



The slings and arrows of cyber-bullying

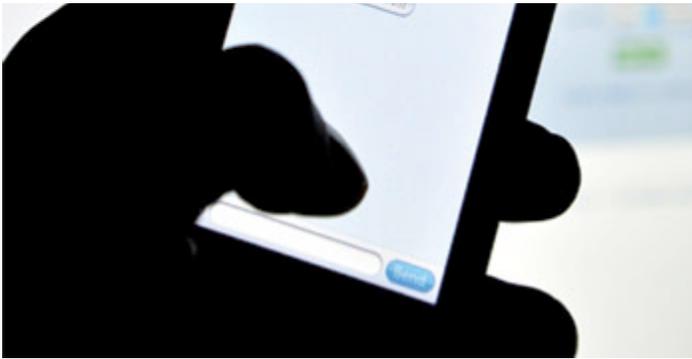
By [Carla Iacovetti](#) 11/18/2010

Most every adult remembers at one time or another hearing the age-old adage, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me." That is not always the case, however, particularly in today's world. Words have the power to encourage or abuse, and the margin between those two extremes is colossal.

Children of all ages are often targets for verbal slings and arrows, and this kind of weaponry seems to be mounting throughout America. There is no blood trail leading to a literal battlefield; nevertheless, victims who fall prey to this kind of abuse are left emotionally shattered, and some do not survive the onslaughts.



Nobody likes a bully, and the new kind of tormentor that has come on the scene is directly related to the advanced, technological media world we live in. According to Love Our Children USA, cyber-bullying is currently at "epidemic proportions." Love Our Children USA is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit national organization that was started in 1999 with the commitment to keep America's children



safe. Its international signature program, STOMP Out Bullying™, focuses on the prevention of cyber-bullying, sexting and other forms of digital abuse; educating against homophobia, racism and hatred; decreasing school absenteeism and truancy, and deterring violence in schools on playgrounds and in online communities across the country.

Cyber-bullying is not like traditional bullying, where a student terrorizes other students on a playground while holding them down to spit on them or threaten them physically. This new form of abuse invades someone's personal life through the Internet or mobile phones. Cyber-bullying should not be confused with cyber-stalking, which is generally committed by an adult, and can take on many faces to include: Harassment, using technology to trace and locate the victim, hacking bank accounts and credit card information for the purpose of harming someone. A cyber-stalker uses the benefit of anonymity and undetectable location as a means to deliberately unravel the prey.

The state of California took an active stand against cyber-bullying in January of 2009 when it passed a law that any form of cyber-bullying — non-physical harassment that is imposed through menacing bullies at schools; by social networking sites, instant messaging or text messaging on cell phones; or with any other form of digital communication — is not protected speech under the First Amendment.

Recently, President Barack Obama addressed cyber-bullying at an MTV forum.

"The Department of Education had a summit just two weeks ago to talk about this very issue," says Obama. With a desire to help state and local governments combat this growing issue, Obama continued to express his concerns.

"There is nothing wrong with instituting school policies that say, harassment in any form, whether it comes through the Internet or whether it happens to you face to face, is unacceptable. We have zero tolerance when it comes to sexual harassment; we have zero tolerance when it comes to harassing people because of their sexual orientation, because of their race or because of their ethnicity." With Obama's resolute agreement that cyber-bullying is something we should have "zero" tolerance for, he also admitted that there are limitations, due to the power of the Internet and the opportunity there for information to flow without censorship or authoritative control. In addition, Obama says, "The law is a powerful thing, but the law doesn't always change what's in people's hearts."

Ventura County Senior Deputy District Attorney Howard Wise says, "Cyber-bullying is a really hot issue right now.

Currently, this is typically handled in the schools, where it is a disciplinary issue — which is where it's most appropriate unless there are other crimes being violated.... In that case both the school and the



prosecuting agencies would then have to balance public safety concerns with public amendments, rights and freedoms, and sometimes there is a conflict, and then it's ultimately left to the court."



While cyber-bullying can occur within any age group, it has predominantly been seen among young adults. The seriousness of cyber-bullying cannot be understated, and groups are popping up across the nation to try and stop these kinds of crimes from occurring. The National Crime Prevention Counsel (NCPC) says, "When teens were asked why they think others cyber-bully, 81 percent said that cyber-bullies think it's funny. Others believe that the youth who cyber-bully don't think it's a big deal, don't think about the consequences, are encouraged by friends, and think they won't get caught."

