

Parents Need to be Aware that Bullying Has Gone Hi-Tech

**Presentation by
The Prince Edward Island
Home and School Federation**

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The Prince Edward Island Home and School Federation thanks you for this opportunity to come and present our concerns and ideas on an issue that is becoming increasingly serious in our schools and society – cyberbullying.

Most of us are aware of bullying at school. We likely have talked with our children about who was being bullied, offered advice or intervened if our child was being bullied, or dealt with complaints that our child may even be a bully. This type of bullying, as damaging as the experience can be, is for the most part restricted to the school property or within its vicinity. But cyberbullying extends to the world, can be even more dangerous and damaging, and cannot be erased.

The saying that "sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me" has never been comforting to those who have experienced bullying. At Home and School, we are very proud of the amazing work that Tami Martell, a former board member, had done over the past decade to build awareness of the impact and seriousness of verbal abuse.

The PEI Home and School Federation has placed priority over the years on helping to make our schools and communities safe and accepting places for all of our children. For example, last spring, we coordinated three Diversity Youth Forums across PEI which involved almost 2,000 Grade 8 students and their teachers in a day of discussions and presentations on diversity and openness. In 2000, we sponsored Reverend Dale Lang to come to PEI and speak about the events that led to the tragic death of his son in Taber, Alberta in 1999 at the hands of another student. Our organization has sponsored speakers on Internet safety at our provincial, local, and regional meetings. Projects have developed a teen violence prevention video "LEAVE" or "Let's End Adolescent Violence Everywhere" and two video scripts, "The Party Girl" and "Egg Boy" on internet safety/bullying and alcohol & drug for grades 9-12.

The expansion of communications channels, including, weblogs, chat rooms, emailing, text messaging, and hate websites, and the continuing growth in the number of Island families with home access to the Internet, is exposing more and more of our children to greater risks of being cyberbullied in more ways.

What is Cyberbullying?

Cyberbullying is being cruel to another person by sending or posting hurtful materials using the Internet or cell phone. It includes:

- **Flaming** - Using angry or vulgar language in electronic communications such as email, cell phone and pager text messages, instant messaging and website or weblog postings.
- **Misusing** a cell phone to take embarrassing photos and emailing it to others.
- **Cyberstalking** - repeatedly sending threatening messages to a target which causes them to feel afraid for their safety.
- **Harassment** - Sending insulting and rude messages repeatedly to someone.
- **Denigration** - Sending or posting cruel gossip or rumours about a person to damage their reputation.
- **Impersonation** - Breaking into someone's email account, posing as that person and sending damaging messages about a person that will get them into trouble or danger, or damage the person's reputation or friendships.
- **Outing or trickery** - Revealing someone's secrets or embarrassing information online or tricking someone into revealing secrets which are then distributed online.
- **Exclusion** - Excluding someone from an online group like blocking them from a chat group.

Who are Cyberbullies?

- Usually it is someone the target knows.
- It can, however, be an online stranger that the target has been communicating with in chat rooms or a visitor to the person's weblog. Online bullies will take advantage of those who are lonely and looking for connection online.
- Bullies at school may continue bullying the victim online.
- Sometimes the person who is being victimized by a bully at school will retaliate against the bully online. For example, those who bullies consider "the geeks" may find themselves on the receiving end of computer wizardry where, for example, their email will be broken into, routed to the online bully's email, edited in a damaging way and sent on as normal to the intended recipient. It is certainly less damaging than the revenge that we witnessed in Columbine? Taber, but it is no more justifiable.
- A jilted partner in a relationship breakup can resort to online vengeance.
- Cyberbullies can be those who express hatred toward others because of differences such as race, religion, appearance, obesity or sexual orientation.
- Some cyberbullies find it entertaining to hurt other people
- Cyberbullies, particular in the throes of revenge or aggression, may not fully realize that what they place on the Internet can be potentially accessed by or forwarded to anyone in the world. They also may not realize what others who are even more devious, for example, a sexual predator, can do with the personal information or photos.

Children who engage in what they may think is a practical joke can find themselves in very deep Internet waters, and there is no turning back. Once the information is out there, it cannot be retrieved or erased. Their practical joking can become outright cyberbullying, and the target's reputation can be damaged.

