

We've come a Long Way Baby

Have we – Really?

I doubt Mark Twain was referring to cyber bullying when he said: "A lie can travel around the world while the truth is putting its shoes on." Although today, cyber bullying confirms the accuracy of Twain's statement.

Like rock and roll, the World Wide Web is here to stay. Our planet revolves and advances online enabling kids - everyone - to enjoy a wealth of choice.

Before the Internet made "social media" available, we were accustomed to talking to each other. Now, we can tap our phones to tap our way into someone's life. It's much easier than tapping into someone else's emotions - or our own for that matter. Facebook, MySpace, Firewalls, YouTube Twitter, Chat Rooms and Blogs make it happen.

Less than a decade ago, most of us probably couldn't have imagined this wired world, and for many, the technology leap is still new and mysterious territory. Today, children are born into the virtual world that offers both opportunities and risks. The Internet lets us promote ideas, access information and increase our knowledge immediately. Kids love making new friends and networking with others living oceans apart. For them, technology makes socializing fun and easy. AWSM! But, not for everyone...

Secrets, Lies and Internet

Enter Cyber Bullying, a relatively new fact of life allowing bullies almost unlimited power to torment, harass and humiliate their targets via email, Internet, password and ID theft, chat rooms, cameras, instant messaging and cell phones 24/7.

Cyber bullying through proxy, a lesser known form of malicious bullying, occurs when bullies cause unsuspecting targets to do their dirty deeds. Malicious messages, defamatory words, compromising photographs and videos that inflict pain, damage reputations, demean, embarrass and attack the target's character and appearance, and reach thousands in overdrive, cause significant emotional distress, depression and cyberbullicide. Kids feeling there's no relief in sight from their extreme pain resort to cyberbullicide - suicide caused by cyber bullying - a tragic result of a fragile system. According to a 1998 Stats Can study, an average of 10 Canadians take their lives every day. Suicide is the second leading cause of death among Canadian youth.

Most kids know the importance of looking good and will do almost anything to fit in. Pursuing the perfect look is a high priority. Plastic surgery is big business. ABC news reported one girl's story: Meghan, 15, tried breaking her nose against a brick wall. After enduring years of teasing, exaggerated pictures that circled the Internet, and name-calling like "Pinochio," her mother agreed to plastic

surgery. In January, Good Morning America reported that almost 90,000 teenagers had cosmetic surgery in 2007. In 2008, a report noted that 43,000 children under 18 had "surgically altered their appearance." In 2009, US teens purchased 12,000 injections of Botox. Since jealousy also makes pretty girls a target, shall we consider bullying an indication of a greater epidemic involving greater solutions?

When Jason received a text during recess warning him to forget about getting on the bus, advising him to acquire a few new coping and relating skills just didn't cut it. Informing kids at 12 or 18 that loving themselves for their own uniqueness doesn't make things better for them NOW. That light switch should have been flipped on years ago, when kids were younger, more receptive, heard and believed you. A bloody nose and surgery scars disappear, but the damage to a child's confidence can last a lifetime.

Studies confirm that teaching respectful behaviour, encouraging social interaction and providing the tools of language at a young age fosters positive communication and develops successful learners. Introducing appropriate self-esteem programs to impressionable pre-schoolers when bullying actually begins presents an ideal opportunity to guide young children to make the right choices, problem solve, and fulfill their needs verbally and respectfully rather than aggressively. That's prevention! By the time children reach grade one, their sense of self-esteem has developed.

The jury is still out as to whether the social networks are stifling or depriving us of "real" social encounters. Dr. Shaheen Shariff, noted McGill professor and cyber bullying and social media expert and her team of legal and educational experts and researchers, are helping to clarify the boundaries relating to cyber bullying and socially responsible communications. "Our bi-lingual website, housed at McGill, definetheline.ca slated for a spring launch, will draw attention to the differences between harmless on-line jokes and teasing to criminal harassment, defamation, libel, threats, and sexting among youth that can result in criminal charges," says Dr. Shariff. Supported by Stanford's Center for Internet and Society and Lester B. Pearson School Board, the website will provide resources for parents, teachers, policy-makers, corporate intermediaries, and news media.

Back-Up

With close to half of 6-9 year-old girls regularly using lipstick/gloss and almost one in five girls aged 8 to 12 wearing mascara, and a make-up line released for 8 year-olds, it's time to pay attention.

A recent Canadian study reported that being seen as obese by peers resulted in rejection and bullying. A survey indicated that nearly half the girls in Grades 1 to 3 want to be thinner.

A 2009 WHO report rates Canada 26th for bullying among both boys and girls—that's worse than the US and 24 of 35 developed nations surveyed.

Canada's ranking has slipped. Other countries such as Britain and Norway have instituted successful national campaigns to address bullying problems.

