

Cyber-Bullying-

“The Silent Tormentor”

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When looking at school safety in general, few (if any) would place cyber-bullying in the same category of fear as a school shooter or natural disaster. Cyber-bullying “seems” petty when compared to just about any school tragedy. In fact, during the last few months, like thousands of others, I have spent hours watching news reports and crying over the senseless massacre at Virginia Tech and the visuals I conjured up of the nine students, huddled in tornado position, who were swept away at Enterprise High School in a small Alabama town. The fear that the young people in both of these instances must have experienced defies most of our imaginations. On the other hand, most people give little or no thought to cyber-bullying and even less to what its impact can be.



Seasoned school administrators and K-12 educators, however, know that there is an extremely wide range of disasters and offenses of varying degrees of severity that can impact school safety. Some are overt, immediate, brutal and frequently devastating to many for decades to come; others are covert, cumulative, insidious and occasionally lead to devastation for the children victimized by them. One of the offenses in the latter group is referred to as “The Silent Tormentor” and it has become a major issue that schools throughout the state and beyond, are scurrying to find ways to address. That issue is cyber-bullying.

Over the years, as educators, we have learned that one of the hardest behaviors to identify and control with consistency is bullying. One would think that we would have a better handle on it by now as bullying has been a part of our culture for centuries. We work with bullies; we live with bullies; we socialize with bullies; and it even seems, at times, that bullies get ahead in life. Yet, it appears that bullying in all forms is difficult to define as well as to address...and even harder when technology enters the equation. Consider that when a definition is given to “bullying”, the perception of the receiver (or victim) and the intention of the deliverer are at its root. Additionally, bullying can be physical, verbal and emotional. It is because of the ambiguity in its meaning that many states have not adopted anti-bullying laws.

I co-teach a course at Murray State University on Crisis Management in Educational Settings. It is a graduate-level administrative class that includes a discussion of the safety practices being used in the school districts where the practicing teachers/school administrators work. A middle school assistant principal taking the course this semester mentioned that his school is working hard to combat bullying, but that on any given day, what one child feels is bullying could be only a curious stare or simply someone changing their route to a class. He relates, and I concur, that emotions run high in middle school and there is rarely enough manpower to investigate every perceived glare or detour to class.

Most school administrators struggle daily to keep their schools a healthy and welcoming learning environment for all students. In the past, however, “school-yard bullying” has been confined to the school, during school hours. This limited such intimidation to a place with a timeframe and a face. But, in the last couple of decades, the school room has expanded exponentially with the addition of the Internet. No addition to curriculum or skill delivery has impacted the structure of learning as significantly as the instructional use of the Internet. Along with the educational advantages of content, problem solving skills and virtual field trips, a new form of bullying and intimidating has evolved. Students who would never bully face-to-face have an avenue to humiliate

their cyber-victims. Indeed, this generation has grown up in a cyber-society and has developed an adult-free environment for communication and socialization. For some, this anonymity lends power to them because they are distanced from their victim, which leads to less empathy and a diminishment of remorse.

Instant messaging, chat rooms and blogs have taken the place of name calling, note passing and the bathroom wall. It is the same harassing communication, but the audience is unlimited and the intimidating follows victims to their homes and even around the world.

Although cyber-bullying is clearly unacceptable behavior, it had not been on my top-ten list of disciplinary problems at school either. Then, I started searching the Internet for resources. I typed in cyber-bullying and suicide. A YouTube video started on my computer. (www.youtube.com *True Effects of Cyber-Bullying 201: They Committed Suicide*) A picture of eight teenagers opened the video and as names, dates and family photos appeared on the screen of suicide victims, “Wanda’s Song, (If you were me)” by The Readings began to play. The lyrics are as follows:

*Why, do you hurt me, and treat me like you do
What have I ever done to deserve this from you
Would you do the things you do
If you were me and I were you*

*Looking back I see the pain that we put Wanda thru
And just where all the fun and games were leading
We didn't realize the damage sticks and stones would do
Cuz' it was deep inside Wanda was bleeding*
(<http://www.bullyinginstitute.org/bbstudies/wanda.html>)

So, here I found myself in a social networking website that contributes to cyber-bullying and I was watching the tragic effects of its power over students. While my hands were still trembling, I came across the page dedicated to Ryan Patrick Halligan. It is a poignant tribute to a young boy’s life who was silently harassed when an on-line consoler encouraged him to take his life. The young boy’s father pleads for other parents to read and learn from his family’s tragedy. www.ryanpatrickhalligan.com.

