CYBERBULLYING
What Parents Need To Know

Adolescents are skilled at navigating the Internet and using it as a tool for socializing. They create their own websites, post personal news on blogs (online interactive diaries), send IMs (instant messages), e-mails, and participate in chat rooms. Parents need to be aware that there are increasing instances of teenagers using the Internet to post cruel text or images to bully their peers. Incidents of posted materials promoting acts of violence towards others or themselves are of increasing concern and are now defined as cyberbullying. Cyberbullying is online social cruelty that involves sending or posting harmful text or images using the Internet or other communication devices. Cyberbullying messages and images may be posted on personal websites, blogs, transmitted via e-mail, discussion groups, message boards, chat IMs, and text/image cell phones. Examples of Internet usage to bully another include:

- Taking an unflattering picture in the locker room with a cell phone and posting it on the Internet.
- Repeatedly sending cruel or threatening anonymous e-mails.
- Creating a website that ridicules someone and allows others to post stories, jokes, or cartoons.
- Spreading malicious rumors about someone in a blog or online discussion group.
- Fantasizing about suicide or violence in a chatroom.

What is it about the teen culture and Internet environment that promotes the occurrence of cyberbullying? Teenagers often view the Internet as a vehicle for massive self-disclosure of sensitive personal information. If one were to visit any teen blogging site (Blurty.com, Xanga.com, LiveJournal.com, StudentCenter.org, Bolt.com, Myspace.com, etc.), you will read discussion group or blog entries where teens are publicly reporting on their sexual experiences, sexual abuse, pregnancy, or suicidal intentions. Another misconception that teenagers have about the Internet is that they have the free speech right to say anything they want regardless of the harm inflicted on others. Thus, teenagers are less inhibited when interacting online. The sense of anonymity that the Internet affords often gives teenagers the feeling of being invisible and, therefore, not accountable for their actions. The lack of face-to-face contact dehumanizes and reduces their empathy when online thus encouraging teenagers to engage in riskier behavior.

Cyberbullying can have a damaging impact on victims. It is possible that the harm caused by cyberbullying may be greater then that caused by traditional bullying, since cyberbullying is distributed worldwide and irretrievable. Teenagers who are victims are often reluctant to tell parents because of emotional trauma, sense of self blame, fear of greater retribution, or fear their parents will restrict online accessibility.

As parents, you can protect your children from being a victim or cyberbully by keeping the computer in a public place in the house and periodically checking your

child's activity. Also, periodically investigate the files on the computer, the browser history files, and your child's public online activities. Engage your child in discussions regarding the value of treating others with respect and your expectations of your child while he/she is using the internet, cell phone, or other digital device. It is important to stress to teenagers that severe cyberbullying can lead to criminal arrest or civil litigation. Communicate to your child that using the internet to retaliate against a previous act of bullying is not a viable solution. Instead, encourage your child to seek assistance from their school administrator or school counselor. Emphasize the risk of revealing sensitive and personal information online in public forum or in a message that could be forwarded to others. You may wish to visit a few teen sites with your child to view the information and images being disclosed. Make sure that your child's e-mail address is a "throw-away" e-mail address that can be cancelled if personal safety has been jeopardized.

Cyberbullying activities may range from unkind comments to cruel harassment and blatant physical threats. If your child is the victim of cyberbullying there are protective steps that you can take. First download the evidence of cyberbullying and report the incident to the school or appropriate authority. Next, you may wish to attempt to identify the cyberbully. Your Internet Service Provider may be able to help trace the origin of the material. If the cyberbullying is severe, contact the police and allow them to identify the source. Lastly, reinforce the importance to your child of reporting direct threats or troubling material immediately to you.

Please know that St. Mary's County Public School's website blocks specific Internet sites to inhibit the occurrence of cyberbullying at school. However, if your child is a victim of cyberbullying that occurs at home but is brought into the school environment; please contact your building administrator.

This article references information presented by Ms. Nancy Willard at the 2005 Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools (OSDFS) National Conference. For additional information on cyberbullying please contact the Center for Safe and Responsible Internet Use.