

CYBERBULLYING >:-(---

One day in October 2006, 13-year-old Megan Meier committed suicide after receiving a series of troubling messages through her MySpace page. A “friend” turned on her and the conversations became hostile. Megan then became aware of electronic bulletins where people were posting degrading comments about her. With a history of depression, she was unable to handle the stress and hung herself in a closet, to be found by her mother. As it turned out, the “friend” was actually an adult posing as a young boy to embarrass and torment Megan for personal reasons. While this is one of the more famous and extreme occurrences, children of any age can experience cyberbullying, and the cases have become more frequent due to increased access to different technologies.

What Is Cyberbullying?

The Ohio State Board of Education defines cyberbullying as “repetitive, hostile behavior with the intent to harm others through the use of information and communication technologies such as Web sites, instant messages, camera phones or Ipods (sic).”

The developments in modern day technology have allowed bullying to reach a whole new level. Youngsters of this generation are more tech-savvy than ever; many have their own computer or cell phone by junior high. This has enabled bullying to occur on a more consistent basis, as victims cannot escape the abuse when they leave school.

Cyberbullying can occur in a variety of ways. Some bullies harass others by sending mass texts to classmates that contain hurtful messages or unflattering images of their victims. The internet has also become a forum for bullies, since e-mails, instant messaging, chat rooms, and popular social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter can be used to spread damaging information.

Some websites are created solely for the purpose of harassing another person. Instigators generally convince other classmates to get involved as well. With today’s technology, a message or image can be spread throughout the digital world within seconds and remain there indefinitely. This constant barrage of insults and rumors can be unbearable to some victims, and a lifetime of consequences may ultimately follow the victim, the bully, and the people around them.

Highlights from Research

- 30% of middle school students were victims of some kind of cyberbullying two or more times in the past 30 days.
- 22% of middle school students admitted to engaging in some type of cyberbullying in the past 30 days.
- Cyberbullying victims and offenders reported significantly lower self-esteem than youth who hadn’t experienced cyberbullying.

Cyberbullying and Suicide

- Cyberbullying victims were almost twice as likely to have attempted suicide compared to other youth.
- All forms of bullying were significantly associated with increases in thoughts of suicide.
- 20% of respondents reported seriously thinking about attempting suicide.

~ Cyberbullying Research Center

“In the information age, playground poundings have moved to online chat rooms and instant messages. Nearly half of all teenagers report they have been the victim of cyber attacks. Everything from text messaging to e-mail can be used to bully victims.” ~ ABC News

Why Teens Cyberbully

There are many reasons why people cyberbully. Because it can be anonymous, people feel safer in these environments and more uninhibited. They are more likely to say or do things that they would not say in a face-to-face conversation because there is a lesser chance of being caught. This also may push the victims themselves to bully, as a way to carry out revenge on those who have hurt them in the past. Additionally, current technology allows information to get out into the public sphere quickly and to multiple people. Because of the tendency for adolescents to act on impulse, a bully might carry out his or her plan of humiliation without first thinking about the consequences. Again, once the image or message is sent out into cyberspace, it is most likely there for good.

Unfortunately, bullies may have no legitimate reason for harassing a classmate. A survey conducted by the Ophelia Project, an organization that focuses its efforts on addressing issues of aggression and promoting safe social environments, showed that the number one reason that children bullied was for entertainment purposes.

While bullying is not new - especially among school-aged children - cyberbullying is occurring more frequently because of young people's proficiency with technology. Humiliating messages and images are not limited or contained to a group of people or even to a certain time period, so it is almost impossible for a victim to escape cyberbullying.

“Cyberbullying may be more harmful than in-person bullying because it can happen 24/7. It can be very public, and bullies can be anonymous.” ~ Carolyn Givens, Ohio Suicide Prevention Foundation

Regulating Cyberbullying

With the recent suicides of children affected by cyberbullying, state governments have begun to crack down on the issue. Laws have been passed to enforce anti-cyberbullying policies on school property, and some states, like Arkansas and New Jersey in 2007, have attempted to take it a step further by punishing cyberbullies who have committed the attacks outside school hours.

In order to deter potential bullies and prevent cyberbullying from taking place, Ohio schools attempt to monitor student internet use through searches of computer records, which can be considered similar to locker searches. In addition, education of students, staff, and parents on the matter is emphasized in order to make people more aware of what constitutes cyberbullying. Earlier this year, a bill was introduced in the Ohio House and Senate that would allow schools to have more power against cyberbullies on or off school grounds.

Warning Signs:

A child may be a victim of cyberbullying if he or she...

- Stops using the computer or cell phone
- Appears nervous or jumpy when an instant message, email, or text appears
- Appears uneasy about going to school or outside
- Appears to be angry, depressed, or frustrated
- Avoids discussions about what they are doing on the computer
- Becomes abnormally withdrawn from friends and family members

What You Can Do to Help:

- Talk with your child about cyberbullying and encourage him/her to tell you immediately if it occurs
- Talk regularly about online and phone activities
- Explain that you will look at phones and web pages to monitor conversations for child's safety
- Encourage your child not to respond to bullying
- Report any cyberbullying to the school
- Consider contacting the cyberbully's parents
- Save messages for police if threats are included
- Contact the police, if threats of violence or harrassment continues

For more information, visit http://www.cyberbullying.us/cyberbullying_warning_signs.pdf or <http://www.stopbullyingnow.hrsa.gov/adults/cyber-bullying.aspx>

Sources:

Ohio State Board of Education
The Ophelia Project
Cyberbullying Research Center

Megan Meier Foundation
StopBullyingNow!

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

Science Daily