

Cyberbullying damage just as real to teens

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MOUNT VERNON — School's out for the summer, so your child is safe from bullies, right? Wrong. In this age of computers, the Internet, chat rooms, text messaging and cell phones, today's "plugged in" generation is more at

risk of being a target of bullying than ever before as a phenomenon called cyberbullying is becoming more and more insidious.

Online bullies create Web pages devoted to unpopular students, send anonymous hurtful, insulting or threatening e-mail, post compromising photos, spread nasty rumors and make unfounded, derogatory sexual comments. Bullying has become a 24-hour-per-day, seven-days-a-week online bashing with no place being safe for the victims.

Considering that, as research indicates, 50 percent of children are online most of the time without adult supervision, the anonymity available on the Web is what makes the cyber attacks so cutting and offensive. Victims of cyberbullying can be reached anytime and anyplace, and frequently experience heightened anxiety, fear and embarrassment because they do not know the source and have no way to retaliate.

Glenn Stutzky, on the faculty of Michigan State University's School of Social Work, said girls tend to be cyberbullied most about their appearance, choice of friends and their choice of clothes, while boys' harassment often centers on sex and sexual orientation.

A survey conducted by i-SAFE America indicated the "damage done by cyber bullies is no less real [than face-to-face encounters], and can be infinitely more painful." The survey found 42 percent of children in grades four through eight have been bullied by others online; 35 percent have been threatened; and for 58 percent someone has said mean or hateful things to them online. Fifty-eight percent have not told their parents or another adult about something mean or hurtful that happened to them online.

The cyberbullying problem is so far-reaching that Hollywood has gotten into the act. A review by Dave Mason which appeared in the April 2 edition of The Columbus Dispatch, said, "The drama 'Odd Girl Out' shows the harmful effects of Internet bullying." Alexa Vega plays the victim of students who bully her through vicious Web sites and e-mails and the film dispels the notion that bullying is typical childhood or adolescent non-injurious behavior.

What can parents do? One important thing parents can do is to supervise their children's cell phone and Internet usage. They should also talk with their children about Internet safety and buy software that records instant messages. It would also not be inappropriate to block certain Internet sites.

I-SAFE America Inc. is a nonprofit foundation whose mission is to educate and empower youth to safely and responsibly take control of their Internet experiences. It is funded by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Office of Justice Programs, Department of Justice.

According to officials at i-SAFE America, "The fact is, parents are principally responsible for their child's Internet safety education." It has initiated the i-Parent Campaign, a nationwide movement to raise awareness of Internet safety issues and advocate Internet safety education. To help parents learn about the dangers online and help them protect their children, the organization has developed a toolkit which includes a video, PowerPoint presentations, fact sheets and more. More information about the i-SAFE i-Parent Campaign Toolkit can be accessed at the i-SAFE America Web site www.isafe.org. I-SAFE Internet safety tips for students are:

- Guard your identifying information such as name, gender, age, address, school and teams. It only takes a little information for a predator to identify you.
- Always remember: Responsible adults do not pursue relationships with kids and teens.
- Make your user name generic and anonymous.
- Make your online profile generic and anonymous.
- Know how to exit an inappropriate Web site.

- Don't send photos to an Internet friend or post photos on the Internet.
- Remember that chat room "friends" are not always who they say they are.
- Don't open or read mail by cyberbullies.
- Don't erase the messages. They may be needed to take action.
- Protect yourself. Never agree to meet with anyone you meet online.
- If you are threatened with harm, inform the local police.

The national campaign against bullying, Stop Bullying Now, has a resource kit and other materials available online at www.StopBullyingNow.hrsa.gov.

The MindOH! Foundation Web site www.mindohfoundation.org/bullying has a variety of materials and resources about cyberbullying. Some of the discussion activities are designed to be used jointly by parents and children. Anti-bullying activity sheets are also available.

The Pennsylvania Service-Learning Alliance suggests the following: Cyber Smart! at <http://cybersmartcurriculum.org>; www.safechild.org and cyberbullies at <http://www.successunlimited.co.uk>. Another site is www.cyberbullying.com.