Accepting that cyber bullying is a grave problem and will worsen if ignored is the first step to prevention. Secondly, responsible parents and schools need to learn how to protect children by recognizing and quickly addressing the signs of cyber bullying before it's too late. A recent Ipsos Reid study reported: 8% of Canadian parents of children aged 7-17 know that their child was cyber bullied; 26% weren't sure if their child was targeted; 34% of children aged 13-15 were unaware. Time spent online now exceeds watching TV.

In 2009, Microsoft Canada study, reported that 40% of Canadian youth said they have been bullied online - up 25% since 2004.

According to New York's Mediamark Research and Intelligence, children's use of cell phones has increased by 68% since 2005 and 36.1% of 10-and 11-year-olds have cell phones. Kids today send or receive approximately 3,000 messages a month.

Top 10 Cyber Bullying Warning Signs

- Reluctance to use the computer or other electronic devices;
- Fear of leaving home;
- Grades plunge, loses interest in school or drops out;
- Lack of or extreme eating or sleeping;
- Change in dress and appearance;
- Appears sad or becomes angry after using computer or cell phone;
- Stops socializing with friends;
- Unusually depressed and/or moody;
- Expresses an unusual interest in self-harm or suicide;
- Switches screen or closes the computer when someone walks by.

Handling Cyber Bullying

1. Don't Respond: Confronting a cyber bully can worsen the circumstances.
2. Collect evidence: Save related e-mails, messages and postings as proof should you need to involve the law or school.
3. Determine the source: Try to find out the bully's identity and what information he or she knows about you.
4. Report incidences: Laws vary so contact local law enforcement first.

5. Protect your information: Parents should make sure a child's social networking profile doesn't reveal any contact information.

Douse The Fire!

Through an innocent lack of discretion, these insidious predators glean a majority of personal information on social sites – likes, dislikes, fears and social status. Are you popular, do you have friends or are you a loner?

- Move promptly and quickly.
- Ensure the child is safe and feels supported and loved.
- Work together to devise a plan.
- Putting out the fire before it spreads is crucial. A person's reputation is at stake. The longer the posting is online, the greater the harm. Sometimes, the defamation can be removed before it's exposed to search engines. Meet legal deadlines, or a limitation period, if a case is heading to court.
- Wiresafety.org. will work with the police. Ensure all electronic evidence is preserved.
- Contact the cyber bully's parents.
- Work with the ISP – the Internet Service Provider and Cell Phone or Service Provider to investigate the assaults, remove current material and block further cyber bullying.
- Make certain the school knows. They are in a position to keep an eye out for other kinds of bullying.
- Let the police know if you think a crime has already been committed. Depending on the bully's age, uttering a threat or harassment may constitute a criminal matter.
- Be sure kids understand that once it's on the Internet – it's public.
- Parents should educate their kids and set rules on safe and appropriate Internet and social media site use.
- Educators and Parents need to track what sites their kids are visiting, install tracking or filtering software, and learn the lingo – IM slang. SITD?
<http://www.netlingo.com/top50/top50parents.php>
- Check how much time your children spend communicating electronically with their friends. One mother went into shock to see her son's cell texts slightly over 3,000.

Where do we Grow From Here – 2011?

Rewiring Our Brains

Efforts to curb cyber bullying appear skimpy, compared to the damage on lives and lives taken.

Moving forward will take schools, parents and kids, cooperating, collaborating and partnering. We need to instruct our students on how to better protect themselves and begin teaching young children acceptance, respect and the how-to of positive social interactions. Providing workshops to mobilize the bystanders by giving them the tools – the words and actions - on how to intervene is prevention that leads to solutions. Relying on anti-bullying laws is not enough. History has proven in many facets of our lives that legislation alone does not prevent others from spewing hatred and wounding others.

Both Schools and Parents need to get tech savvy and schools need to invest in forensic tracking software, new programs, policies and safe practices and training and curriculum addressing cyber bullying. Dr. Shariff advises: "There is a need to ensure young people are aware that whatever information they tweet or post on social media is public. We need to develop an inner filter in them, just as they know not to cross the road in heavy traffic."

The ramifications of psychological cyber bullying are widespread and efforts to curb cyber bullying appear skimpy, compared to the damage on lives and lives taken. Perhaps, we are suffering from a disconnect to our inners, lost some empathy along the way and need to reconnect. What if we start looking at the Internet and all our other available technology as tools and realize that staying connected to ourselves and our values means using technology as our tool to advance better freedom of expression? Like other tools and devices, we have choices and we can use them to either wound and destroy or advance and enhance our lives. It's in our hands!

Responding to the escalation in Youth Violence, Alexandra Penn founded Champions Against Bullying in 2003, an international organization that provides programs, workshops and keynotes to schools, parent groups and associations. Penn and her colleague, Leigh Rachel Faith, have just written a book on Bullying and Social Skills for the pre-school crowd. A survival bible for kids, teachers and parents!

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