

## VIRTUAL WEAPONS - NEW TOOLS OF THE BULLY

Has your child ever been upset about something that was posted online about him or her? Today's youth, with online technology and social media, are able to reach out to their peers anywhere, at any time. However, this includes the ability to hurt, embarrass, and demean others online, and it's been said that "if it's on the web, it's forever." What do you know about cyberbullying, and when should you step in?

A recent report has found that teenagers spend an average of 9 hours *per day* on social media sites, while tweens (children between the ages of 8 and 12) spend an average of 6 hours *per day* consuming social media. This high volume of online interactivity of pre-adolescent and adolescent individuals may result in conflict in the form of cyberbullying. Defined as the use of online or mobile technology to "harass, threaten, embarrass, or target" a fellow individual, cyberbullying is more prevalent (25% to 30%) than traditional bullying (12%). It has been found that 58% of students have admitted to using the internet for unscrupulous or illegal activities, with 1 out of every 10 students with unsupervised access to online activities within their schools.

Differing forms of intimidation have been realized through cyberbullying, in part because of the anonymity that the internet permits:

- *Flaming* is defined as arguments or fights via email or in online chat rooms and blogs, resulting in derogatory and inappropriate verbiage aimed at a specific individual, either publically or private
- *Denigration* is similar to flaming, but more of a group-oriented activity to belittle or make fun of an individual
- *Exclusion* is the purposeful intention of ignoring, dismissing, or omitting an individual from an online group, chat room, or blog
- *Outing* is the revealing of private information of an individual to others, whether it be secrets, pictures, or conversations
- *Trickery* is convincing an individual to share private information and then sharing it with other individuals online without that individual's awareness or consent
- *Impersonation* is falsifying an individual's identify as someone else while interacting with others
- *Harassment* is the continued and repeated verbal attacks on an individual via online chats, blogs, or messages of a cruel and malevolent nature
- *Cyberstalking* is the ongoing harassment of an individual integrated with threats or bodily harm and may include blackmailing

Cyberbullying does occur among both sexes, but is more prevalent among females, with nearly half of all teenager and tween females (40.6%) have reported some form of cyberbullying in their lifetime, with only 28.8% of males having similar experiences. The most common form of cyberbullying, as reported by these individuals, fall within the following areas:

Specific Act of Cyberbullying	% Reported
False rumors about an individual	19.4%
Cruel comments in a public forum	12.8%
Threats made through mobile phone text	10.1%
Threat made online	8.3%
Impersonation of another individual	6.4%
Unwarranted posting of picture	4.6%

Signs that an adult should recognize if a child is a victim of cyberbullying include specific recognizable changes in the following areas:

- **Emotional Changes:** An individual suddenly becomes withdrawn, appears depressed, moody, or agitated, and perhaps aggressive behavior suddenly manifesting
  - **Social and Behavioral Changes:** Individual suddenly stops using computers or mobile phones altogether, sudden discontinuation of social activities or friendships, and attempts to hurt oneself
  - **Academic Changes:** Withdraws from schoolwork or school attendance suddenly declines
- Conversely, signs that an individual may be cyberbullying others may include:
- Individual suddenly turns off the computer screen when an adult enters the room
  - Individual appear nervous or jumpy when using a computer or mobile phone, and spends excessive amounts of time online, while being secretive about online activities
  - Individual becomes upset when online or mobile accessibility is removed, whether purposeful or not
- However, schools, as the center of this social foundation, can take the lead in reducing cyberbullying by addressing these issues:
- Adopt a no-tolerance issue of bullying, whether in person or online, with resulting recriminations dealt with immediately with consequences, as well as ongoing internet safety awareness throughout the classroom
  - Awareness of these policies implemented to administrators, educators, and students alike, addressed at the beginning of each school year

Simultaneously, parents must support the schools in this effort and take responsibility for addressing cyberbullying issues with their children:

- Keep the computer in an area of the home where parents can monitor a child's online activities, and eliminate online access in a child's room
- Parents should familiarize themselves with social media sites, and be able to monitor their child's social media interactions
- Discuss what cyberbullying is with your child, and how to recognize it. Establishing rules in these matters allow the parents to set the tone of what online behavior won't be tolerated and a clear understanding of the repercussions when these rules are broken. Make it clear to your child that of not only to not respond to cyberbullying, but not delete any content containing cyberbullying, and to share with an adult so that appropriate action may be implemented

Teenagers and tweens can protect can protect themselves from cyberbullying issues, with the help of their school and their parents:

- Inform a teen or tween to tell an adult if they are being cyberbullied, as well as to ignore cyberbullying issues, rather than respond to them
- Don't share personal information online, including not sharing usernames or passwords with other individuals
- Don't open an email or link to a file from an unknown individual
- If a teen or tween does not want his or her parent to see a posting, then don't post it

The Golden Rule, "Treat others as you wish to be treated" is the ideal message that should be conveyed to teenagers and tweens when interacting online. Remember, as a parent or school administrator, cyberbullying can usually be addressed and stopped before long-term repercussions can affect the bullied individual:

- Reassure your child that as a parent or school administrator, you will work together to figure this out and that they are not alone. If you are a parent, make sure your child knows you are going to talk to a school administrator before you plan on doing so
- Praise your child for coming to you and being honest with you, and remind them that many people get bullied at some point in their lives
- If you have evidence of your child being bullied online, save the texts, pictures, or messages, to show evidence of the individuals responsible to the authorizes, whether it be other parents, school administrators, or even police in severe instances. If necessary, take screen shots as well
- Find out what social media sites your child is on, and follow them to monitor their interactions. However, don't abuse the privilege by commenting on social media sites and potentially embarrassing him or her

- Therapy may be appropriate for your child to discuss the issues he or she is experiencing from cyberbullying, or even consider a therapist for mediation between the cyberbully and the victim  
Cyberbullying is a new face to an age-old problem of growing up, and like every generation before this technologically advanced one before us, this can be confronted and eliminated with adult involvement, intervention, and care.

