

The (not-so) brave new world of bullies

Online harassment is on the rise and it's just as serious as threats made at school

By Jim Gibson, Times Colonist
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The 21st-century school bully need not rely on just fists and a cruel tongue. The Internet is now part of the bully's arsenal, making cyber-bullying possible anywhere -- and not just around school hours.

The Internet has also opened the door for first-time bullies, according to a 2008 University of Toronto study.

"A threat made through Facebook or [texting] is as serious as a threat made at school," says Monterey Middle School principal Brenda Simmonds.

Any cases that surface at school or at home can be tricky to peg down. Detection is far less likely than in face-to-face bullying. The cyber-bully hides behind the Internet's cloak of anonymity. There's little risk of being interrupted or found out by an adult. Also, there's less chance of a victim physically retaliating.

"Because you have that layer, it makes the [cyber-bully] braver and less inhibited," Simmonds says.

Cyber-bullying is much the same as regular bullying, but without the physical presence, according to the University of Victoria's Bonnie Leadbeater. It's intentionally hurting someone by teasing, intimidation, rumour or exclusion.

"These are the kids who are repeatedly harassed and bullied and end up killing themselves," Leadbeater says.

Cyber-bullying is happening more and more, according to Darren Laur, a local police officer, who, as a personal protection consultant, often speaks at schools.

"It's the big thing now. Back in our day, it used to be the bathroom wall," Laur says, referring to the way reputations were once damaged at school.

Laur estimates his private company receives two calls a month concerning cyber-bullying. Last year, one came from a local high school where a group of girls had created a website and blog to target one girl.

The University of Toronto study found half the young people surveyed reported being cyber-bullied. Further, according to the study cited on the Be Web Aware website, 75 per cent of those admitting to cyber-bullying someone had never bullied anyone off-line and face-to-face.

Cyber-bullying was unheard-of 12 years ago when Leadbeater helped create WITS, the widely used school anti-bullying program sparked in part by the 1997 homicide of schoolgirl Reena Virk.

"It just wasn't an issue," Leadbeater says, adding it became one a few years ago. She and her grad students have since augmented the program with cyber-bullying material for parents and children.

Cellphone use by children has increased by 68 per cent since 2005, according to New York's Mediamark Research and Intelligence (www.mediamark.com). An estimated 36.1 per cent of 10- and 11-year-olds have cellphones. Most use them for basic communication tasks, such as calling parents (88.1 per cent), calling friends (68.1 per cent), emergency purposes (55.7 per cent) and text messaging (54.1 per cent).

Technology has changed the way kids interact. Today's children are far more electronically connected -- and computer savvy than their parents, Laur says.

"We know most of the kids are involved in communicating with each other," Simmonds says. Her school bans texting and cellphone use during school hours, but she can't guarantee it doesn't happen.

Sandra Hudson, a mother of an 11- and 14-year-old, was surprised that children send or receive an average of about 3,000 text messages a month until she checked the monthly statement for her son's iPhone texts. He was close to the mark.

"That's how they communicate," Hudson says, referring to the few words or lines he texts to friends or to her.

While the adolescent Hudson might have been overheard on the family phone, that's unlikely when her son texts on his iPhone.

"He could be sitting next to me in the car and cyber-bullying someone and I wouldn't know," Hudson says, not believing he actually does.

Chances are you won't know if your child is a cyber-bully, according to Laur.

"You won't know until someone contacts you."

But it's also difficult to know if your child is being bullied, according to Laur. Children don't readily admit to it.

The signs, however, are similar to any type of bullying -- fear of leaving home, crying for no apparent reason, decline in school work, change in dress, calls to parents for a pickup at school and a concern for personal safety.

The first thing a parent should do if their child is cyber-bullied is contact the bully's parents. Further, notify your child's school and even the police. Once a child reaches 12, uttering threats or harassment can be a criminal matter, Laur says.

Kids don't realize the scope of the Internet, according to Leadbeater.

"Kids don't understand it's a public document as soon as it's on the Internet. They don't think it's illegal or can be easily traced," she says.

The consensus is that parents should set family rules on Internet use. Further, they should familiarize themselves with what their child is doing and where on the Internet, Leadbeater says. Also, **learn the Internet language from such sites as www.netlingo.com**, Laur says.

"Make it clear that you, the parent, know what cyber-bullying is," Leadbeater says.

Keep eye on kids' online communication

What is cyber-bullying?

- Sending nasty electronic messages via Internet or cellphone
- Sending or posting gossip or rumour to damage reputation or friendships
- Pretending to be someone else and sending negative messages to get others in trouble or hurt their reputation or friendships
- Posting real or digitally enhanced photographs of someone online without their permission
- Using a website to rate someone's appearance or popularity

What parents can do if a child is being cyber-bullied

- Listen and provide support
- Save evidence -- phone and Internet records can be traced
- Tell bully to stop if identity is known
- Report to school authorities
- Notify police

How to combat cyber-bullying

- Keep computers in shared family space -- and not in child's bedroom
- Learn everything about what your child is doing online. Be familiar with any profile sites (Facebook etc.) web pages and blogs they use
- Know your child's passwords
- Teach child never to post online or send in a text a message they wouldn't want the entire world to read

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