

Leaders In Violence Education Presents A Parent's Guide to Cyber Bullying



CyberSticks and CyberStones...



Online networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace are generally used by millions of teens and young adults to communicate with friends or family members who are away at college or who don't live nearby. Sadly, they have also become a tool for bullies to target their victims mentally and emotionally even when they aren't in their presence physically. The misuse of this technology can mean long-term consequences for both the abusers and the abused.

Cyber bullying occurs when a child or teen is tormented, harassed, embarrassed, threatened, or targeted by another child or teen using the internet or cell phones. Parents should understand that cyber bullying can be just as harsh and damaging as physical bullying, if not more so because of the ease with which it can be hidden from authority figures. The effect on victims is often extreme and can lead to legal action against the perpetrators.

The purpose of this bulletin is to inform Seneca parents about the dangers and prevalence of cyber bullying in today's society so that we may all be better prepared to deal with bullying situations as they arise.

High schools across the nation have seen a rise in physical altercations between students as a result of bullying that begins online. It can be easy for parents and teachers to overlook the signs of cyber bullying; especially with the seemingly limitless access to messaging technologies today's youth are allowed.

The key to putting an end to cyber bullying is vigilance. Just as a parent would keep a watchful eye on his or her preschooler on the playground, he or she should strike a balance between freedom and supervision when it comes to teens and their tech time.

According to the National Crime Prevention Center, over 40% of all teenagers with Internet access have reported being bullied online during the past year.

Cyber Bullying and Its Legal Ramifications

Cyber bullying can be categorized into two different types; proxy and direct. **Proxy cyber bullying** is when someone says or posts anything negative on the computer about someone else. Examples of proxy bullying include posting pictures of people without their permission, talking about people in blogs and profiles, and posting any other unapproved information on the web about them. **Direct cyber bullying** consists of direct comments by one to another child or teen online or comments posted on that child or teen's personal page or blog.

Even though a child might start out as a bully, he or she can soon become a victim because children in cyber bullying situations tend to change their roles and retaliate against one another as the situation escalates. Cyber bullying is hardly ever a one time thing, unless it involves a death threat or severe bodily harm and legal action is sought.

Those who cyber bully may be charged with harassment, making terroristic threats, or even stalking depending on the severity of their actions. A charge of harassment can mean heavy fines, but if a teen is charged with making terroristic threats or stalking, both indictable offenses, it means almost certain jail time. The charged teen's fate would rest solely in the hands of whatever judge drew his or her case.

Tips for Teens Who Are Cyber Bullied:

- Tell a trusted adult about the bullying, and keep telling until the adult takes action.
- Tell your school if it is school related. Schools have a bullying solution in place.
- Don't erase the messages!--they may be needed to take action.
- Protect yourself--never agree to meet with the person or with anyone you meet online.
- If bullied through chat or instant messaging, the "bully" can often be blocked.
- If you are threatened with harm, inform the local police.

Megan's Story: Cyber Bullying leads to tragic death

Megan Meier was your typical thirteen-year-old girl. She was eagerly looking forward to getting her braces removed and turning fourteen, and was just starting to get into boys when she befriended a cute boy named Josh on MySpace. The teens bonded quickly over the course of about a month.

Josh described himself as a 16-year-old boy who lived nearby and was home schooled, and, at first, he and Megan really seemed to hit it off. Josh was quick to flatter and compliment Megan who, like most thirteen-year-old girls, sometimes struggled with low self-esteem and self-doubt and had recently been diagnosed and medicated for depression. Megan's mom, Tina, started to become a bit wary of the relationship when Megan told her that Josh had begun to weave some insults in among those sought-after compliments and that he didn't have a phone, so she couldn't call him. Tina had an intuitive, uneasy feeling about the relationship, but she wasn't sure that what she was feeling wasn't just her tendency to be a "nervous mom" taking over. She opted to allow her teenage daughter her space and privacy while still attempting to monitor the relationship.

On October 15, 2006, Josh posted a message to Megan's MySpace page saying, 'I don't know if I want to be friends with you any longer because I hear you're not nice to your friends,'" Tina Meier said. Someone using Josh's account was sending cruel messages and Megan called her mother, saying electronic bulletins were being posted about her, saying things like, "Megan Meier is a slut. Megan Meier is fat," according to the Associated Press.

The cyber exchange devastated Megan, who was unable to understand how and why her friendship had unraveled. The stress and frustration was too much for her.

Tina Meier discovered her daughter's body in a bedroom closet on Oct. 16, 2006. Megan had hanged herself and died a day later.

During the week of December 15th, Seneca students will have the opportunity to take The Megan Pledge, promising not to participate in cyber bullying behaviors, during their lunch periods. This program is being sponsored at Seneca by LIVE (Leaders In Violence Education).

But six weeks after Megan's death, the Meiers learned Josh never existed. A local mother, who had learned of the page from one of Megan's friends, told the Meiers that another neighborhood mom had created and monitored Josh's profile and page in order to torment Megan as retaliation after an alleged falling out between Megan and the woman's own daughter.

Although this case may be especially sickening since an adult was involved in the bullying of a young girl, in the information age, it is not uncommon to find that the playground poundings of yesterday have moved to online chat rooms and instant messages. Nearly half of all teenagers report they have been the victim of cyber attacks. Everything from text messaging to e-mail can be used to bully victims. Some people even create websites solely dedicated to harassment.

It may be difficult for a well-meaning child to initially tell the difference between friend and foe online.

"When emotionally vulnerable young people get online, they can be very easily manipulated," said Nancy Willard, executive director of the Center for Safe and Responsible Internet Use.

Ron Meier, Megan's dad, says parents should be mindful of their children's online activities and relationships.

"Be as watchful as you can be," he said.

For more information on The Megan Pledge or cyber bullying, go to www.stopcyberbullying.org

THE MEGAN PLEDGE