In a 2008 study by Sameer Hinduja and Justin Patchin, *Cyberbullying: An Exploratory Analysis of Factors Related to Offending and Victimization*, shows that the consequences for both the victim and the perpetrator are severe. The victims often deal with long-term depression, which has led some to commit suicide. Another study reveals that 60 percent of those who were bullies ended up committing at least one criminal act by the time they were 24 years old.

According to Love Our Children USA, every day 1 out of 7 kids and teens are approached online by predators, 1 out of 4 kids are bullied and 43 percent of teens, 97 percent of middle schoolers and 47 percent of older teens 18 to 24 are cyberbullied. Nine out of 10 LGBT students experienced harassment at school. As many as 160,000 students stay home on any given day because they're afraid of being bullied.

Ross Ellis, the founder and chief executive officer of Love Our Children USA, says, "Some parents don't understand the seriousness of this, and others are not text-savvy." Ellis believes that parents should not only closely monitor their children's Internet use and cell phone activity, but she advises that they become more technologically knowledgeable than their kids. "Parents need to take the time to supervise their kids. Saying, 'I don't have time' is not an appropriate answer, and this not about violating their privacy. It's about safety."

Even though cyber-bullying is predominantly done among the youth, it is hard to forget the story of Megan Meier, a 13-year-old girl from Missouri who hung herself in 2006 after being harassed online by a 49-year-old neighbor and mother of a friend (Lori Drew), who was posing as a teenage boy named Josh. According to the ABC News report, Meier was being treated for depression; Drew began to demean and harass Meier, calling her a "slut" and telling her she was "fat." This is a prime example of the problem with ambiguity on the Internet. The web makes it very easy to harass someone anonymously.

Cyber-bullying, cyber-stalking, and all forms of Internet abuse have also become a growing issue between adults as well. Unfortunately, the Internet is the perfect vehicle for warped individuals who get some sort of gratification from harassing, provoking, and in some cases tormenting others. The margin for this kind of cyber-bullying is broad and includes all kinds of abusers. Whether the abuse exits in chat rooms, through social network sites like Facebook or MySpace, and includes hate mail, sexual exploitation, harassment through dating sites, the list continues to cultivate and attract predators of all ages and from all walks of life.

A number of years ago Shelia got involved in an online poetry chat room where she met a man. This relationship escalated into spending hours a day chatting and sharing poetry. This went on for months, and developed into a romantic relationship. Only, how does one have a romantic relationship with a computer screen? No phone numbers were ever exchanged, she did share, however, with him her last name, saying that she felt, "safe sharing it." Months later, they were making plans to meet, even though they had still never spoken on the phone. She became fearful and unsettled when this man suddenly shared the details of her title deed, and banking information in an instant message, using the fact that he was able to access this information to harass, taunt her and fill her with fear.

In no way should anyone who is being victimized like this sit silent. If cyber-bullying occurs on popular websites like Facebook then the site should immediately be notified. If it is happening over a cell phone, Wise says, "Contact the service site and report that someone is harassing. It's also important to preserve the evidence — what's being sent by e-mail or text. Go to the Internet and get instructions to print out the full header, which has a lot more information and can help track who's sending a message."

Cyber-bullying is a plague that is affecting households across the nation. Ellis says, "The Internet has opened up the world of cyber-bullying immensely. In the last five years, this has escalated to epidemic proportions." No longer can this be ignored or swept under the carpet, but the intensity of this growing problem suggests a call for action. Ellis says, "Schools need to ante up and begin to take an active role helping with parental and child education, but the greater responsibility starts at home. Parents should take greater responsibility for their children's Internet and cell phone activities."

Wise encourages youth to notify the proper authorities and not put themselves in the position to be victims. For example, he says, "Don't post inappropriate photos of yourself online that you wouldn't feel comfortable having your parents see." All those who post questionable photos of themselves are at risk of being exploited.

On occasion, attorney Wise lectures school guidance counselors and parents on Internet safety. He says that kids should make sure they talk to their parents if they're the victims of cyber-bullying. In addition, Wise says, "The school should be immediately involved, because they will be able to discipline the student in a meaningful and swift way."

