Internet bullying

With the click of a key, bullies are humiliating their peers. What are schools doing to tame this behavior?

By Amanda Paulson | Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor

For one middle-school girl it was a rumor, circulated via text messaging, that she had contracted SARS while on a trip to Toronto. She returned to school and found nobody would come near her.

For an overweight boy in Japan, it was cellphone pictures, taken of him on the sly while he was changing in the locker room and then sent to many of his peers.

And for Calabasas High School in California, it was a website - schoolscandals.com - on which vicious gossip and racist and threatening remarks grew so rampant that most of the school was affected.

The actions themselves - rumors, threats, gossip, humiliation - are nothing new. But among today's adolescents - a generation of instant messengers, always connected, always wired - bullies are starting to move beyond slam books and whisper campaigns to e-mail, websites, chat rooms, and text messaging.

While in some ways it's no worse than old-fashioned bullying, cyberbullying has a few idiosyncrasies. Websites and screen names give bullies a mask of anonymity if they wish it, making them difficult to trace.

The pressure for kids to be always online means bullies can extend their harassment into their victims' homes. And the miracle of the Web means that sharing an embarrassing photo or private note - with thousands of people - requires little more than the click of a key.

"It used to be if something happened at school, someone made a joke about you, or said something in front of you, that was horrible enough," says Glenn Stutzky, instructor in Michigan State University's School of Social Work. "But at least a relatively small group of people is there and aware of it. With wireless technology, that stuff is much more quickly spread, not only around school but it has the potential of being put up and shared around the world." No one knows that better than Ghyslain, the Canadian teenager who gained notoriety this year as "the Star Wars kid." Fooling around alone with a video camera one day, the somewhat awkward adolescent filmed himself acting out a scene from "Star Wars": He twirled and flung himself about the room, swinging a golf-ball retriever as his light saber.

It was the sort of private geeky moment many kids have, but in Ghyslain's case, it went further.
Some peers got hold of the video, uploaded it to the Internet, and started passing it around. Doctored videos, splicing him into "The Matrix," "The Terminator," or the musical "Chicago," with added special effects and sounds, soon followed. He's now the most downloaded male of the year. According to news reports, he was forced to drop out of school and seek psychiatric help.

"It's one of the saddest examples," says Mr. Stutzky. "He did one goofy little thing, and now it will always be a part of that young man's life."

Cruel messages - in an instant

Most cyberbullying doesn't reach such extremes, but it's still damaging. One in 17 kids ages 10 to 17 had been threatened or harassed online, and about one-third of those found the incidents extremely distressing, according to a 2000 study by the University of New Hampshire's Crimes Against Children Research Center. A study in Britain last year by NCH, a British children's charity, found that 1 in 4 students had been bullied online.
The most common instances often involve instant messaging, or IM - the instantaneous chats that have spawned a lingo of their own and are a constant presence on most kids' computers. Bullies can send a mean or threatening

IM with no identification beyond a selected screen-name. If that name gets blocked, they choose another. More recently, it's cellphones. For several years now, bullying via text messaging and cellphone photos has been a concern in countries such as Britain and Japan, where such technologies are common. Stutzky says he's just beginning to see it in the US. He heard from a high-school boy who got text messages questioning his sexual orientation, and from a middle-school girl who got messages like: "Where did your mom get you those shoes? K-Mart?"

Other times, it's a website. Some circulate rumors, ask students to vote on the ugliest or fattest kid in school, or focus on one individual. When Will, a middle-schooler in Kansas, broke up with his girlfriend, she created a website devoted to smearing him.

She outlined vivid threats, made up vicious rumors, and described what it would be like to see him torn apart.

Unflattering images
Photos are ammunition, too. Ted Feinberg, assistant director of the National Association of School Psychologists, often cites the young woman he met who had a falling out with a boy. In a fit of anger, he used photo-editing tools to paste her face onto a pornographic photo and sent it to his entire e-mail list.

"It was emotionally devastating for her," says Dr. Feinberg.

