

WEB-EXCLUSIVE COMMENT

## Cyberbullying: new school year, new threats

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SPECIAL TO GLOBE AND MAIL UPDATE  
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A new educational year is taking shape, and one issue that is challenging schools across Canada is the dramatic growth and impact of information and communication technologies. All students, teachers and staff have the right to feel and be safe, but cyberbullying and harassment are becoming widespread, from the elementary level to universities.

A group of elementary students in Pickering, Ont., recently apologized for posting a video on YouTube mocking a schoolmate who had suffered a stroke. A 14-year-old student at Saskatoon's E. D. Feehan High School found a video on the Internet that showed herself being beaten up.

In Burlington, Ont., students are alleged to have set up a website called "daveknightisgay" that asked participants to write what "u think of dave knight." People posted hundred of anonymous abusive messages on the site, and the 17-year-old student's family brought a lawsuit against the school board, administrators and the alleged ringleaders.

And last year, 19 students at Robert F. Hall Catholic Secondary School in Caledon East, Ont., were suspended after posting sexually explicit, derogatory and demeaning remarks about their principal. The school took the position that their actions violated the school board's code of conduct, which states that "using computer technology to communicate inappropriate, demeaning, harassing or threatening messages shall be subject to disciplinary action. Police may be contacted."

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The disciplinary action taken by the school attracted considerable controversy. Some students argued that because they sent comments from home computers, rather than from school property, they should not have been suspended. Welcome to the world of cyberspace, where the rules are changing rapidly.

Cyberbullying has been defined by educator Bill Belsey as the use of information and communication technologies, such as e-mail, cellphones, pagers, instant messaging, personal websites and online polling, to support repeated and hostile behaviour that's intended to harm others.

Like other forms of bullying, it's about human relationships, power and control - a form of aggression used from a position of power. The child who bullies is attempting to use power to control and cause distress to another. The child who is victimized may become trapped in an abusive relationship.

Young people are increasingly communicating in ways that are unknown by adults or beyond supervision. Cyberbullies can communicate hurtful messages to a very wide audience with remarkable speed. They often take no ownership for their actions, making it difficult to identify or punish them.

A recent study conducted by Faye Mishna, a professor of social work at the University of Toronto, found that the Internet hasn't just moved bullying beyond the schoolyard - it has created new bullies. Prof. Mishna interviewed more than 2,000 students at 32 Toronto schools and found that three-quarters of online bullies don't pursue their victims offline. The reason for this may be the Internet's false sense of anonymity and detachment, she said.

In her research, 21 per cent of students surveyed said that they had been bullied online recently. Nineteen per cent said rumours had been spread about them online. Thirty-five per cent said that they had bullied others, and 28 per cent had seen online bullying taking place, with half of those having either joined in or continued to watch without intervening.

On July 12, the Canadian Teachers' Federation adopted a policy to urge the federal government to amend the Criminal Code to include cyberbullying. The federation's position is that the current laws do not provide the tools they need to investigate online harassment.

"We feel that there's not enough teeth in the Criminal Code right now for cyberbullying," said president Emily Noble. The federation has been highlighting these issues in recent years, arguing that harassment negatively affects the learning environment and should be viewed as a serious occupational health and safety issue.

From a school perspective, cyberbullying is a particularly difficult issue, as, unlike physical bullying, threats are often sent anonymously,

from home computers. And while it can be as devastating as traditional forms of bullying, some students won't complain for fear that adults may overreact and take away their cellphone or computer privileges - or of reprisals.

Ontario's revised safe schools legislation, which came into force on Feb. 1, extends disciplinary action to include activities beyond the classroom if they affect the school climate. Cyberbullying is not the main focus of the new legislation, but it does also add "bullying" to the list of infractions for which suspension must be considered.

It is also important for schools to educate students, parents and teachers about the seriousness of cyberbullying.

In past years, most boards have developed computer and Internet use policies, setting out written rules about what is permitted and forbidden. These policies should be updated to include harassment, threats or intimidation using cellphones and wireless Internet technology. The policies should be signed by students and parents, and there should be clear and serious consequences for anyone who does not comply.

Students should be taught healthy relations strategies and communication skills. And schools should be encouraged to teach curriculum-based anti-bullying programs. The programs should encourage and reward fairness, equality, mutual respect and co-operation. They should focus on improving relations among members of the school community and creating a peaceful school culture.

It can be a challenge to get Internet and cellular service providers to deal with a young person's complaint. Students should be encouraged not to share personal information, e-mail addresses or passwords with others. They should be taught that if someone treats them rudely online, they should not respond.

And in cases where the conduct might involve a criminal offence, such as a physical threat, the student and parents should inform police. To this end, they shouldn't erase or delete threatening or harassing e-mail messages - they should be encouraged to save a copy with full headers, all addresses and the date and time received. The header indicates every stage of the message's journey, helping track its origin.

Overall, cyberbullying represents a very serious problem for Canadian schools. Students should be encouraged to speak out when they see someone being mean, threatening or intimidating to another person online. They should also be encouraged to report incidents of bullying or harassment to a person they trust, such as a parent, teacher or principal. Principals should be able to access district-level support for any situation they feel is a threat to the safety of students, both inside and outside of school. Responding quickly and effectively to allegations of cyberbullying will assist in creating a safe learning and teaching environment that promotes responsibility, respect and civility.

*Eric Roher is a partner with the law firm Borden Ladner Gervais LLP. He is the co-author of An Educator's Guide to the Role of the Principal (second edition).*

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