guidance counselors who registered for the conference said they have come across cyberbullying at their schools. Lois Miller, a guidance counselor at Diamond Regional Vocational Technical High in Fall River, said the school has had a problem with students using [myspace.com](http://myspace.com) to post nasty comments about classmates, and police and school officials also have found threats against other students on the website.

"It's just so anonymous. It's so much easier than being in a person's face," said Lynn Curran, a social worker at the Learning Prep School in Newton. "You're right," said another conference attendee, Laurie Smith, who teaches health at Jordan/Jackson Elementary School in Mansfield. "They can say things they would never say in person. It gives them power."

Students can pretend to be anyone online in chat rooms, on blogs, and on social networking sites. "So, we're seeing an escalation of cyberbullying," said Lee.

Before the Internet, students might slam students in notes, notebooks, or on the walls of a bathroom that had limited audiences. Now, they can do it for the whole world to see on the Internet, Lee said. "In today's world where everybody is connected, the rumors go berserk," said Raynham Police Chief Louis J. Pacheco, who specializes in computer investigations and high-tech crime enforcement. Pacheco, a panelist at the conference, has created a "rumor control" section on his department's website to disseminate the truth when rumors fly at local schools.

The dangers can go beyond bullying. This month alone, an Easthampton 18-year-old was charged with harassment and second-degree breach of peace for allegedly threatening Easthampton High School students on [MySpace.com](http://MySpace.com), the Associated Press reported. And Pacheco pointed out that 18-year-old Jacob D. Robida of New Bedford spent a lot of time on [MySpace.com](http://MySpace.com) before he attacked three men at a gay bar in New Bedford in February. He then fled, killed a woman riding with him and a police officer, and took his own life while being pursued by authorities in Arkansas.

On the Internet, there is no end to bullying; it can go on as long as there is a computer available. Lee recalled what it was like being ridiculed as a schoolgirl: "There were days when school was an 8-to-2 prison term. And you're just waiting for the bell to ring." But on the Net, that bell never rings.

Pacheco talked about a girl who had an online fight with someone one night. The next day, the entire profanity-filled exchange was printed out and posted for all to see at school. In another local case, a 14-year-old girl's photograph was morphed onto the image of a naked body and put online, he said. She never returned to the school she was attending. The solutions to cyberbullying are complex and uncharted, according to experts. "We're all going to have to pedal very fast to keep up," said Englander.

And malevolence-filled computer video games, like the soon-to-be-released "Bully," don't help, she noted. The interactive game, by software developer Rockstar Games, features rival bullies and gangs in brutal battles for supremacy of their school. Antiaggression experts worry it could become a tutorial on bullying. Englander said administrators need to consider the complexities of monitoring technology in and out of school when writing electronic use policies. Lee said parents and teachers need to learn how to deal with bullying, and students need to be taught not to escalate situations by responding online. They also need to be taught that there are consequences to their actions, even in the virtual world. When harassment occurs or threats are made, those affected should keep printouts of the information to show to authorities. Pacheco encourages students to search their names often to see what about them is on the Internet.

Parents need to be more aware of what their children are doing and how they are using technology, he said. "You have to get outside your comfort zone and get into where these kids live," said Pacheco. "You can't police a community you don't know."

And, know the lingo, Lee urged. For examples, "POS" means "Parent Over Shoulder"; "9" signals that a parent is in the room; "IPN" is "I'm Posting Naked"; and "YBS" is "You'll Be Sorry." "If you don't know what these things are, you are out of touch," she said. Websites like [www.netlingo.com](http://www.netlingo.com) can help.

"Supervising children is going to be 100 percent harder as the technology improves," said Lee. *Sandy Coleman can be reached at [sbcoleman.com](mailto:sbcoleman.com).*