The perpetrator was known, at least, in situations like the previous two. In Will's case, his mother went to the principal, the website came down, and the girl got counseling and was transferred to another school.
In other cases, however, schools feel helpless. Free-speech rights can make it difficult to take down a website, bullies are often anonymous, and most of the harassment takes place off school property. After the school shooting at Columbine High School in 1999, many schools began looking at bullying as a serious problem, and some instituted zero-bullying policies. But cyberspace is a new territory, and schools aren't sure how far to extend their jurisdiction.

J. Guidetti, principal of Calabasas High School, did get involved, after comments on schoolscandals.com caused many of his students to be depressed, angry, or simply unable to focus on school.

"It might have been happening off campus," says Mr. Guidetti, "but the effects carry on into the school day.... Our school had the most postings of any school in southern California. It became a snowball effect, like a real-life soap opera. It became this culture of its own, and got very hurtful very quickly."

The site has more than 30,000 members and any student can post a message. Guidetti first looked at schoolscandals.com after hearing about it from a parent. He was shocked to find some blatantly racist comments, threats, and even references to lynching certain students.

His next step was a series of meetings - with parents, students, and faculty - to keep everyone informed. But getting the site stopped, he learned, wasn't easy. Talking to law-enforcement officials led nowhere; there are few rules governing what can get posted on the Internet.

Eventually, a local radio station got involved and put enough pressure on the people running the site - a father-son duo - that they took it down in the spring. Already, there's a schoolscandals2 - relatively harmless, so far. Guidetti checks it regularly for offensive content, one of the ever-growing tasks of a 21st-century principal.

Combating cyberbullying
Despite the legal difficulties of forcing a website to shut down, or even discovering the identity of someone smearing or threatening another online, kids, parents, and schools do have ways to combat cyberbullying, experts say.

Perhaps the most important is simple communication."You can buy filters and all these things, but I think the only filter that really works is between our kids' ears," says Bill Belsey, president of Bullying.org Inc., a nonprofit group in Canada. "We need to have really strong communication with our kids, so they know if they are ever being cyberbullied to come forward."

At www.cyberbullying.ca, a website that he runs, it details steps families can take - including how to track the owners of an e-mail address - and provides software that can help filter text or track e-mails.
He and others would like to see more corporate responsibility - Internet service providers taking down threatening sites, or at a minimum ISPs and cellphone companies providing clear policies against abuse and resources for reporting harassment. In Britain, notes Stutzky, cellphone companies already offer such resources and are developing software that sends copies of text messages to parents.

But some of the most effective techniques to fight cyberbullying are the same ones that fight bullying of any kind: Teach kids to report incidents. Don't engage the bully. Talk about the issues surrounding bullying at school and at home.

"It's not new bullying, it's just a vehicle," says Nancy Mullin-Rindler, director of the Project on Teasing and Bullying at Wellesley College in Massachusetts.

"The most effective responses are principals engaging parents and teachers to try to stop this sort of behavior," she adds. "There's this myth that we can't possibly know who does it. But you just have to use good old-fashioned sleuthing to find out. Kids want credit for doing this thing."

Online bullying: a punishable offense
At Calabasas, Guidetti encourages the school's peer-support group to offer comfort and advice to victims of all sorts of bullying. John Gibbons, principal of Weston Middle School in Massachusetts, sent a listserv notice to parents this month, alerting them to instances of IM harassment among the students. He encouraged them to talk to their kids and gauge whether, in fact, they were mature enough to be using IM.

He's already heard back from some parents. "Some of them had no awareness of how much their kids were using it," he says. "For others, it prompted them to talk more about the content of the messages they send and receive." More schools are sending home Internet use policies at the start of the school year and are including cyberbullying as an offense that can be punished.

Both parents and educators, notes Belsey, can help by showing kids the positive connections and educational benefits of the Internet.

"The promise of technology is absolutely brilliant," he says. "But we have to understand that the world our kids are growing up in is different than it was in the past. We can't condemn it, but need to give our kids enough information to cope with the world they're living in.... We need to show kids all the positive potential for teaching and learning that all this connectivity has."

http://www.csmonitor.com/2003/1230/p11s01-legn.html