

## CYBERBULLY, THE NEWEST BREED OF BULLY

By Charlene C. Giannetti and Margaret Sagarese

*A high-schooler was surprised, and alarmed, to find out that he was the subject of a Web page called "Welcome to the Page That Makes Fun of Dave Knight." The page was filled with derogatory comments from David's classmates about David and his family. Among the accusations, David was described as a pedophile using the date rape drug on young boys.*

*Following a trip to Toronto, a middle school girl found no one would talk to her when she returned to classes. Using text messaging on cell phones, someone had started a rumor that she had caught SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) while traveling.*

*An overweight boy in Japan changing clothes in a school locker room didn't know a classmate used a picture phone to photograph him. The photos were soon posted on the Internet and forwarded to many of his classmates.*

Cyberbullying, using new communication technology to torment others, is taking humiliation to a frightening level. Hiding behind the anonymity of the Internet, cyberbullies are able to hurl threats, spread rumors, trash reputations, and damage fragile egos, usually without being caught. The incredible scope of the Internet means that a cyberbully can reach millions with the click of a mouse.

"Rather than just some people, say 30 in a cafeteria, hearing them all yell insults at you, [a Web page] is up there for 6 billion people to see," David Knight told a Canadian TV reporter. "You can't get away from it."

Adolescents love new technology, everything from the Internet to iPods, from camera phones to camcorders. Parents, who foot the bill for their children's electronic toys, seemingly remain oblivious of the dangers for misuse. According to the 2000 study *Online Victimization: A Report on the Nation's Youth*, by the University of New Hampshire's Crimes Against Children Research Center, one in 17 kids ages 10 to 17 has been threatened online, and about one-third of them found the incident very upsetting. A 2002 study done in Great Britain by NCH, a children's charity, said that one in four students had been bullied online.

In the past, experts were most concerned about adults threatening children online. Now, however, an increasing number of complaints involve kids menacing their schoolmates.

### CHARTING NEW LEGAL TERRITORY

Because cyberbullying is such a new phenomenon, school and law enforcement officials in the United States and other countries are still sorting out the legal technicalities. "Most of what is done online is protected as free speech," says Frannie Wellings, policy fellow at the Electronic Privacy Information Center in Washington, DC.

In contrast to print publications, where individual stories are checked for libel and accuracy, the atmosphere surrounding websites is freer. "An editor of a newspaper or magazine has to make a conscious decision about what happens in his pages," observes Wellings. "There is a lot of history on what has happened to publishers who were sued," she adds. Because of the vastness of cyberspace, few screening mechanisms exist. "Imagine the bureaucracy of policing everything online," says Wellings. "An Internet Service Provider [ISP] would have to go to great lengths and spend a lot of money." As a result, most ISPs maintain that they are merely a conduit for individuals who want to post information online. Most ISPs have policies telling people not to post offensive material, but that warning is often ignored.

While some of what is published online may seem libelous (i.e., intended to harm the reputation of another), proving that point can be difficult and expensive. In order to prove libel, you have to prove malicious intent, something that might prove difficult if the offending Web page was put up by an adolescent. And many times, freedom of speech wins out.

Unless an actual crime has taken place, law enforcement officials often are unable to arrest anyone, even if they can identify the culprit. According to Lt. John Otero, commanding officer of the computer crime squad for the New York City Police Department, individuals would actually have to post a direct threat in order for the police to act. "For example, if they say, 'tomorrow I am going to hurt, kill, or injure an individual,' that would constitute a crime," he explains. A person posting such a threat could be arrested and charged with aggravated harassment. Although Otero says his department has seen some arrests, anyone under the age of 18 would not be dealt with harshly: "If the kid is too young, he would get a scolding and the incident would be brought to the parents' attention; if they are under 16, they are considered minors."

Most of what police departments see, however, does not constitute an actual crime. "What we get is a lot of is 'he said, she said,' not unlike what you would find in the boys' room, only now they are doing it using electronics," says Otero.

Since most cyberbullying originates on home computers, school administrators resist getting involved. Officials at David Knight's school refused to take action, for example, saying they couldn't uncover who put up the Web page. David's mother complained to Yahoo, the host for the Web page, but weeks later, the page was still up. Unable to withstand the pressure, David finished his final year of high school from home.