Knowing the severity of this silent tormentor placed cyber-bullying on my top-ten list of safety offenses to be addressed at school. A 2004 i-Safe survey includes some alarming percentages relating to the way students communicate online:

- 58% of kids admit someone has said mean or hurtful things to them online.
- 53% of kids admit having said something mean or hurtful to another online.
- 42% of kids have been bullied while online.
- 58% of kids have not told their parents or any adult about anything mean or hurtful that had happened to them on-line.

Just as with so many other safe school initiatives, awareness is only the first stage of addressing cyber-bullying. Several steps follow including the development of a plan of action and implementation.

Combating the Cyber-Bully

After talking to teachers and administrators in classes at Murray State University, I became interested in knowing what policies or rules were out there in the state regarding bullying and cyber-bullying. I also wanted to know if they were being enforced. There didn't seem to be much consistency (district to district) in many of the policies, so I turned to the Internet and began looking for student handbooks, codes of conduct, etc. I was surprised in two ways: first, many schools did not have their handbooks available for the public (including parents) to review; secondly, after searching extensively, most of the ones I reviewed did not address bullying at all.

I, then, looked at several schools' Acceptable Use Policies (AUPs) for the Internet. Very few mentioned any form of cyber-bullying. A few used words like "intimidation" or made statements such as, "Harassment on the Internet will not be tolerated".

A review, at least annually, of the student handbook and its policies is critical. Also, I feel strongly that the public, particularly parents, should have access to the rules that their child is obligated to follow. The following list is offered for consideration when seeking ways to address cyber-bullying at school.

1 Educate

Faculties, staffs and students should be made aware of cyber-bullying and its dangers. They should also know the school/district's policies and procedure to address it. Students should be advised never to exchange pictures or personal information on-line and not to send messages when they are angry. They should be taught to delete messages from people that they do not know. Parents should also be educated on this topic. School principals should consider planning a parent night or writing an article in the school's newsletter to keep parents up-to-date on the school's progress in this regard.

2 Handbook or Conduct Policies

Consider ensuring that cyber-bullying is defined in the student handbook and that consequences are clearly articulated for anyone who engages in such behavior.

3 Monitor Technology Use

Closely monitor students' computer use, as well as other technology such as cell phones. (If cell phones are permitted at school, ensure usage limitations.)

4 Filtering Software

In Kentucky, each school has free access to filtering technology. (SB230 – 1998 General Assembly) Filtering software uses keywords to block specific sites.

5 Search Engines Filters

Most search engines also have filters that can be set on each computer which allow for some protection both at school and at home. Kid-friendly search engines such as *Yahooligans* or *Ask Jeeves for Kids* are examples.

6 Investigate Reports of Cyber-Bullying in a Timely Manner

Staff should consider giving priority to this behavior. It will send a strong message to the students and faculty that bullying and cyber-bullying will not be tolerated.

