

Cyber-Bullying: What Is It and What Can We Do About It?

Patty Morrison, WVU Extension Agent, Wirt County

Jodi Smith, WVU Extension Agent, Wood County

Educational Objectives

1. To understand terms related to the Internet and cell phone usage.
2. To understand cyber-bullying.
3. To learn ways to help youths handle cyber-bullying and other Internet dangers.

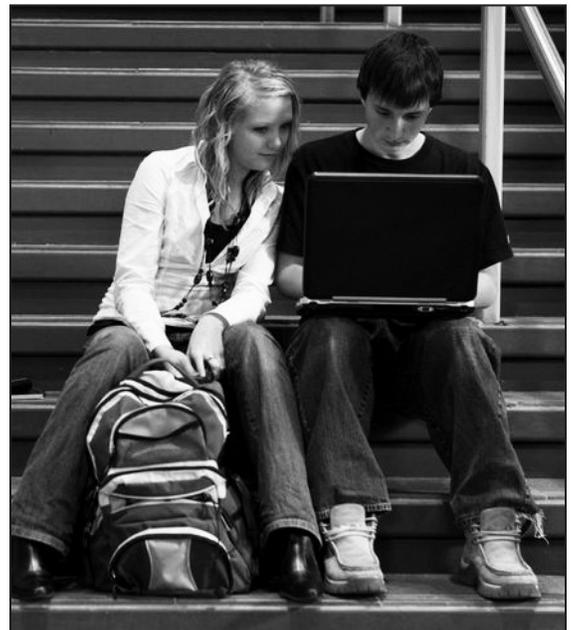
Cyber-bullying – A social problem

Close your eyes and picture a child bully. What do you see? Do you see a child who is mean, angry, and bigger than the other kids? Do you see a boy with rolled-up sleeves and clenched fists? Do you picture someone who steals lunch money from smaller children? When asked to participate in this activity, most adults and even youths picture a bully this way. They picture someone who has power over another and who is bigger and meaner than the other children. This picture of a bully is very unrealistic. The face of today's bully has changed, and often that face is hidden by the Internet.

Bullying comes in many forms: physical bullying – hitting, pinching, punching; social/emotional bullying – gossiping and spreading hurtful rumors

or excluding a person from a group; verbal – insults, name calling, racist remarks; and cyber-bullying – the newest form of bullying, which is becoming the most damaging type of bullying.

With today's technology, a cyber-bully can remain anonymous and cause irreparable harm to others. A cyber-bully stays anonymous by using temporary email and social networking accounts or "fake" names in a chat room. This allows the bully to feel that he or she has no social restraints on behavior.



– continued –

What exactly is cyber-bullying?

The National Crime Prevention Council defines cyber-bullying in this way: “When the Internet, cell phones or other devices are used to send or post text or images intended to hurt or embarrass another person.” These messages or posts may include threats, sexual remarks, hate speech, false statements, or ridicule.

Kids as young as second grade report being mean to each other on the Internet. According to research, both boys and girls engage in cyber-bullying. Whether you call it bullying or cyber-bullying, the main purpose is to intentionally embarrass, harass, intimidate, or make online threats to others. Unlike bullying in which the victim and harasser meet face-to-face, cyber-bullying is often anonymous. This anonymity has made it easier for kids to bully without repercussions.

The majority of cyber-bullies attack their victims by forwarding text messages or posting on social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter. The growing number of adults on these sites has resulted in young people creating two accounts – one that parents and family members can see and another that they cannot see.



Texting gone bad

Another form of cyber-bullying is “sexting.” Sexting occurs when sexually explicit messages or photographs are sent between mobile

phones. The term is the combination of the words “sex” and “texting.” Teens often share sexual jokes, comments, and photographs via text messages. Girlfriends and boyfriends may exchange comments and photographs not meant to be shared with others. Often, however, messages of this type are shared and can become potentially damaging to the victims.



Beware of the cyber-stalker

We warn our kids about the dangers of talking to strangers or opening the door to strangers, but do we warn them about the unseen strangers on the Internet? Much like cyber-bullies, cyber-stalkers harass and threaten victims using technology.

