



Terror in the Classroom: What Can be Done?, Part 4

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What Can Parents Do?

A survey conducted by *MSN United Kingdom* found that 74% of teens as compared to 80% in this study did not go to anyone for advice when they were cyberbullied (www.msn.co.uk/cyberbullying, 2006). One reason some teenagers are reluctant to tell parents or adults is the fear of retaliation. Online retaliation can often be vicious. These teens also don't see any immediate solution to the problem, so they keep it to themselves and hope it goes away. Another reason teenagers are also less likely to tell their parents is the fear of losing their use of the computer and internet access (Cottle, 2001). "Many teenagers are unwilling to risk having parents choose such extreme forms of protection because, without technology tools, they would feel socially isolated and less able to stay in immediate contact with their friends" (Strom and Strom, 2005).

When teens refuse to get their parents involved, it is easy for parents to think that everything is fine. In a survey conducted by *Wired Safety.org*, only 15 percent of parents polled knew what cyberbullying was (Wiseman, 2007). Many times parents don't get involved because they are afraid of invading their teen's privacy. Others may feel that as long as they have filtering software their teen is protected from negative material. Not only can many teens override these obstructions and still access negative material, filtering software cannot prevent cyberbullying (Willard, 2006). Parents need to be educated about cyberbullying-what it looks like, what the effects are and how to handle it. Rosalind Wiseman, educator and author of the best seller "*Queen Bees & Wannabes*", suggest parents consider the following:

- **Use technology as an opportunity to reinforce your family values.** Attach rules and consequences if inappropriate behavior occurs.
- **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.**
- **Monitor your child's screen name(s) and Web sites** for inappropriate content.
- If cyberbullying occurs, **save and print out any evidence** and decide whom you should contact for assistance.

Wiseman goes on to remind parents that technology is a positive tool and that there are many teenagers who use it responsibly. "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" (Wiseman, 2007, p. 7).

What Can Schools Do?

There are few laws that address how to handle cyberbullying. In 2000, CIPA (Children's Internet Protection Act) was passed. It requires public libraries and publicly funded schools to block access to sexually explicit material. Along those lines, DOPA (Deleting Online Predators Act) was introduced last May by U.S. Rep. Michael Fitzpatrick, R-Pa. DOPA would require libraries and schools to block access to "commercial websites that let users create public Web pages or profiles and offer discussion boards, chat rooms or e-mail services" (Rivero 2006). This legislation would prevent students from using popular websites such as Facebook, MySpace and Bebo unchaperoned. Individual states such as Arkansas, Florida, Hawaii, Rhode Island, South Carolina, South Dakota, Utah and Washington are creating their own legislation regarding bullying. For example, Florida's pending legislation would add: "Bullying or harassment of any student or school employee is prohibited: (c) Through the use of data or computer software that is accessed through a computer, computer system, or computer network of a public K-12 educational institution" (Hinduja and Patchin, 2007). Some of these states are also encouraging schools to address cyberbullying in their internet-use policies and school-wide bullying policies. That way, discipline for each violation would be determined by the individual school (Ascione, 2005). While it is a positive step, this legislation alone will not prevent cyberbullying altogether. One of the main concerns is how to legislate something that mainly takes place at home without infringing on the rights of free speech. "The fact that two teenagers say nasty things about each other is a part of growing up," says Steven Brown, executive director of the Rhode Island branch of the ACLU, "How much authority does a school have to monitor, regulate, and punish activities occurring inside a student's home?" (Ascione, 2005)

The courts have given some direction for schools dealing with cyberbullying. "School districts are well within their legal rights to intervene in cyberbullying incidents - even if these incidents were initiated off-campus – if it can be **demonstrated that the incident resulted in a substantial disruption of the educational environment**" (Hinduja and Patchin, 2007) (emphasis added). While free speech is protected by the First Amendment, a student's right to free speech is more limited than the "public at large". In *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District*, 393 U.S. 503 (1969). The court ruled that a student's right to free speech can be limited when the speech "materially disrupts class work or involves substantial disorder or invasion of the rights of others." The standard of "material disruption" set by *Tinker* is often referred to by the courts ([Bloggin and the Law](#)).