Cyberbullies can be lurking on the Internet and may not even know their target. They can also engage the involvement of others online whom the target does not know. It can be considered

pure entertainment for these people. What can make it worse is victims often do not want to report cyberbullying to their parents because they are traumatized by it, and they do not want to take the chance of losing their Internet and cell phone privileges.

Who is Vulnerable to Cyberbullying?

Potentially anyone can be vulnerable to cyberbullying, but the most likely victims include:

- Those who are already a target of bullying in school.
- Those who are bullies in school and generate enemies who take revenge.
- Those who have difficulty making real-world friends. They open up more with online connections and mistake the Internet for a safe place.
- Those who reveal personal information online either in chats or on weblogs. Young people often disclose personal contact information and other sensitive information in profiles, web pages, weblogs and in other communications. They seem to be unaware of the public and permanent nature of disclosing personal information.

Because the Internet is accessed in the privacy of their homes, young people can mistakenly feel invisible on the Internet and have a false feeling of "you can't see me." They can be deluded to feel free and uninhibited.

Cyberbullying is Very Intrusive

- A home should be a safe place for a child.
- It can make a child feel stalked because they are being contacted within their personal space and cause them to be afraid to go outside.
- Parents can mistakenly feel that their child is safely at home in front of the computer. At one time, the television was considered to be the "electronic babysitter", but the interactivity of the Internet, potentially makes cyberspace a dangerous babysitter.

What are Some "Red Flag" Signs of Cyberbullying?

- Your child is not willing to talk about his or her online activities.
- Your child is often using their computer late at night.
- Your child spends many hours on the computer.
- Your child's grades are declining.
- There is evidence that your child is covering their online tracks.
- You have received a report of inappropriate behaviour.
- Your child appears upset after Internet use.

What can Parents Do to Educate their Children on Cyberbullying?

- Talk to your child about the importance of treating others with kindness and respect.
- Make it clear what the consequences will be if your child undertakes cyberbullying. Mention that extreme cyberbullying can lead to criminal charges.
- Educate your child on what cyberbullying is, as they may not be fully aware.
- If they are being bullied and involved in cyberbullying, explain that taking vengeance like this is not solving the problem and that it could make the situation worse.
- Speak with a counselor about how to bully-proof your child..
- Maintain good communication with your child and let them know that you trust and support them.
- If someone is aware that cyberbullying is taking place, they should report it to a trusted adult or counselor.

How to Protect your Children: A Parent's Story

Part of the beauty of raising a child on Prince Edward Island is the protection and closeness of small communities where we know each other, but even here on PEI, parents need to be very aware of the larger Internet community, the ramifications and consequences of unsupervised Internet use in your home and ultimately the wellbeing and safety of your children.

Here is a story from an Island parent whose child is presently experiencing cyberbullying.

Out of respect for their privacy, they will not be identified; however the story is similar to that of many parents who are experiencing this sinister type of bullying. They speak first hand about the strategies they recommend and are using to protect their children.

The parent says,

We have to watch our daughter almost 24 hours a day because she has become so devastated about being bullied at school and being cyberbullied.

Our daughter has had embarrassing pictures taken of her in the school locker room and posted on a websites, emailed and spread physically around the school. She has received mean messages and threats through MSN and email.

As parents we have had to take excessive measures to protect our daughter as well as our two sons while at the same time allowing them access to computers, the Internet and MSN. We keep a very close eye on their computer use

Parents need to be educated on ways to monitor computer use. Here is a list of what we do which we hope will be helpful to other parents.

- Let your children know that you will be monitoring their computer use by looking at their Internet activity files. This is a condition of the privilege of using the computer. It is important to explain that you are doing this, not because you do not trust them, but because you want to protect them from cyberbullies, sexual predators, identity thieves and computer security and virus threats.
- Educate your children on the dangers of using the Internet to divulge personal information to people - especially if they do not personally know the individual they are communicating with. This information includes passwords, PIN numbers, birth dates, addresses, phone numbers, full names and personal pictures.