The difference is that “cyber-bullying” is the term used to define bullying between minors, and “cyber-stalking” or “cyber-harassing” describes harassment by an adult of a minor or by an adult of another adult.

Some adults will try to start a relationship online with children for purposes that are not pleasant. Sexual predators may use the Internet to contact children, often posing as someone younger to start online relationships. Sometimes, relationships may result in plans to meet face-to-face, which can result in very dangerous or even deadly situations. Children need to be warned about these “stranger dangers.” We think children are safe at home, but these predators find them via computers.



Addressing the problem

How do we stop cyber-bullying? It is not easy, but children need to know there are consequences to bullying or sexting others. Many states already have legislation in place or are working on legislation to make bullying a misdemeanor crime. A proposed federal law would make it illegal to use electronic means to “coerce, intimidate, harass, or cause other substantial emotional distress.” If this law would become reality and someone is reported to be bullying or sending explicit sexual text messages, he/she would face legal consequences.

What can children do now if they are a victim of cyber-bullying? A tool developed by the Vanden Corporation allows children to instantly notify selected adults when they are bullied or harassed online. CyberBully Alert also documents the threatening message by saving a screen shot of the child’s computer when the child triggers an alert. Cyber Patrol and

LookBothWays are two firms that keep up with Internet trends. YouTube also has an Anti-Bullying Channel for youth (BeatBullying), which engages the assistance of celebrities to tackle the problem.

The keys to prevention are supervision, communication, and education. Technology is a wonderful tool when used properly and respectfully.



Supervise, communicate, and educate – Basic tips for Internet safety

Talk to your children/grandchildren. Teach them how to react to cyber-bullying in a positive way. Set rules and guidelines for Internet use and supervise children to ensure these rules are followed:



- Never give out clues online about where you live or your location.
- Never give out passwords.
- Never plan to meet someone in person – if someone asks, tell your parents.
- Always stay in public chat rooms and never go to a private chat room.
- Always have chat rooms and online groups approved by parents before you visit them.
- Always report harassment or cyber-bullying to your teachers and parents.
- Don’t forward threatening or inappropriate messages to anyone.
- Don’t post online or send a text you wouldn’t want your parent to see.
- Tell friends engaging in cyber-bullying that it is not acceptable.
- Block friends or bullies who send inappropriate or threatening messages.
- Report bullying to a parent, grandparent, or other trusted adult.

- Do not return insults or mean comments – let them go! Be the better person!
- Keep copies of all threatening message.
- Report to police if harassment is repeated and threatening or defamatory.

As parents and grandparents, supervise and monitor children’s use of technology. It is not an invasion of privacy!

- Keep home computers in central location and monitor their use.
- Give cell phones a bedtime – do not let children take phones to bed!
- Communicate with your children/ grandchildren about these issues often.



Today’s youth do not remember a time before the Internet. Many adults do not understand the dangers that are waiting to entice children. Understanding potential dangers is the first step. School systems and many youth and

family organizations offer Internet/technology safety education. Remember – educate yourself and your family, supervise the use of technology, and communicate. These simple steps could help prevent cyber-bullying, sexting, and cyber-stalking situations.

Answers to definition quiz in WL 364:

- | | |
|------|-------|
| 1. B | 6. D |
| 2. G | 7. J |
| 3. F | 8. H |
| 4. I | 9. A |
| 5. C | 10. E |

References

Cyber-bullying Common, More So at Facebook and My Space (www.informationweek.com/news/internet/showArticle.jhtml;jsessionid=4XOTWRLM FJITYQSNDLRSKHSCJUNN2JVN?articleID=200001167&cid=tab_art_sec#community) by Thomas Claburn, Information Week; June 27, 2007.

YouTube tackles bullying online (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/7098978.stm>) BBC News, November 19, 2007.

Lawton, Jodie. “Children and Internet Safety.” MissouriFamilies.org Home. Web. 21 Jan. 2011. (<http://missourifamilies.org/features/parentingarticles/parenting18.htm>).

“Cyberbullying — National Crime Prevention Council.” Home — National Crime Prevention Council. Web. 29 Sept. 2011. (www.ncpc.org/cyberbullying).

