Coping with Cyberbullying – The Use of Technology to Terrify

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We know that bullies come in all sizes and can be found in many places – playgrounds, cafeterias, sports teams, college dorms, even workplaces. In the last ten years of advanced technology there is a new hiding place for a destructive and often lethal bully – cyber space.

What is Cyberbullying?

Cyberbullying is the use of internet or other digital devices as E-mail, instant messaging, text messages, social networking sites, web pages, blogs, chat rooms or interactive game sites to send negative and harmful messages and images. While the term "Cyberbullying" is technically used when the victim or bully in a minor, it is also applied to the cyber harassment of college students.

Cyberbullying Takes Many Forms

According to Nancy Willard of the Center for Safe and Responsible Use of the Internet, cyberbullying can take the form of:

- **flaming** or online fighting with vulgar language
- **harassment** or repeated sending of mean and insulting messages
- **denigration** or demeaning gossip
- **impersonation** or pretending to be someone else and posting damaging messages
- **outing** or sharing someone's personal information or embarrassing secrets
- **trickery** or covertly drawing out and then exposing personal information
- **exclusion** or intentionally excluding someone from an inner on-line group or site
- **Cyber stalking** or repeated frightening threats

Cyberbullying like any form of bullying is relational aggression. It is intended to make the victim feel frightened, humiliated, helpless and too often – hopeless. What makes cyber bullying particularly harmful and in the case of at least five young people who have committed suicide, so deadly, is the nature and virulent reach of electronic medium.

Cyberbullying is anonymous. Perpetrators can torture and harass without detection. Cyberbullying is relentless. It can be conducted 24/7 appearing constantly on the phone and computer that a young person uses on a daily basis for school and social connections. Cyberbullying assaults privacy boundaries in a way that magnifies the horror as it makes damaging material public to an infinite audience that can instantly download, save or forward to others.

Reported in *Cyber Bully: Bullying in a Digital Age*, David Knight, a high school student who found that a web page of negative, sexual accusations and negative descriptions about him had reached as far as Thailand, painfully describes, "Anyone with a computer can see it…It doesn't go away when you come home from school. It makes me feel even more trapped."

Statistics on Cyberbullying

Statistics reveals an increasing problem. Four in ten teens have experienced online bullying; girls are twice as likely to be victims *and* perpetrators, usually engaging in social sabotage of others; boys are more likely to target girls and less aggressive males; sexual and homophobic harassment is emerging as a prevalent aspect of cyberbullying; cyberbullying is most prevalent among 15 and 16 year olds; and the more that young people share their identities and thoughts on social networking sites as MySpace and Facebook, the more likely they are to be targets than those who do not use the sites.

Why Teens Don't Tell

Electronic harassment is as real as and often more frightening than face to face bullying. Much like stalking or other types of assault the victim can often feel helpless, frozen, isolated, ashamed and not likely to reveal what is going on to parents or sometimes even to friends. According to surveys, only 35% of cyberbullied teens and 51% of preteens told parents. The reasons given by teens in Focus Groups were fear of restriction from electronic use, fear of being blamed or expectation of parents' overreactions.

Feeling Safer in Cyber-Space

The answer for parents is not to ban a child or teen from their technological connections or to read every E-mail. Cyberspace is as much a viable social world as the playground, candy store or Mall was to earlier generations.

- For parents, talking with children and teens about the forms of cyberbullying and strategies for dealing with it can be a valuable trusted collaboration. Supervision is different from invasion of privacy.
- For pre- teens and teens living at home or college students living with friends the answer in the face of harassing material or cyber terror is not to isolate and hide. You have done nothing wrong. You are entitled to the support of those around you. Work together and draw upon the guidelines listed below to respond to cyberbullying.

Guidelines for Responding to Cyberbullying

- Stop- Don't respond to the bully- even to the first offense -it only escalates the problem.
- Save the evidence- print copies and save the messages. Young children can be instructed to shut off the monitor if something upsetting appears (not the computer) and/or CALL YOU.
- Block the sender or point out how you can click the warning button on an instant message (IM) screen or chat screen that alerts the Internet Service Provider of objectionable material.
- As a parent if you and your child find that the perpetrator is another student, share evidence with the guidance counselor – even though 70% of the cyberbullying happens when a youngster is home, if often involves other students in the school.
- If the cyberbullying continues – contact the parents of the perpetrator. If you are comfortable with that, it can be very effective in helping everyone. Given that you have saved evidence, you can invite the need for steps to correct a dangerous situation for all.
- If needed contact an attorney to help you deal with the parents of the perpetrator.
- If the cyberbullying contains threats, intimidation, obscene material or sexual exploitation report it to the police or cyber crime unit it your area.
- Seek support and professional help for yourself and or your child if there is emotional stress reflected in depression, desperation, anxiety or thoughts of self-harm.

The Bystanders

As reflected in the title of Barbara Coloroso's book on bullying, the cycle of this type of violence includes the bully,

the bullied and the bystanders. In all types of bullying the role of the bystander is crucial – perhaps even more so in cyber bullying.

If we overlook the ease with which we or our children can unwittingly add to the horror of damaging someone's life by passing on the secrets, privacy or exposure of another with a simple click, we make cyberspace a dangerous place. If we talk about and participate in steps with friends and family to stop, delete, tell, block and report cyber assault, if we show compassion, we change from bystanders to protectors.