

Taking on the cyberbullies

Hidden behind online names and aliases, they taunt, even lay down death threats

By MOIRA MacDONALD July 16, 2008

Listen to the stories of the lows cyberbullying has sunk to and you wonder what Franz Kafka would have made of it.

"There's no escaping it," says Bill Belsey, an Alberta schoolteacher who has run the website www.cyberbullying.ca for about nine years. "The people who are cyberbullying can do it whenever the other person is on the Internet. It can be as close as the phone in your pocket."

Cyberbullying is marked by its ability to harass and abuse people through online technology that allows the perpetrator to stay anonymous. Polls show it's pervasive among students -- kids bully anyway and they are more than early adopters of technology; technology is a central pillar in their social infrastructure.

No longer do they hide under the bed covers reading Archie comics with a flashlight. These days that glow is from the gleam of a cellphone screen as the kid trades a flurry of text messages with friends.

How bad is cyberbullying? A poll released last weekend by the Canadian Teachers Federation says more than one third of Canadians know of a kid who has been bullied online in the last year and 20% knew of a teacher who had been cyberbullied.

The Toronto Sun has written stories of Ontario students who actually committed suicide after being bullied online.

Guess what? It's enough of a trend that it's got a name: Bullycide. And here's another: Teacher baiting, setting up a teacher for online abuse to the point the teacher loses it in class and the incident gets captured on a cellphone, to be quickly uploaded to the Net.

For the purposes of cyberbullying other students, there's "cruelty rings," where a website is created to ridicule another kid.

Hidden behind online names and aliases, cyberbullies often say whatever they like, taunt, even lay down death threats towards other people, publicizing their viciousness to a wide audience of other online users.

Last weekend the CTF approved the finishing touches on a policy to deal with cyberbullying, which they say has become "an increasingly serious problem in our schools and society." While I am often critical about the real motives behind teacher union proclamations, good on the CTF for using their national clout and resources to put a spotlight on a problem that needs major attention.

The CTF made waves with a part of the policy that calls for cyberbullying to become a criminal offence when it involves intimidation, creating fear or making threats of death or physical assault.

EMPHASIZE THE MESSAGE

Belsey told me that while such legislation would be difficult to enforce because it is so difficult to finger the person doing the bullying, it nevertheless would turn up the volume on the message that cyberbullying is socially unacceptable.

Belsey also wants to see technology marketers and those running social networking sites get more involved and pro-active in combating cyberbullying. He told me big-name service provider companies have in at least one instance used the prospect of mild cyberbullying as a selling point for their services. That needs

to stop. And service providers need to start seriously enforcing their own online conduct rules they make people sign when they register for service.

"They are making money hand over fist," Belsey told me. "They need to step up to the plate and enforce their own "acceptable use" policies.

Belsey has also seen the upside of technology. His Grade 5 class has used the Internet for lessons on the nature of peace, "talking" to both Palestinian students and Canadian soldiers in Afghanistan about what peace means to them.

So this isn't about the Luddites crushing the early adopters. Nevertheless, the evolution of technology has created the ultimate tools for passive-aggressive behaviour. With our iPods, BlackBerrys, cellphones and laptops we've got a million different sophisticated excuses for not talking to each other face to face.

Perhaps one day teachers will have to teach kids how to do that, too.

Ref: http://www.torontosun.com/News/Columnists/MacDonald_Moira/2008/07/16/6168246-sun.php