Make no mistake about it; cyber-bullying can have serious ramifications. Because it has not been around for too long, health professionals are still in the early stages of learning how to treat victims and perpetrators. Even though those in the mental health profession have a better grasp on the effects of traditional bullying, cyber-bullying is not the same thing. In his article, "Cyber Bullying Recognizing and Treating Victim and Aggressor," published in *Psychiatric Times*, Robin M. Kowalski, Ph.D. says, "The effects of cyber-bullying are serious and, in some instances, life-threatening.... As with traditional bullying, bully/victims appear to be at particular risk for psychological and physical problems associated with bullying."

At the federal level, there is still no law against cyber-bullying. A somewhat controversial bill was introduced to the House of Representatives in April 2009 after Meier's death. If this goes bill into effect, anyone caught "transmitting communication, with the intent to coerce, intimidate, harass, or cause substantial emotional distress to a person, using electronic means to support severe,

repeated, and hostile behavior” could face a fine and serve up to two years in a federal prison. Some free-speech political activists argued against this bill during a House committee meeting, maintaining that this kind of bill may violate free speech and unnecessarily encumber the federal government.

With a growing concern about the impact cyber-bullying is having on the youth here in Ventura County, the Boys & Girls Clubs of Greater Oxnard and Port Hueneme (BGCOP) are looking at what can be done to help at the national and local levels.

Tim Blaylock, the chief professional officer for BGCOP, says, “Cyber-bullying is a huge issue. Bullying has always been around, but because of the digital age we live in, we’re dealing with a new phenomenon. Parents need to be much more aware and talk with their children about this problem. It all boils down to educating parents and children.”

Anne, the mother of two high-school-age children here in Ventura, says, “I don’t think schools are monitoring Internet activities enough. Twice, I’ve had two different friends’ kids instant message me during the middle of the day. When I asked one of the girls, ‘Shouldn’t you be in school?’ her response was, ‘I am at school. LOL, I’m in the library.’ ”

While the Internet is a breeding ground for cyber-bullying, the media also needs to take some responsibility for injecting a bullying way of thinking into today’s youth culture. The MTV reality show Jersey Shore is a perfect example where bullying is frequently a part of the show. Blaylock says, “What is this kind of show teaching the kids in our society?” Bullying is only one aspect of questionable messages this show sends to young adults. Sleeping around, sex with whomever and teen pregnancy define the premise of this reality show.

Blaylock says, “There is a lot that can be done to insure a safer environment for kids. Parental and educator oversight and the monitoring of school software are important steps to alleviating this kind of misuse. If a child is using school software, there should be tracking software on every computer.”

There are a number of ways that parents can become educated about cyber-bullying and all aspects of Internet and cell phone harassment.

Ellis says, “Kids should never give out their passwords, usernames or anything personal. The Internet is a new Wild West frontier, and parents need to pave the way for this new world so it can be used safely. The book Cyberbullying: What Counselors Need to Know, by Sheri Bauman, is a great source for information. With the intent to educate communities on the seriousness of cyber-bullying, ebrary employees and customers affiliated with DASH™ created the Cyber Bullying Searchable Information Center, an open-access collection. The website can be located at:

<http://site.ebrary.com/lib/cyberbullying/home.action>

Additional websites with excellent resources: www.cyberbullying.us/, www.stopbullyingnow.hrsa.gov/adults/cyber-bullying.aspx and the Haxor (Leet) translator, which takes a simple English sentence and translates it into the kind of seeming gibberish that can be difficult to interpret in a text message or an instant message, www.ypass.net/misc/haxor/index.php.

While the majority of youth today consider text messaging, instant messaging, blogging on social

networks like Facebook and Twitter to be normal part of culture and communication, many fall prey to the harassment and violence of others. With a concerted effort to become better-informed about the growing problem of cyber-bullying and any other form of digital abuse, however, it is possible to help our children become aware of the critical difference between acceptable communication and abusive interaction.

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Thank you for your article filled with useful information for parents who can sometimes feel that knowing how to parent just isn't enough these days, without also being an expert on every new technology as well. Pieces like yours are sorely needed and appreciated.

Susan

posted by **sardith** on 11/18/10 @ 11:12 a.m.

Thank you for commenting Susan. I'm happy you enjoyed it and found the information insightful.

posted by **WriterAtTheSea** on 11/18/10 @ 12:44 p.m.

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