Mean Girls (and Boys): Cyberbullying and What Can Be Done about It
by Kathy Fredrick

From Arkansas to Iowa and from Nebraska to Washington, state legislatures are enacting bills that extend anti-harassment measures to the electronic world, both in school and out of school. The tragic deaths of teens like Megan Meier and Ryan Halligan that are linked to extended cyberbullying by classmates and adults make shocking headlines. Other teens and preteens who have been bullied online suffer anxiety and depression. Stories of the victims of cyberbullying have left deep impressions on all educators. How has it reached this point? And, what can be done about it?

A Definition
A basic definition of “cyberbullying” is provided by Nancy Willard, director of the Center for Safe and Responsible Internet Use. She has defined cyberbullying as using the Internet or other mobile devices to send or post harmful or cruel text or images to bully others (http://csriu.org/). This type of bullying takes a number of different forms, and appears to be particularly compelling because of its relative anonymity. The advent of social networking has highlighted cyberbullying. Email, instant messaging, chat rooms, and Web pages are all venues for cyberbullying.

What do victims experience? They may receive repetitive messages that are angry or vulgar or intimidating and sent directly to them. They may learn that messages with cruel, false, and harmful statements about them are sent to other people with the intent to embarrass or discredit them with classmates and friends. The bully may also masquerade as another person. Unlike the face-to-face bullying seen in schools and classrooms, cyberbullying continues 24/7, tormenting the victim without an opportunity for intervention.

Extent of Cyberbullying
How widespread is this problem? When i-Safe America surveyed 4th-8th grade students in 2004, they found that 42% of kids had been bullied—but more than half had never told their parents or an adult. And, of the 1500 surveyed, 53% admitted saying something mean to someone online (http://www.isafe.org/). The Pew Internet & American Life Project found that one-third of teens surveyed had been bullied online (Lenhart 2007). A September 2008 online survey detailed in the Journal of School Health stated that 72% of respondents reported at least one online bullying incident—and 90% said they didn’t tell an adult about it.

Even though legislatures are enacting measures against cyberbullying, what steps can schools take? At the district level, a beginning point is an Acceptable Use Policy (AUP). Schools can make sure there is a statement requiring students not to post information about other students—particularly not information that is incorrect or harmful. This can go hand-in-hand with a stricture against posting personal information that identifies location, contact information, or other items that would make it easy to find a student. This will also come in handy for other Web 2.0 technologies being used such as blogs, podcasts, and other social networking tools. Some districts are also rewriting student codes of conduct to reflect Web 2.0 technologies and their interactive nature.

Is there a way to judge how prevalent this problem is for students? Library media specialists could survey students and parents about the issue. Before doing the survey, however, it would be a good idea to gauge awareness of this issue among colleagues and with administrators to determine the best approach. Drs. Justin Patchin and Sameer Hinduja have developed a checklist or report card on cyberbullying at their Web site (http://cyberbullying.us). It covers school climate, curriculum, and policies, and can help focus on the
issue. Based on what is learned from this evaluation, staff development may be in order. Online safety sites like i-Safe, Media Awareness Network, and McGruff.org have materials that will help in this process.

The Role of the Library Media Specialist

Now it's time to make cyberbullying up close and personal—what can library media specialists do? After researching the topic, library media specialists can be an advocate in fighting cyberbullying. They can work with teachers to instruct students about cyberbullying and how to combat it. Since students are reluctant to tell when they are bullied online, it is important to let them know there are ways to combat the problem. Working with students on this topic is a natural extension of instruction related to Web evaluation and using online resources. Students can develop strategies to share with other students, produce anti-cyberbullying materials, and talk with others about how to combat cyberbullying. As policies are in place, library media specialists can go over them with students regularly.

Information can also be shared with parents through the library media center Web site and at parent meetings. The same materials and video clips that work with students will also work with parents. The parents’ first reaction may be to say they won’t let their kids online. An alternative, library media specialists can talk with them about extending rules for online use to include ways to guard against cyberbullying—keeping information private, knowing how to block access and change passwords, and knowing when to tell an adult what’s going on.

In Summary

A Missouri mother was convicted of offenses connected to cyberbullying in November 2008. She created an alter ego online—a 16-year-old boy who sent flirtatious messages to Megan Meier. Later this boy told Megan, “The world would be a better place without you” (Stelter 2008). Megan took her own life. The role models provided for children should not include a road map for cyberbullying. They need to be given the resources they need to make good choices online and to have the resilience to respond to those who would tear them down.

Resources:

Articles:


Videos & Games:
Cyberbullying. http://www.cyberbullying.info/
Delete Cyberbullying (5 short videos developed as public service announcements). http://www.ncpc.org/cyberbullying
Stop the Bully (McGruff the crime dog). http://www.mcgruff.org/Games/stop_bully.php

Kathy Fredrick is the Director of Libraries and Instructional Technology for the Shaker Heights City Schools in Ohio. She has worked in school libraries at all grade levels in Ohio, Wisconsin, Australia, and Germany. Email: fredrick_k@shaker.org


Informational Web Sites:
Center for Safe & Responsible Internet Use. http://csriu.org/
Cyberbullying.us. http://www.cyberbullying.us/