

## AGGRESSION BEYOND THE SCHOOLYARD

### **What to do about cyber bullies? Get real, for a start**

**Toronto expert says most parents don't know what kids do online. She's pushing to make online safety part of the school curriculum**

**SUSAN KRASHINSKY**

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A ninth grader in Calgary admits he has thought about killing himself.

The anonymity of his online bully is "killer," he says. "It could have been my best friend for all I know."

A 19-year-old near Ottawa says a girl started rumours about her online and called her "every name in the book."

Her tormentor then went after her little sister, encouraging her to slit her wrists.

These are the voices of young Canadians who feel the sting of online bullying. They gather where they suffered: on the Internet, sharing their experiences in Facebook groups, on blogs and in chat rooms. While this virtual world might seem remote, kids say what happens there is very real.

The Internet has not just taken bullying beyond the schoolyard; it has created new bullies, says Faye Mishna, a professor of social work at the University of Toronto.

Dr. Mishna recently studied the effects of "cyber bullying," speaking to more than 2,000 students at 32 Toronto schools. She presented her findings at a U of T conference yesterday.

"The kids told us that it wasn't just the traditional bullies," Dr. Mishna says. "Some kids who bully online are not the ones who would bully face-to-face."

She found that three-quarters of online bullies would not pursue their victims offline. That might be because of a false sense of anonymity and detachment on the Internet, she says. |

Unlike old-fashioned bullies, the online variety doesn't have to look anyone in the face.

Greater accessibility only makes the problem worse.

Text-messaging and cellphone web browsers enable kids to immerse themselves in Internet-based social lives, and make it impossible for parents to monitor their Internet use.

The vast majority of parents whom Dr. Mishna spoke to during her research said they know what their kids are up to online, and can protect them from the dangers lurking there most of the time.

The students told a different story, however.

Very few went to their parents when they were bullied online.

Since parents can't fight for them, young people need to be able to protect themselves, Dr. Mishna says.

"We need to provide ways for kids to understand the risks. And we need to help them problem-solve." Dr. Mishna is leading the effort to make online safety part of the school curriculum. She is developing a course on the subject for grade four to six students - a first in Toronto.

Among other things, she wants to teach students what to do when a friend becomes a bully - a common occurrence, both online and off.

"It happens in the social world. Kids get mad, they use their power," she says. "We have to provide them with tools to deal with friendship issues."

And what can parents do? Get real, for a start.

"They're more worried about the predator, the stranger. It's not that you don't have to worry about them, but this is really what's going on, more often," says Dr. Mishna.

Students told Dr. Mishna that they refrained from talking with parents, for fear they would take away their cellphone and Internet privileges.

Discipline has its place, Dr. Mishna says, but not when it prevents communication.

"Adults have to find different ways to respond."

### **A tragic cautionary tale**

The problem of online bullying had never attracted so much attention - or had such a tragic cautionary tale - as it did after the suicide of Megan Meier in 2006.

The 13-year-old Missouri girl had trouble making friends, but easily connected with a 16-year-old boy on the social networking site MySpace.

The boy (who later turned out to be a neighbourhood mother in disguise) quickly turned nasty, sending her mean messages that caused others to join in the fray.

"They're being horrible," she told her mother, crying on the phone shortly before she hanged herself with a belt in her bedroom.

Megan's mother, Tina, has since become an outspoken opponent of "cyber bullying." The practice was outlawed by a nearby town, which also called for more widespread legislation.

*Susan Krashinsky*

### **By the numbers**

21 Percentage of the 2,000 students surveyed said they were bullied online recently.

35 Percentage who said they had bullied others.

28 Percentage who saw online bullying happen; about half either joined in or continued watching without intervening.

19 Percentage who said rumours had been spread about them.

11 Percentage who said they were recently threatened.

19 Percentage who said they had unwanted sexual words or pictures sent to them or were asked to engage in sexual activity online.

95 Percentage who feel safe using the Internet.

84 Percentage of parents who think their child would tell them if they were being bullied online; only about 8 per cent of kids who were bullied did so.

*Susan Krashinsky*

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