

How Has Telecommunications Aided the Bully: What Can We Do About It?

Essay by Meera

Telecommunication bullying is often referred to as cyber-bullying. It is a form of psychological bullying, typically between adolescents. It intends to harass, manipulate, taunt, threaten or destroy the emotional and spiritual stability of victims, who often cry for help silently. Cyber-bullying is real; it is scary and difficult to control, and it has become a part of our culture. It can have long-term effects on victims, such as anxiety, depression, trauma, anger, sadness, shame or revenge.

I vividly recall the 2006 Missouri suicidal story about a young adolescent girl, who was victimized on the website MySpace by a female peer and her mother. They maliciously created a fictional boy who developed a relationship with the victim and later rejected her. The trauma experienced by the young girl resulted in the tragic loss of her life.

One might question whether bullying has increased in our generation due to telecommunications, or has bullying just extended beyond the school playground into cyberspace. I think it is difficult to statistically analyze this, because the detrimental effects of bullying are only recently being researched and publicized in newspapers, journals, television, and other media. In my parents' generation, physical bullying was considered to be part of school life and supposedly made a person emotionally stronger. These days however, telecommunications has taken bullying to a different level where humiliation is extreme.

In many ways I am privileged to grow up in a world where digital technology has opened up social communication at a click of a button. I can use e-mail, websites such as Facebook, instant messaging, cell phones, answering machines and text messaging to stay in touch with my friends. However, I recognize that as I am a part of an ethnic minority, I am particularly vulnerable to the dangers of the inappropriate use of this privilege. According to the Alberta Association for Media Awareness (2008), cyber-bullying may target victims from racial, religious, ethnic or sexual minorities, economically disadvantaged students or exceptional students.

I believe that telecommunications has certainly aided bullies, and this is a significant problem in our society. All students in junior and high school have easy access to the Internet. Statistics Canada (2004) states 99% of secondary schools have computers with Internet connections. Moreover, about 60% of these students have access to the Internet outside school time when there is much less supervision. Use of cell phones are also on the increase. In my school nearly all students possess a cell phone, as it provides an element of safety and enables them to stay socially connected. For cyber bullies, easy access to electronic communication offers an ideal medium to engage in psychological victimization towards their peers. Mnet (2001) concluded that 25% of Canadian Internet users received messages that expressed hate for others. Beran & Li (2005) indicate in their study on middle school children in Calgary that approximately 23% of students have been victims of cyber-bullying, and 25% have victimized others.

A major advantage for cyber-bullies is that they can hide behind a veil of anonymity. They give themselves fictitious user names, which they change frequently. They can steal other people's passwords and screen names. They use computers, for example from

Internet cafes, so that they cannot be tracked. They can send text messages through cell phones, or even publicize or distribute photographs via cell phone cameras. They use chat rooms or create personal Websites for the purpose of harming others. They sometimes join in with their peers in criminal activities. Much of the bullying is done outside of school, making it almost impossible to unravel details as to who the real victim and who is the perpetrator. Studies indicate that 41% of victims of cyber-bullying did not know their perpetrators (SACSE).

As telecommunication bullying is not confrontational, bullies are removed from the action and have no direct feedback from their victims. This may contribute to their lack of empathy, caring or remorse. Consequently, they convey hateful messages electronically without any concern, which they may not do in a face-to-face situation.

Unlike physical, direct bullying, the legalities for charging cyber bullies for their crimes appears to be blurred and there is a lack of clarity regarding the grounds on which perpetrators can be formally charged. Not all school personnel are totally knowledgeable about understanding online youth culture. This ambiguity naturally makes it easier for cyber bullies to carry on their behaviour, as they recognize that the chances of being caught are slim, and they are unlikely to receive consequences for their actions.

Can our generation stop these silent atrocities? Each of us has a duty to seek prevention for the sake of our friends, our society and ourselves. We have to raise global awareness of this problem and create community strategies to stop any form of electronically transmitted hate mail.

The Edmonton Journal on March 19 2009 reported that students in various high schools were wearing the colour pink to support an anti-bullying campaign in Canada. The article did not specifically address cyber-bullying, but I was encouraged, as it brought to light the importance of taking a stand and having a global voice against bullying.

We should all be educated on how to protect ourselves from online perpetrators, especially since most cyber-bullying occurs outside school and outside the vicinity of adults. For instance, schools can hold forms, where students can be informed about the dangers of sharing contact information such as cell phone numbers, email addresses, instant messaging names with any unknown person, and the importance of maintaining confidentiality in passwords. Even elementary schools can have special classes focusing on teaching young children how to develop online morals and ethics, for example, not to divulge any information about themselves that they wouldn't want to publicize. Clear rules prevent minors from engaging in inappropriate online activities.

I recommend resources such as iSafe (www.iSafe.org) which is a non-profit foundation dedicated to Internet safety for youth, or the Government of Alberta document of cyber bullying (http://www.bullyfreealberta.ca/cyber_bullying.htm#7). These documents provide specific information to all victims. For example, blocking, saving and printing instant messages instead of replying, and using these as evidence when reporting physical threats to the police; taking down websites; contacting Internet and cell phone service providers to restrict users; and changing cell phone numbers. In Canada, victims can report incidents under the Canadian criminal and civil laws, or under the violation of the Human Rights Act.

Victimized students should be encouraged to talk about their experiences and feelings and seek help from both adults and peers. I think that sometimes youth find it easier to discuss sensitive issues with peers or a school counselor. Training and mentoring students on how to look out for signs of cyber bullying, or how to offer concrete advice, may encourage students to help each other in schools. Most high schools have social justice clubs. Victims could share their experiences with a core group of socially conscious students who would listen and offer both empathy and advice to cope and prevent further incidents.

Parents can get involved with combating cyber-bullying both at home and at school. At home, they may watch out for signs by analyzing their child's behavior. For instance, their child may deliberately avoid school, seem detached, withdrawn, fearful or sad, or may manifest unusual physical symptoms. Open, trusting communication helps children and youth confide in their families if they feel threatened. At school, parents can have a voice in organizing campaigns, have discussions or talk at special assemblies to raise awareness of the misuse of telecommunications. Research confirms that parents can act as advocates for the entire school community and it is therefore important for schools to involve them.

Our schools in Canada endeavor to provide safe and caring environments. Although much of cyber bullying is done outside of school environments, schools should raise community awareness and integrate "the dangers of electronic communication" into the educational curriculum. Perhaps schools can organize a 'Cyber-Bullying Awareness Day' and invite professionals such as psychologists or police to talk to students. School communities can organize special initiatives in public places to raise awareness about cyber-bullying. There should be specific stringent school policies against cyber-bullying, such as internet restrictions and suspension and expulsion of students who misuse the Internet. It is important for the entire school community to be technologically savvy. Educational centers may organize workshops for parents, teachers and interested youth to educate them about online youth culture and how to detect and combat inappropriate online activities.

Online activities are addictive – and addicted adolescents need to break away from it by engaging in other interests such as sports or music. There is still much research and work to be done in this new field of digital bullying, and further action and intervention strategies need to be developed by higher levels of education and government. Telecommunication bullies are hard to detect and yet they lurk everywhere. Ultimately, each one of us need to take personal responsibility in eliminating and eradicating any form of cyber victimization by supporting one another and standing up for what we believe is morally right in our increasingly technological society.