CYBER BULLYING

PENETRATES THE WALLS OF THE TRADITIONAL CLASSROOM

The year 2009 marked the 40th anniversary of the Internet. Technology is a part of almost every student's life today. In some countries, access to computers is a right, not just a privilege. For instance, France has made access to the Internet a "human right." As of July 2010, it is also a legal right in Finland. And, in 2009, Uruguay became the first Latin-American country to provide every student in public elementary school with a computer through The One Laptop per Child program.[1] The new Web-based culture has resulted in exciting new ways to communicate, socialize, learn, and be entertained. However, online technology shares certain negative characteristics:

• It can be difficult to escape as well as invasive—it can occur anywhere, anytime;

• It can involve harmful material being widely and rapidly disseminated to a large audience. For example, rumors and images can be posted on public forums or sent to many people at once; and

• It can provide the bully with a sense of relative anonymity and distance from the victim, so there is a lack of immediate feedback or consequences.[2]

These characteristics increase the likelihood that the Internet will be exploited for malicious purposes, such as recruiting people for all manner of cults and hate groups, distributing pornography (including sexually explicit photos of children), giving pedophiles access to vast numbers of young victims, and facilitating hate speech and bullying.

Unfortunately, the growth of the Internet has given rise to endless new ways to threaten, harass, abuse, insult, and bully others through "cyberbullying," defined as "the willful and repeated harm inflicted through the use of computers, cell phones, and other electronic devices."[3] High-tech bullying, which ranges from barrages of teasing texts to sexually harassing group Websites, is a growing issue.

While cyberbullying may occur separate from real-life interaction between bully and victim, it often only extends and exacerbates harassment that occurs on playgrounds and in school hallways. Cyberbullying allows perpetrators to threaten victims both face to face and electronically. ("When I see you at school tomorrow, my friends and I am going to beat you up.") Even if cyberbullying does not produce acting-out behavior that results in bruises and lacerations, it is just as harmful to the psyche of the victim as traditional types of bullying—it still creates fear and emotional distress. Cyberbullying:

• Can take place 24/7—not just during school hours;

• Invades the victim's home and personal space as well as the school environment;

• Often occurs with some expectation of anonymity, since perpetrators can use temporary e-mail accounts, pseudonyms in chat rooms, and disposable cell phones to mask their identity;

• Makes it easy for bystanders to become perpetrators by forwarding e-mails, text messages, and photos, and participating in online discussions;

• Can last longer and can reach much farther than face-to-face bullying, sometimes building over weeks and months, with the messages being

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Facts About Cyberbullying

• **According to the National Crime Prevention Council, cyberbullying affects almost half of all American teens.[4]**

• **Eighty-five percent of middle school children report being cyberbullied at least once.[5]**

• **Thirty-two percent of American teens who use the Internet report some form of online harassment.[6]**

• **Online harassment can begin as early as second grade. Most cyberbullying involving elementary students and teens is done by their peers.[7]**

• **In one recent study, when students were asked why their peers engage in cyberbullying, an astonishing 81 percent said it was "because they found it funny."[8]**

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stored indefinitely in multiple online locations;

• Makes it more difficult to identify perpetrators, as they and their targets often do not fit the profile of those who engage in face-to-face bullying;

• Allows perpetrators to intimidate and humiliate through the sharing of e-mails, texts, photos, or videos with many people simultaneously in a way that other forms of bullying cannot accomplish;

• May be invisible to parents and educators who do not visit social networking sites or know how to track computer use.[9]

Harmful Effects of Cyberbullying

Too often, bullying is dismissed as an expected childhood rite of passage.[10] Children who are teased are often told to "ignore it." However, the experience of being bullied can cause long-term damage. Victims need not be physically harmed in order to suffer lasting psychological trauma. Bullying is an attempt to instill fear and self-loathing. Being the repetitive target of bullying damages a person's ability to view himself or herself as a desirable, capable, and effective individual. This can result in loss of productivity in school, as well as psychological and psychosomatic distress and dysfunctional social and emotional responses.[11] For, example, eating disorders and chronic illnesses have affected many young people tormented by cyberbullies.[12] Cyberbullying has even resulted in suicide.[13]

In fact, youth who are the targets of cyberbullying at school are at greater risk for depression than either the perpetrators or the victims of traditional bullying, according to a recent survey of sixth- to 10th-grade students conducted by researchers at the National Institutes of Health.[14] Previous studies showed that the highest depression scores occurred in adolescents who were both bullies and victims. The study authors wrote in the *Journal of Adolescent Health* that "unlike traditional bullying which usually involves a face-to-face confrontation, cyber victims may not see or identify their harasser; as such, cyber

victims may be more likely to feel isolated, dehumanized or helpless at the time of the attack."