- Educate your children on the dangers of downloading software. Downloaded software can often include data miners which can send personal information about the user to identify thieves.
- If your children are using Hotmail for their email, set it up so they can only receive emails from people on their contact list. This option is under the Filter settings.
- Require that your child tells you their username and password for all MSN and email accounts.
- Turn on message logging for MSN accounts which will save the entire conversations they have online. Let your child know that this log must be left on and that you will be checking it.
- Make sure that the web browser (which could be Internet Explorer, Firefox, or Netscape) has its settings set to keep a history of the web pages your child is visiting. Check these periodically so you know where your child has browsed. View the browser's temporary files, looking for suspicious cookies or files.
- Go through the child's computer files looking for signs that they have received menacing emails and messages.
- If you have reason to be concerned, install a router or software with parental controls. This allows you to lock your child out of adult sites, and restrict the time of day the Internet can be used. Some parental controls keep a log of Internet activity as well which your child cannot override unless he/she knows the password. Net Nanny is the best known software for parental control. Linksys makes a parental control router for about \$120 and then you must then subscribe to their service which costs about \$40 per year. These parental control routers are the best solution if you have multiple computers and are concerned that your child may hack into software type controls.
- Search the Internet using Google, Yahoo or other popular search engines for instances of your child's name, username or other keyword that might help you locate harassing sites about your child. Another way to find these sites is to look at your child's contact list in MSN or other chat lines. Often the contact list includes the contact's website. Check out some of them to see if they have websites that you feel are harassing. Pay attention to contacts that your child has blocked.
- It is best to not allow your child to access the Internet from his/her own room. Rather the computer should be in a room that you are frequently in. Be concerned if your child is in the habit of switching screens as you walk by the computer. If you are going to allow computers in their room, then you should have the ability to monitor and block Internet access at the first sign of problems. Parents who allow

computers in the child's room should have a high degree of computer expertise so they can supervise Internet activity.

- Talk to your child about the experiences they have on the Internet to make sure there is nothing sinister going on.

These are strategies that this family set up for their children. These parameters change with our trust and the age of our children and their understanding of the dangers around cyberbullying and Internet access.

Other Advice to Parents

- Be up front with your child that you will be periodically investigating files and Internet history.
- Tell your child that you may review their private conversations if you have reason to believe there is unsafe or irresponsible behaviour.
- Watch for secretive behaviour such as an empty history file or attempts to hide online communications.
- If you have serious concerns, install key-stroke software that will record all of your child's online communications and activities. Your child should be aware that you are doing this and what actions would lead to you checking their conversations.

There are a number of excellent websites that can educate parents and teachers about cyberbullying. They include: www.cyberbullying.org and www.cyberbullying.ca
<http://www.bullying.org>

As communications technology develops, it is so important for parents to be aware of the technology and the dangers that it can pose for our children. It is very important to keep a good communication with our children, so they as well understand the full consequences of the technology they are using.

What Needs to Be Done?

As we have outlined, cyberbullying is an increasingly important concern in our society. It is not just more of the same kind of bullying that we knew as children ourselves. It is a new kind of bullying, more diverse, often more hurtful, more invasive and more lasting than traditional bullying.

Also, unlike traditional bullying, it reaches into the home, and this places a new level of responsibility on parents to protect their children. In fact, parents are the only people who can protect their children against being cyberbullied in their own home.

Some parents may hesitate to use the strategies that we have suggested because they may seem like invasions of their child's privacy. It is vital for parents to accept that they have the responsibility to protect their children against cyberbullying, and that this gives them the right to monitor their child's online activities and communications.

In addition, many parents need to develop the computer knowledge and skills to carry out the strategies we have described. It is vital to find ways to support and carry out expanded parent education sessions on computer training to "cyber-proof" their homes and their families.

We urge the Committee to recommend development of a strategy for family education in this important area. The PEIHSF would be pleased to partner with the education system, the health system, the Community Access Program system, the justice system, and parent and youth groups in this initiative.

Many employers, like the provincial government, offer different options to employees. Perhaps the provincial government should promote the options it has available to its employees. For example:

- deferred salary
- leave of absence
- temporary reduction in hours
- job sharing

This would allow parents to spend more time with their children.

Even more importantly, the schools, in partnership with parents and communities, play a vital role in promoting acceptance, respect, and tolerance. Initiatives like Peaceful Schools, the school district policies such as Caring and Respectful Places to Learn, and a host of school-based anti-bullying programs are making a difference by tackling the root causes of cyberbullying.

We also ask that the Committee recommend that issues related to bullying and to promotion of acceptance and tolerance be given high priority by the Department of Education in its school improvement planning processes, and that the development of school improvement indicators take account of the study findings on the importance of sustained, long-term, school-wide measures to promote acceptance and to reduce aggression and bullying.

In closing, we thank you for this opportunity to present our concerns and suggestions, and wish you well in your work.