In *J.S. v. Bethlehem Area School District No. 415* (2002), the Commonwealth Court of Pennsylvania ruled that schools do have the authority to discipline students when behavior or speech happen off-campus as long as school officials can prove it was a clear disruption of the classroom environment. J.S. was expelled for creating a web page entitled "Teacher Sux" that included derogatory remarks and solicited funds to hire a hit man to kill his math teacher. Bethlehem Area School District was able to clearly demonstrate a significant disruption to the school environment. The court also concluded that in this day and age of school violence certain categories of unprotected speech include "fighting words, speech that incites others to imminent lawless action, obscenity, certain types of defamatory speech, and true threats" (Wheeler, 2007).

However, in *Emmett v. Kent School District No. 415* (2000), the U.S. District Court for the Western District of Washington overturned an expulsion of Nick Emmett and reduced it to a five day suspension. On his home computer he created a website called "Unofficial Kentlake High Home Page" where it included mock obituaries and encouraged visitors to vote on who should "die" next. The reason the district lost is because it did not demonstrate that the website caused a substantial disruption to the school environment. The district failed to prove that anyone listed on the site was actually threatened (Hinduja and Patchin, 2007).

And more recently, in *Layshock v. Hermitage School District* (2006), a student created a website from his grandmother's home computer creating a parody of the school principal on his myspace.com. While the site was non-threatening and created off-campus school officials were able to prove a major disruption to the

school day. Officials pointed out that staff devoted a lot of extra time diffusing and resolving the situation. Secondly, the computer system had to be shut down, resulting in cancelled classes and disrupting the educational environment (Hinduja and Patchin, 2007).

Meanwhile, other schools across the nation are beginning to address cyberbullying at the place where it usually begins, at home. Schools are educating parents to help stop cyberbullying and other online dangers. By giving parents tools and making them aware of what is going on, school officials believe they can curve the growth of cyberbullying. Also, the social networking site MySpace prohibits cyberbullying and will take down those sites when contacted by school administrators, parents or its users. MySpace also provides safety tips for parents and its users on its [website](#).

While information regarding cyberbullying has grown within the last two years, many parents, teachers and administrators are still not fully aware of what is happening. In the same study from **Fight Crime: Invest in Kids**, only 37% of those (ages 12-14) who were bullied told their parents about it, while only 11% told a teacher. In a similar study conducted by i-Safe America, results show 58% of kids of have not told their parents or an adult of something mean or hurtful done to them while online (cite website). Meanwhile, only 6% of the students who had admitted to being cyberbullied in this study confided in an adult. "Every school has a responsibility to determine the extent to which students are exposed to cyberbullying", states bullying experts Paris S Strom and Robert D Strom (Strom and Strom 2005). In their 2005 essay, Strom and Strom give several implications for further research to be done on cyberbullying. They go on to state that educators often overlook the need to survey their students, to find out what is going on and what can be done to improve the current situation. They then suggest that the results of the survey should be shared with students, parents and staff that discussion on improving internet safety will begin (Strom and Strom 2005).

What Schools Should Do

Schools should start addressing students, parents and staff about the issues of cyberbullying. Students need to be reminded that what they do in cyberspace is not really anonymous. They need to know their behaviors and words are downloadable, printable and sometimes punishable by law. Mark Franek, Dean of Students and English teacher at William Penn Charter School, suggests "your school's technology teachers should demonstrate to students how each time they access the Internet they generate an electronic fingerprint called an IP, or Internet Protocol address, which authorities can use to trace all electronic communication from computers or mobile phones" (Franek, 2006). Students also need to be reminded not to share personal informational such as passwords, contact information and financial information with anyone. Franek adds that this communication can be done during regular computer classes or by holding special assemblies involving local authorities or experts in the field.

