Kids are using technology to hurt and humiliate each other.

How To Fight the New Bullies

By Rosalind Wiseman
Parade Magazine
Published: February 25, 2007

divagirl: *Hey, loser, watch your back.*
surferchick: *What r u talking about?*
divagirl: *Why don't you kill yourself while u r ahead?*
surferchick: *Why can't you just leave me alone?*
divagirl: *Ugly girls like you need to be put in their place.*

Bullies used to be big kids who picked on smaller ones. But instant messages (like the exchange above), cell phones and the Internet have changed that. Today, young people are using technology against each other: It's called cyberbullying, and it can be as frightening as face-to-face aggression. While most parents worry that their child will fall victim to a sexual predator online, cyberbullying often slips under the radar. Here's what you need to know:

Cyberbullies use e-mail, instant messages (IMs), cell phones, text messages, photos, videos and social networking sites to humiliate and threaten others. For example, a student uses her cell-phone camera to take a picture of a classmate changing clothes after gym, then uploads it onto her computer and forwards it to friends along with cruel commentary.

What makes cyberbullying so easy—and tempting—is the mask of anonymity the Web provides, along with a potentially huge audience. As Parry Aftab, executive director of <u>wiredsafety.org</u>, explains: " There's a lack of social norms when children use technology to communicate. Because you can be anonymous, there's no fear of detection. Even if you identify yourself, you don't see people's reactions and realize you have gone too far."

For the victim, cyberbullying can be especially damaging because it's so pervasive. "Whenever I was on my computer, I'd get IMs saying that everyone hated me and I should watch my back," says Alison, a ninth-grader in Washington, D.C. "It seemed like it was from girls who I thought were my friends. When I confronted them, they denied it and blamed it on someone else. I never knew who was really behind it. I got really paranoid and couldn't concentrate in school."

Fortunately, the legal and educational systems have begun to address this problem. From Florida to Oregon, educators and state legislators are incorporating cyberbullying into their bullying policies or drafting new laws. Vermont currently is working to amend its bullying laws in response to the suicide of 13-year-old Ryan Patrick Halligan, who was bullied both in school and online.

These new regulations often include language that allows school officials to intervene in incidents that occur away from school if the activity impacts the learning environment. And later this year, the Supreme Court will hear a case concerning whether public school officials can suppress student speech off-campus. The decision could determine whether students can be disciplined for off-campus communications that include online threats. In the meantime, violence-prevention experts and educators, including myself, are working to create guidelines for using technology ethically.

Rachel Simmons, author of *Odd Girl Out*, tells teens: "Be the same person online that you are in real life. If you wouldn't say it, don't send it. And remember: The Internet is like the bathroom wall. Secrets and privacy don't exist online." Adds Parry Aftab: "Be careful that, in reacting, you don't become the bully yourself. You can go from being a target to a perpetrator all too easily."

Shanterra McBride, a spokesperson for Stand Up!, a program that educates teens and parents about cyberbullying, advises parents to learn what's happening online: "Don't be intimidated by technology. Sit down with your child and let him or her take you through Web sites like MySpace, Facebook and YouTube."

If you discover that your child has targeted someone, take away the weapon—the computer or cell phone—and make him or her earn it back. At the same time, bear in mind that many children use technology responsibly, and those who struggle socially in person often communicate better in cyberspace. We don't need to freak out. We do need to know what our kids can do with technology and hold them accountable when they use it unethically.

Watch the video: Matt Lauer interviews Rosalind Wiseman on [The Today Show.](#)

How common is cyberbullying?

90% of middle school students have had their feelings hurt online.

75% have visited a Web site bashing another student.

40% have had their password(s) stolen and changed by a bully who then locked them out of their own account or sent communications posing as them.

Only 15% of parents polled knew what cyberbullying was.

SOURCE: [wiredsafety.org](#)

What Parents Can Do

Use technology as an opportunity to reinforce your family values. If you buy a cell phone or computer for your child, attach rules for appropriate use and consequences if these rules are broken.

Move the computer out of your child's bedroom and into the family room.

Teach your child not to share passwords.

Install monitoring and filtering software. Find free downloads at [k9webprotection.com](#) and [safefamilies.org](#).

Monitor your child's screen name(s) and Web sites for inappropriate content.

Save and print out any evidence if your child is cyberbullied. Decide together to whom you should go for additional assistance.

Rosalind Wiseman is an educator and the author of the best-seller "Queen Bees & Wannabes" and "Queen Bee Moms & Kingpin Dads."