

THE DAY of Facebook, You



In February 2007, Robert F. Hall Catholic Secondary School located in Caledon East faced widespread publicity surrounding the use of the Internet by certain students. It started out as an opportunity for students to vent about their principal. As more and more students logged on to the popular social networking site Facebook.com, the venting became vulgar.

The postings included sexually explicit, derogatory, and demeaning remarks about the principal. As a result of the cyberbullying, 11 male and female students of the school were suspended for up to eight days.

The school took the position that the postings violated the Dufferin-Peel Catholic District School Board's Code of Conduct. It states that "using computer technology to communicate inappropriate, demeaning, harassing or threatening messages shall be subject to disciplinary action. Police may be contacted." The disciplinary action taken by the school

Welcome to the world of cyberspace where the rules are changing rapidly.

attracted considerable controversy. Some students argued that because they sent comments from home computers and away from school property, they should not have been suspended.

In this new age of Internet technology, cyberbullying and harassment have been widespread among students from elementary to

university age. For example, a group of Pickering elementary students recently apologized for posting a video on YouTube mocking a schoolmate who had suffered a stroke. A 16-year-old student at Birchmount Park Collegiate Institute was recently suspended for creating a site on Facebook that targeted the school's vice-principal, using degrading and offensive language. This was part of an ongoing attempt to undermine the authority of the vice-principal.

Cyberbullying has been defined by educator Bill Belsey as the use of information and communication technologies, such as e-mail, cell phone and pager text messages, instant messaging, defamatory personal Web sites, and defamatory on-line personal polling Web sites, to support deliberate, repeated, and hostile behaviour by an individual or group, that is intended to harm others.

Cyberbullying, like other forms of bullying, is about human relationships, power and control. Bullying is a form of aggression used from a position of power. The child who bullies is attempting to use power to control and cause distress to another. The child who is victimized may become trapped in a relationship in which he or she is being abused.

Young people are increasingly communicating in ways that are often unfamiliar to adults and away from their supervision. Cyberbullies can communicate their hurtful messages to a very wide audience with remarkable speed. Cyberbullies often do not take ownership for their actions, as it may be difficult to identify them and they do not fear being punished for their conduct.

A recent study conducted by the University of Calgary found one in four students in Grade 7 reported being a victim of cyberbullying. In her

RK SIDE Tube and MySpace

Eric Roher

study, Professor Quing Li surveyed 177 students in two middle schools. She found that more than half (53%) of the students reported that they knew someone being harassed or intimidated on-line. Fifteen percent said that they bullied others using electronic communications tools. Recent studies reveal the following facts:

- ◆ 48 percent of Canadian students spend at least an hour a day surfing the World Wide Web;
- ◆ almost 60 percent of Canadian students use chat rooms and instant messaging;
- ◆ only 16 percent of students say they talk to their parents about what they do on-line;
- ◆ a 2004 British Columbia study of Grades 4 to 8 students found that 35 percent of students reported that they were threatened on-line.

From a school perspective, this may be a particularly difficult issue as, unlike physical bullying, cyber-threats are often sent anonymously and from home computers. And while cyberbullying can be as devastating as traditional forms of bullying, some students won't complain for fear that adults may overreact and the students will lose their mobile phone or computer privileges. In addition, victims of cyberbullying are afraid of reporting it, as they are fearful of possible reprisals and retaliation. They are afraid that the bullying will become worse if they report it.

Prevention and Early Intervention

Principals, teachers, guidance counsellors, and teacher-librarians all share the responsibility of keeping our students safe from bullies. It is important for schools to educate students and

parents about the seriousness of cyberbullying. In this regard, teacher-librarians can take the lead in promoting curriculum-based, anti-bullying programs and ethical use of technology. These programs should focus on improving relations among members of the school community and creating a peaceful school culture. School council meetings, family literacy nights, and newsletters from the school and the school library can all support parents in understanding the problem and taking proactive steps to both protect and teach their children responsible on-line behaviour.

Software applications such as NetSupport (as described in the last issue of *The Teaching Librarian*) can help monitor students' communications while they are in school. Unfortunately, some of the most hateful messaging is done from home, and so it is important that teachers and teacher-librarians assist parents by noticing students who shy away from the computers, who seem withdrawn from their classmates, or who indicate that something is troubling them.

Excellent lessons and information on cyberbullying are available at:

- ◆ Media Awareness Network
www.media-awareness.ca;
- ◆ Be Web Aware
www.bewebaware.ca;
- ◆ Cyber Wise
www.cyberwise.ca. ■

cyberbullying in schools