Schools should also have policies on cyberbullying explained clearly in the school's handbook and in the acceptable user policy (AUP). The AUP is a legal document signed by both student and parent, where the parent and student agree to follow the rules established by the school. By specifically addressing cyberbullying, "the school now has authority to take appropriate action to deal with the dangerous or abusive conduct" (stopcyberbullying.org). Experts Hinduja and Patchin suggest schools also include the following elements in their policy:

- Graduated consequences and remedial actions
- Procedures for reporting
- Procedures for investigating
- Specific language that if a student's off-school speech or behavior results in "substantial disruption of the learning environment," the student can be disciplined (Hinduja and Patchin, 2007)

Mark Franek offers a sample school policy from William Penn Charter School in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Neither the school's network nor the broader Internet (whether accessed on campus or off campus, either during or after school hours) may be used for the purpose of harassment. All forms of harassment in cyberspace, often called cyberbullying, are unacceptable. Cyberbullying includes but is not limited to, the following misuses of technology: harassing, teasing, intimidating, threatening, or terrorizing another person by sending or posting inappropriate and hurtful e-mail messages, instant messages, text messages, digital pictures or images, or Web site postings (including blogs). Often the author (sender or poster) of the inappropriate material is disguised (logged on) as someone else.

Community members who feel that they have been the victims of such misuses of technology should not erase the offending material from the system. They should print a copy of the material and immediately report the incident to a school official (the director of technology, the dean of students, or the director of the upper school). All reports of harassment in cyberspace will be investigated fully. Sanctions may include, but are not limited to, the loss of computer privileges, detention, suspension, separation, or expulsion from school (Franek, 2006, p. 42).

A good policy and student awareness is not enough, schools also need to get parents and staff involved and informed. As stated earlier, research shows, adults have a lack of knowledge when it comes to cyberbullying. Schools should provide meaningful training to both parents, staff and even students. Workshops can be designed to promote awareness, procedures for bully prevention and strategies to handle cyberbullying. The following resources can be used to help students, parents and educators learn more about cyberbullying.

- [*Wired Safety*](#), "the world's largest internet safety and help group". Parry Aftab, Wired Safety Executive and cyberbullying expert, provides parents, educators and students many fun and up-to-date resources with online safety. Wired Safety also manages other cyberbullying sites such as *Teenangels*, *WiredKids*, *CyberLawEnforcement*, *StopCyberbullying*, and *Internet Super Heroes*.
- [*Surf Swell Island*](#), "adventures in internet safety". This site, created by Disney, provides fun, interactive games with Mickey and friends. *Surf Swell Island* teaches kids about online privacy and positive internet behaviors.
- [*i-Safe*](#), the "leader in internet safety education". This site provides fun, interactive resources (including curriculum) for students, parents, educators and the community. *i-Safe* also provides opportunities for students to become "i-Mentors", where students are able to help teach their peers about online safety.
- [*Cyberbullying.us*](#), "identifies the causes and consequences of online harassment". This site includes news stories, research, activities and helpful resources regarding cyberbullying.
- [*Cyberbullying.org Canada*](#), "always on, always aware", created by Bill Belsey, President. This site offers resources to help parents and educators understand cyberbullying and how to combat it.
- [*Safe Families*](#), "keeping children safe online". *Safe Families* offers free internet filtering software and parental controls to help protect children online. *Safe Families* also provides parents an online safety workshop and guidelines for safe internet use.

Conclusion

With only 59 students from one Midwest eighth grade, it is difficult to make significant generalizations. But, this study does seem to support the results of larger studies; including Cole, J. I., et al. (2001), Bullen, P., & Harre, N. (2000), (Finkelhor, D., Mitchell, K.J., & Wolak, J. (2000), (Li, Q, 2006) and Opinion Research

Corporation (2006) on the topic and does begin to look at the impact, reasons and almost total lack of communication on the topic that student have with both their parents and their educators. Thus, it highlights the need for schools to develop awareness programs and provide informational resources for parent, teachers, administrators and student's involved. Perhaps, additional research will examine the possible effectiveness of such educational programs to curb this growing concern which can produce life long emotional scars and even deadly results for our nation's children.

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