It is possible that the damage caused by cyberbullying may be greater than the harm caused by traditional bullying. Online communication can be extremely vicious. Once it is distributed worldwide, it is often irretrievable. Furthermore, electronic media empower "group bullies" because other people can pile on additional hateful messages. There is no escape for those who are electronically bullied because the victimization is constant and repetitive.[15]

Finally, students may be reluctant to report either being bullied themselves, or their awareness of bullying by others, because they fear retaliation or having their Internet and cell phone privileges withdrawn.[16]

The damage inflicted by hate speech and cyberbullying makes it clear that teachers and parents need to become more aware of this phenomena and effective ways to prevent and stop it. Thus, administrators need to create and enforce comprehensive school policies, as well as education programs, to deal with this troubling problem.

Because Adventist schools are committed to providing a wholistic education that combines academic and social skills, they cannot assume that since cyberbullying occurs outside of school hours or using non-school-owned devices, that it is none of their business (see sidebar). They have both the legal and moral responsibility to teach children how God wants us to treat one another, and to provide a safe environment for learning. Preventing emotional and physical harm to children, who are the object of God's special regard "'Whoever welcomes one such

child in my name welcomes me'" (see Matthew 18:1-5, NRSV)[17] should be a priority in Adventist schools. Therefore, knowledge of cyberethics is vital for teachers and students.

Administrators should make sure that teachers receive training in preventing and dealing with cyberbullying, and adopt appropriate policies that combine clear definitions with appropriate penalties.

Prevention Programs

One of the most widely researched programs to combat bullying in school is the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program, which was first developed in the early 1980s in Norway and Sweden by psychologist Dan Olweus.[18] This program was originally designed to work with interventions at three levels: schoolwide, classroom, and individual. The components of this program, which are applicable in both face-to-face and cyberbullying, are as follows:

• Choose a coordinating committee;

• Do a needs assessment;

• Provide professional development for teachers and other school employees;

• Create and enforce policies that include appropriate consequences;

• Ensure increased supervision of problem areas;

• Involve parents;

• Combine classroom education with the opportunity for participants to discuss concerns; and

• Perform individual interventions that address the needs of the victims, bullies, and both sets of parents.[19]

Adults must model ethical and virtuous conduct on the Internet, teach students about dangers online, and moni-

tor use of school computers so that students understand what it means to behave ethically, and to protect themselves against electronic bullying.[20]

Dealing with the many avenues of cyberbullying and cyberthreats will require significant revisions in most schools' policies, which may not even include clear prohibitions of traditional bullying. A team should be formed that includes a member of the school administration, the school counselor, one or more teachers, the technology coordinator, librarian or media specialist, and school resource officers. After receiving training and studying the policies of other schools, the team should establish specific guidelines for the use of school computers as well as student-owned devices on campus. Because of the rapid development of technology, school policies need to be reviewed frequently and updated as necessary. The policies relating to bullying must be comprehensive enough to cover both face-to-face and electronic harassment.

The Computer Crime and Intellectual Property Section of the United States Department of Justice provides a model Acceptable Use Policy (AUP), which schools can adapt for their needs. This policy includes detailed information about the safe and responsible use of computers and the Internet; and provides suggestions for discipline, supervision, and monitoring.[21]

The school's AUP should be specific about the following areas: appropriate use of school- and student-owned computers on campus, where and when cameras and electronic devices are allowed, and what will happen if a student is caught using a device at a prohibited time or place.[22]

Effective supervision and monitoring is essential for deterrence, detection, investigation, and response to incidents of cyberbullying. An effective approach for teachers can use is to frequently and randomly review the browser history file of individual students whenever they use the Internet in class, computer labs, or in the school library.[23]

The Federal Children's Internet Protection Act (CIPA), passed by the U.S. Congress in 2000 and upheld by the

Legal Issues Relating to Cyberbullying

The U.S. Constitution guarantees specific rights: The Fourth Amendment prohibits "unreasonable" searches and seizures, and the Fifth Amendment establishes the requirement of due process.[1] However, in the educational setting, these rights apply only to students in the nation's public schools. Private K-12 institutions have far more leeway to conduct investigations, withhold findings if they choose, and suspend or expel a student. In the U.S., private school relationships fall under the purview of tuition and employment contracts. When a student enrolls in a private school, his or her parents (or the student, if an adult) and the school are bound by the provisions of a contract that makes certain demands and provides certain guarantees to the participants.[2] Thus, contract law allows schools to hold students accountable for their actions.

Taking disciplinary action against a student who does something illegal outside of school hours and off school grounds may exceed a school's normal authority and potentially lead to lawsuits. American courts have reviewed several of the cases where the school has taken disciplinary action with regard to cyberbullying that occurred outside of school. In the past, in most cases U.S. judges have ruled against the school, but some are now ruling in the school's favor on the basis that these matters affect the safety of the school's program.