- School administrators are obligated to take action when cyber-bullying occurs through the school district's Internet system. However, if the cyber bullying occurs off-campus, *consider a plan that will help* to address it before it occurs:
- Notify parents of victims and cyber-bullies. Notify the police if the known or suspected cyber-bullying involves a threat.
- Closely monitor the behavior of the affected students at school.
- Talk with all students about the harms caused by cyber-bullying. Remember, cyber-bullying that occurs off-campus can travel like wildfire among students and affect how they behave and relate to each other at school.
- Make school counselors or school-based mental health professionals available to the victim.
- Contact the police immediately if known or suspected cyber-bullying involves acts such as:

- Threats of violence

- Extortion

- Obscene or harassing phone calls or text messages

- Harassment, stalking, or hate crimes

- Child pornography

www.stopbullyingnow.hrsa.gov U.S. Department of Health and Human Resources

7 Acceptable Use Policies Provisions for AUP's were also outlined in the 1998 Senate Bill 230. Every school must have a student and faculty AUP and parents must acknowledge the Internet's usage at school by written consent. Accountability must be tied to Internet usage in order for schools to receive funding from the Kentucky Department of Education for technology purchases.

▪ **AUPs are designed to**

- Educate parents about their children's use of the Internet
- Educate students about:
 - Risks peculiar to computer communication
 - Rules for efficient, ethical, legal computer/network use
 - Safe and appropriate computer social behavior
 - Use of available and unavailable services
- Preserve digital materials created by students and teachers
- Protect vulnerable children from inappropriate approaches
- Discourage children from making inappropriate personal disclosures
- Encourage ethical behavior, and discourage criminal behavior
- Encourage accepted "Netiquette" from the very start
- Encourage polite and civil communication
- Encourage individual integrity and honesty
- Encourage respect for others and their private property
- Allow enforcement of necessary rules of behavior
- Protect the school networking equipment and software from danger
- Help improve network efficiency www.isafe.org

8 i-Safe Curriculum Students, now more than ever, must be taught using an age-appropriate curriculum on how to make the use of the Internet powerful, informational, responsible and safe. The i-Safe curriculum is both interactive and flexible to reach students at a very young age.

"The goal is to educate students on how to avoid dangerous, inappropriate or unlawful online behavior. i-SAFE accomplishes this through dynamic K-12 curriculum and community outreach programs to parents, law enforcement and community leaders. It is the only Internet safety foundation to combine these elements. Some of the lessons taught by i-SAFE are:

- *Cyber-Citizenship*
- *Personal Safety*
- *Cyber- Security*
- *Intellectual Property*
- *Cyber-Bullying*
- *Predator Identification" (www.isafe.org)*

Jimmy Adams, a District Technology Coordinator with the Woodford County Schools, uses the i-Safe curriculum with the students there, starting in Kindergarten. He believes that starting children on the Internet at a young age will help combat cyber-bullying as students will learn "netiquette" early and it will therefore become a routine with them to use it properly.

He states:

"At Woodford County Schools, we teach our students how to login to our network starting the first six weeks of kindergarten. It is gut wrenching to watch the students during the first six weeks as they get used to it, however, once they learn it, they are ready to go. Our goal is to get them on the computer and teach them as many technology skills as possible before they reach the assessment accountability grades. Along with this comes responsible use of the internet. We use the i-Safe curriculum at all grade levels starting with kindergarten. The curriculum is informative without negatively enticing students."

9 Sample Work-shop Agenda on Cyber-Bullying

- Consider beginning with the YouTube video on Cyber Bullying and Suicide.
- Show the Ryan Halligan website and family photos.
- After a short pause, review the bulleted list above with faculty and discuss.
- Develop a policy to combat cyber-bullying in a school in a comprehensive organized manner. (Be mindful that being pro-active about this issue may save a precious life.)

After viewing these videos and family photos of the cyber-bullying suicide victims on the web, I thought, “What a senseless loss of young life!” just as I had after the Virginia Tech and Enterprise High School Tragedies. I realized on a personal level that this silent tormentor claims its victims too.

Resources

- www.wiredsafety.org
- www.wiredkids.org
- www.cyberbullying.ca
- www.netsmartz.org
- www.stopbullyingnow.hrsa.gov
- www.isafe.org
- <http://education.ky.gov>
- www.youtube.com
- <http://www.bullyinginstitute.org/bbstudies/wanda.html>
- www.ryanpatrickhalligan.com