### **SAME BULLYING, DIFFERENT FORM**

Like cliques, cyberbullying reaches its peak in middle school, when young adolescents are trying to figure out who their friends are and whether they fit in. "Third- and 4th-graders are just having fun with computers," says Loretta Radice, who taught computer skills to middle-schoolers in public and private schools for more than 15 years. Radice is now director and technology consultant for RADICEL Educational Technology Services in New York, and holds private computer classes for children and adults.

Too many parents, she believes, get bogged down in the new technology and forget that cyberbullying is, at its core, just another form of bullying. "A child who is bullying other children in cyberspace has been bullying earlier," says Radice. Similarly, a child who is being victimized online has probably suffered other abuse.

Hiding behind the anonymity of the Internet emboldens some bullies. Kids feel free to say things on a computer screen that they would never say face-to-face. A cyberbully can feel removed from his actions, almost as if someone else, his alter ego perhaps, is doing the taunting. Without seeing the consequences of his behavior (the hurt or tears on another child's face), how can a bully feel sympathy for his victim, or remorse?

While the cyberbully believes he cannot be caught, Radice notes that everyone leaves footsteps in cyberspace. "Everything is traceable," she says. "Kids often don't realize that."

For example, anyone putting up a Web page in cyberspace needs to pay with a credit card. If your child is being taunted online, you can type in the name of the Web page on [www.whois.com](http://www.whois.com) and find out who paid for the offending page.

Similarly, e-mails and instant messages (IMs) can be traced through screen names and addresses provided by the ISP, such as America Online. Uncovering the culprit may take time, effort, and possibly even the help of a technology expert, but it can be done. "Sometimes bullying can be refuted because everything is verbal and there is no trail," explains Beth Madison, principal of George Middle School in Portland, Oregon. With cyberbullying, however, children can be taught to print out offending messages. Madison says a girl in her school printed out offensive IMs. Armed with the evidence, her parents were able to come to the school and ask for advice. Madison coached them on how to respond to the other parents. The meeting took place, Madison says, and the cyberbullying stopped.

Patti Kinney, principal of Talent Middle School in Talent, Oregon, and president-elect of the National Middle School Association, says that she will work with parents if their children are being harassed online. "If we can help, we will give it our best shot," she says. "If the incident is beyond our control, we will help them contact the police or an ISP."

Yet, in the final analysis, there's only so much that the police and school officials can do to stop a cyberbully. Otero, who lectures frequently to school officials and parents, believes the solution comes back to "Parenting 101." "Most of the time, these kids are better equipped to deal with computers than their parents [are]," he observes. "Most parents don't have a clue what their kids are doing online." He advises parents not to use the computer as a babysitter and to educate themselves immediately on the new technology.

## STRATEGIES TO PROTECT YOUR CHILDREN

Even with cooperative school officials, parents remain on the front line protecting their children. Here are some strategies parents can implement:

- Learn about the new technologies. If you are unfamiliar with the Internet, now is the time to start surfing the Web. Learn the many ways that children can bully electronically, through IMs, e-mails, blogs (Web logs that are online diaries), and videos that are downloaded from camcorders or picture phones.
- Talk about values. The technology may have changed, but kindness and decency should still be top priorities for everyone.
- Guard passwords. A bully can use another child's screen name to send out offensive e-mails. Tell your child not to share passwords with friends and to change passwords frequently.
  - Talk to your child if you believe he is the victim of a bully. Oftentimes a child being tormented by a cyberbully will be too embarrassed to tell a parent or teacher. Make sure your child knows he's not to blame for being targeted and that he should report any incident to you or an adult at school.
  - Keep hard copies. Having documentation of the cyberbullying will strengthen your case if you need to report it to school or other authorities. Otero advises not to delete the original e-mail, even after you have printed it out. "There may be something in the original [e-mail] header that would lead us to the source," he says.
  - Lobby your school. Even if cyberbullying happens outside of school, the repercussions spill over into the classroom. Computer etiquette should be on your school's agenda.
  - Stress the Internet's impact. An e-mail sent to one child can be forwarded to hundreds. Old e-mails and IMs may resurface and get even a well-meaning child in trouble. Encourage your child to think before clicking.

*Charlene Giannetti and Margaret Sagarese are coauthors of several books for parents of young adolescents, including The Roller-Coaster Years: Raising Your Child Through the Maddening Yet Magical Middle School Years; Cliques: 8 Steps to Help Your Child Survive the Social Jungle; and What Are You Doing In There? Balancing Your Need to Know with Your Adolescent's Need to Grow. They lecture to parent, teacher, and student groups across the United States.*

*Adapted from PTA.org*