

Inside the School

**What is
cyberbullying
and what can
teachers do
about it?**

By Joanna Marx-Talarczyk

Special Report

Inside the School

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WHAT IS CYBERBULLYING AND WHAT CAN TEACHERS DO ABOUT IT?

Bullying is intentional, repeated, negative behavior toward another/others involving a lack of empathy and an imbalance of power. Cyberbullying is all that through a technological medium like the internet or text messages and according to cyberbullying expert Mike Donlin, it's much more harmful.

"I, as a cyberbully, only need to send a picture, a naked picture, one time. I only need to create a blog one time," Donlin said. "Once it's out there, it takes on a life of its own and repeats and spreads around the world in a heartbeat."

Donlin was a program administrator for Seattle Public schools where he managed technology grants and worked in bully prevention programs with an emphasis on Internet safety. In his seminar *Cyberbullying: Awareness and Prevention*, Donlin explained what cyberbullying is and how teachers can help manage it.

STUDENTS ARE DIGITAL NATIVES

Students have 24/7 access to technology; phones in their pockets and computers in their rooms. They are fluent in the language of social networking and can outpace their parents with their technological skills and capabilities.

“The young people today with their tools and toys have great power. They’re creating media, putting things out there that are reaching across the world instantly,” Donlin said. “And with that power should come great responsibility; that’s what we’re really talking about here—building up that sense of responsibility.”

According to Donlin, students don’t understand all of the consequences of their actions; they’re becoming desensitized and uninhibited. In their minds, what they do online is all virtual and they forget that there is someone on the other end. Real people read and see what they post and write online.

“The tools and toys give them a sense of anonymity where they say, ‘It’s not really me, it’s this online person. I’m not like that in real life,’” Donlin said.

CYBERBULLYING AMONG TEENS

According to Donlin, statistics vary on how many kids experience cyberbullying, some say 40 percent, others estimate more. No matter what the statistic, he's sure that millions of students experience cyberbullying, but the majority don't tell their parents or another adult about their online problems.

"Number one is they're afraid they're going to lose their stuff," Donlin said. "Following that, breaking the code of silence could make it worse for them. By sharing their experiences with an adult and having some kind of retribution, it could get worse."

Donlin gives examples of how students' Internet habits and relationships can lead to trouble and problems at school. A girl can create a blog about how she thinks one of her classmates, Brittany, is a loser, others can then long on and comment about how they agree, Brittany is a loser.

"Who are the people who are writing the comments?" Donlin said. "She doesn't know, so it's very, very difficult for her to function and the even trust the real life friends that she has that she thinks are her good friends."

In another scenario, Randy sends Jack messages using several different screen names. Randy threatens to beat Jack up.

"[Jack is] probably going to be afraid to come to school," Donlin said. "It's going to be tough for him to survive in school, to listen, to do his work and be attentive to the school work that needs to happen."

In the case of best friends forever Margot and Lisa, their relationship is strained when Margot gets mad at Lisa and starts sending nasty information under Lisa's screen name.

“Who gets in trouble? Who gets blamed for that?” Donlin said.
“Lisa gets in trouble.”

WHAT EDUCATORS CAN DO

Not only can cyberbullying affect how students learn and perform at school, but also case studies show that teachers and schools can be held liable for the results of bullying. It's important that schools have the tools to help prevent and manage cyberbullying, Donlin said.

THE FIRST STEP IS COMMUNICATION

Teachers should also ask students about what they're doing online; are they blogging, IM-ing, sharing passwords, posting photos? Teachers should make sure parents are aware of what their children are doing online.

"If need be, notify the police, monitor behavior of all those kids who are affected, whether they're targets, the bullies or the bystanders," Donlin said.

Look for students who are avoiding friends, seem sleep deprived or are reluctant to use a computer; these signs might indicate that this student is a victim of cyberbullying.

"In the world of the 21st century [...] if the young person is reluctant to go and use a computer, is reluctant to go and use technology, that's a signal," Donlin said.

UPDATED POLICIES

Schools should make sure their Internet policies are up-to-date and meet the standards of federal laws like the Children's Internet Protection Act (CIPA) or the Broadband Data Improvement Act.

"[CIPA] requires that we block the visual depictions of obscenities and child porn, anything else that might be harmful to minors," Donlin said. "Things like accessing inappropriate materials, safety

and security using Web 2.0 tools, hacking, protecting personal information and restricting access to harmful materials.”

EDUCATE STUDENTS

The Broadband Data Improvement Act says that schools with Internet access must educate minors on appropriate online behavior. How to interact on social networking websites, in chat rooms and how to respond to cyberbullying are all a part of teaching students appropriate online behavior.

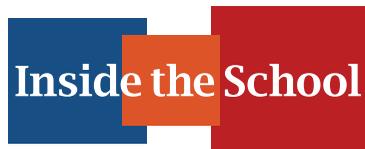
MONITOR STUDENTS

Donlin also suggests using software to monitor what kids do online.

“Interestingly enough this last one, the supervision, is one that I got the most interesting responses from when talking to teachers,” Donlin said. “Mike, you mean we have to look at what kids are doing?” and of course the answer is yes.”

Restrictions on what students can do and say online raises questions about whether or not this kind of Internet policing would be a violation of students’ right to free speech. Donlin’s advice is for teachers to always check with their legal department before gathering evidence about cyberbullying.

“The bottom line is, we’re not talking freedom of speech when we’re talking cyberbullying or online safety; we’re talking about the safety and security, the health of young people,” Donlin said. “If we think something is going to interfere with our young people, whether it’s an individual, a classroom, or your entire school, then it’s up to us to intervene; we have to do that.”



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