Adopting an acceptable-use policy (AUP) enables administrators to spell out exactly what constitutes permissible use of the school's technology and computer systems. AUPs constitute legal documents when they are signed by both parents and students, and are thereby binding on both the parents and the school (and the students themselves once they are of age). By adding a provision that prohibits students from engaging in dangerous or abusive actions that directly affect another student, the institution, or its staff, the school is empowered to deal appropriately with dangerous or abusive conduct. Thus, the behavior's impact on the school, its safety, and the well-being of its staff and students is what triggers the school's authority, not whether the actions took place on a school computer during school hours.

The fact that an incident occurs, no matter how tragic, does not automatically make the school liable. The law imposes a legal duty on teachers and schools to ensure the safety and well-being of students in their care. Unfortunately, there is no clear-cut formula to establish when a duty of care is owed. However, there are two important factors relating to reasonable foreseeability and proximity. For example, the school has a duty to take positive steps to keep students safe from reasonably foreseeable risks, and a court may find it negligent if it fails to do so. The school is not, however, required to ensure that injury does not occur.[3] Professional educators have the responsibility of supervising students and using their knowledge and wisdom to anticipate and prevent problems from occurring. Thus, more care is expected from teachers than from, say, teachers' aides or school secretaries (unless they are the sole supervisor of a group of children).

Laws in other countries may differ from those in the United States. For more information, please consult local statutes or seek legal counsel from someone who specializes in school and contract law.

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United States Supreme Court in 2003, requires that American public schools and libraries install filtering software on computers with Internet access in order to remain eligible for federal funding.[24] This software blocks Internet content that is deemed inappropriate for students by either site blocking or content monitoring. Private institutions should also install these filters on school computers. However, adult oversight is still necessary since technologically sophisticated students can find ways around and through the filtering software.[25]

A comprehensive approach to managing student Internet use is needed. It should focus strongly on protecting younger students by only allowing them access to sites that have been reviewed for appropriateness, adult oversight and training, and open and transparent communication. At the high school level, the strategy must focus on standards and effective technical monitoring to ensure accountability. The key components of a comprehensive approach must include: incorporating the use of the Internet in the curriculum, clear and well-communicated policy, and supervision and monitoring by both adults and peers.[26]

The school can also help facilitate parent and community outreach and education programs through newsletters and workshops.[27] Information should include an overview of the concerns; how to prevent and detect cyberbullying, and intervene if children are victims; current case law regarding cyberbullying; legal consequences of electronic harassment within and outside school grounds; and strategies to empower and activate bystanders. Having resources available in the school office and online can be helpful to parents who otherwise may not know where to turn for information and assistance.

Peer Mentoring

Much e-safety advice for young people revolves around the need to tell someone about what is happening to them. However, for many young people, telling an adult, whether it be a parent, guardian, or teacher, is a daunting and embarrassing prospect. Peer mentor programs provide a way for young people to seek the help they need by talking to peers who understand the issues and are able to support them in a nonthreatening, safe environment.

Peer mentoring has been fruitful in reducing traditional bullying and interpersonal conflict within schools and should be considered in a comprehensive approach to preventing all types of bullying.[28] Through peer mentoring, older students can help change the way elementary students think about the harassment or mistreatment of others, while encouraging them to participate in developing solutions that foster respect and acceptance of others.

Mentors will need training before they can work with younger children. Mentor training should focus on acquainting participants with the varied issues relating to bullying, including cyberbullying, such as an understanding of how mobile phones, social networking sites, instant messaging and other tools can all be a vehicle for the bullying of young people. By using role-play exercises, trainers can help the student mentor develop empathy with those who have been victimized. The peer mentors develop a clear but flexible scripted process they can go through with young people needing support to ensure they receive a consistent, appropriate experience when seeking help.

Peer mentoring can be accomplished in a number of ways, depending on current needs. For example, during one-on-one sessions, a high school mentor would meet with a middle school victim to offer support and help. Or high school students could regularly talk informally with groups of middle schoolers in the cafeteria during lunch. A few high school students could also organize a formal presentation for small groups of middle school students. Finally, high school students can present skits for younger students in auditoriums or cafeterias. Peer mentors can work one on one with students or with small groups using role playing to discuss Internet safety and responsibility.

Peer mentors can also maintain a "drop in center," a comfortable and relaxed place where students can talk about a problem and ask for help to work out a solution. It is easier for students to talk to a peer mentor in this type of environment because it provides a higher level of privacy.

Newsletters or school newspapers can serve as valuable tools for peer mentors to use in helping curb cyberbullying. The center would be assigned to write a "Dear Abby"-type column that provides useful advice to students who have anonymously submitted questions about their concerns.

Conclusion

Adventist schools must be places where students can learn about Christ and prepare for life in a safe, academically stimulating place. Schools can use the Web to help students expand their world and learn in fun ways. But it is also a place where students are vulnerable to cyberbullying and other types of victimization. Because cellular phones go everywhere with their owners, this makes students potentially a continuous target for victimization.

As with other forms of physical or emotional intimidation, schools must combine awareness and regularly updated school policy with education, moral training, and teaching and mod-

eling the Golden Rule to prevent harm to students due to all types of bullying, including cyberbullying. ✐

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