



**DIGNITY AT SCHOOL
NEWSLETTER - APRIL 2007**



Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying may sound futuristic but it is very much a problem of today

When it comes to school bullying there's a new kid on the block. Cyberbullying may sound futuristic and like a virtual experience, but it is very much a problem of today, and the consequences are very real. So, what is cyberbullying?

Cyberbullying refers to the use of modern technology to cause another individual humiliation or distress. Most of us are aware of the potential for misuse of e-mails and mobile phones, but we need to be aware that the world has moved on apace. The communication revolution, which affords us previously undreamt of opportunities to create our own virtual worlds, to share our thoughts and dreams, to chat and make friends with people, all at the touch of a button, also has a darker side. Unfortunately, it is the young with their enthusiasm and willingness to embrace new technology, who are both the winners and the losers in this race.

Most of us will recognise that the mobile phone and the computer have become part of the young personae. It is

difficult to imagine a teenager without a mobile; seconds after leaving the school ground they are to be seen catching up with the latest news and gossip and a social life would be unimaginable without them.

Whereas home used to be the refuge of the bullied, the bedroom may now be the battleground. As if being blitzed by numerous texts/calls, or receiving caustic messages wasn't bad enough, the integration of camera technology on the mobile heralded a darker dawn for targets of bullying, who could now be the subject of hurtful or compromising pictures circulated to great effect amongst their peers. Now though, even that is just the tip of the iceberg as bullies resort to defamatory blogs, polling sites, bulletin boards, chat rooms, game rooms, Myspace, Bebo and Youtube to name just a few. Worse still this secret arsenal is tucked away in the innocuous looking box in the corner of the bedroom, unsuspected by all but the most vigilant of parents. Its effects, however, have the power to rock communities.

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Bullying in any guise is pernicious, but the phenomenon of cyber-bullying raises additional problems, both for the target and for those trying to tackle the issue. For instance, in the event of

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bullying the target usually knows the identity of their tormentor, but web-based systems allow and even encourage anonymity. Knowing who is making life a misery may not seem a particular bonus, but imagine the additional anguish when the inevitable cry of “why” is annexed by an equally confounding “who”? When the source of the attack is unknown everyone becomes a suspect; even close friends may fall under suspicion, with the inevitable effect that targets feel more and more isolated and helpless. Similarly parents and teachers may feel frustrated and dispirited by their inability to get to the root of the problem.

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Research suggests that anonymity also influences the way people behave. If the risk of identification is low there is a reduction in the effectiveness of the normal social constraints reflected in day-to-day interactions. The web provides a disembodied environment where users may feel insulated from the effects of their actions. The normally mild mannered student can feel liberated from social niceties and vent their spleen on an unsuspecting member of their class with perceived impunity. At the same time it also removes the moderating effect of the recipient’s reactions that are normally available in face-to-face communication.

This misevaluation of actions and effects may result in the most unlikely candidates committing bullying acts, especially as the ease of use and immediacy of the technology encourages spontaneous communication.

The fact that it might be very difficult to identifying the perpetrators of cyberbullying does not excuse inaction. The school might be tempted to argue that their responsibilities are confined to activities that occur on site, but careful consideration should be given to the capacity of bullying to disturb the equilibrium and undermine school life.

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It is not only the performance of targets of cyberbullying that is likely to suffer. Observers and class mates may be distracted from their work and drawn into any bullying experience, either as supporters or anxious bystanders. In turn this has the potential to lower morale and damage the reputation of the school.

Schools wishing to extend their jurisdiction with regard to this aspect of student welfare could consider a student/parent/school Cyberspace Acceptable Use Agreement to include off-site activity seen to impact on the school community.

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This should be coupled with an awareness raising programme to help students recognise what cyberbullying is, its effects and their responsibilities if they or their friends are affected.

On the traditional front the school should ensure that there is specific mention of cyberbullying (what it is, what to do if it happens to you or you witness it, what will happen if you are engaged in it) in the school's Anti-Bullying and Harassment Policy, which incidentally is far more likely to be effective if it is produced with the active engagement and input of students. That done it should not become complacent.

There is no doubt that having a student informed policy and cyberspace use agreement are positive first steps in the fight against cyberbullying, but they will only be effective if they are part of a comprehensive strategy backed by whole school commitment.

Schools should not wait until there is a problem before determining on appropriate cyberbullying initiatives.

Proactive strategy developed with student engagement produces solutions tailored to meet the needs of the school

Interventions introduced as a knee-jerk response to actual incidents may meet an immediate need but may turn out to be less appropriate in the long term than available alternatives. Proactive strategy informed by research on what works elsewhere, but developed with student engagement, produces solutions

tailored to meet the needs and expectations of the school.

Having developed policies, use agreements and a workable strategy, the monitoring of auditable (e.g. complaints) and 'softer' (e.g. sickness patterns) indicators, together with the evaluation of processes can provide valuable additional information as to the effectiveness of current policies and measures. In addition they also offer guidance for future directions. All current policies and measures should be subject to regular review.

Parents reading this article might feel at a loss to know what they can do to protect their children. Perhaps the simplest and most effective set of advice is to educate themselves with regard to the technology and the cyberbullying phenomenon, to ensure that their school takes the matter seriously and has a strategy to deal with any problem if and when it arises, and to draw the computer away from the privacy of the bedroom into the family living space.

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In addition to school based programmes for students, and teachers Dignity at School is currently running a series of courses and workshops for parents, teachers and governors, these include:

- ‘An Introduction to Cyberbullying for Parents’ – a 2-hour evening session covering the nature of cyberbullying, what to look for in your children’s behaviour, how to reduce the risks, what to do if you suspect cyberbullying, and what you should expect of your school.
- ‘An Introduction to Cyberbullying for Teachers and Governors’ – a half-day session covering the nature of cyberbullying, the effects on students and the school, the legal position, the problems of tackling cyberbullying, and allocating responsibilities
- Developing a Strategy for Dealing with Cyberbullying – a one day session for teachers and governors covering the nature and effects of cyberbullying, the legal position, student engagement in policy formation, Cyberspace Acceptable Use Agreements, cyberbullying interventions, reporting, monitoring and evaluation of interventions

Space on these courses is limited. Please contact karen@dignityatschool.co.uk if you would like further details.