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## Cyber-bullying root causes must be addressed

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Ryan Halligan of Vermont hanged himself in 2003 at age 13 after being bullied by his classmates, in person and online. Megan Meier of Missouri was also 13 when she killed herself in 2007 after receiving insults from a MySpace "boy" she had developed a crush on. The "boy" was in reality a 49-year-old woman who lived four doors away.

Bullying has always had the potential to wreak real harm. It is most often vulnerable children like Halligan and Meier who are targets. Meier suffered from attention-deficit disorder and depression; Halligan had a learning disorder.

Fuelled with such horror stories, schools and parents are worried about the safety of the children in their care from cyber-bullying. To its credit, the Quebec English School Boards Association decided to tackle the problem of Internet-based bullying as part of its research into the impact and potential of the Internet on English public schools in the province.

Cyber-bullying expert Shaheen Shariff, an associate professor in McGill University's education department, described it as an old phenomenon dressed up as something new.

Shariff described cyber-bullying as an extension, or mirroring, of adult bullying behaviour - road rage and "social" bullying at sports events, work and home. Reporting to the school board association, Shariff said that focusing on "banning technology and demonizing perpetrators" makes the problem worse.

Bullying, however and wherever it's carried out, has root causes, Shariff said. Those causes are what should be attacked. Fixating on technology diverts attention from real problems. The kind of real problem the report listed included dysfunctional relationships between administrators and teachers, underlying tensions relating to classroom diversity or pressures from parents.

Shariff and the study authors recommended that rather than fixate on Facebook or YouTube, schools should develop strategies to help students understand the difference between bullying and friendly teasing. Youngsters also should be taught what kind of impact their words have on other people, however those words are expressed, whether in person or online.

Words and their power to wound are sometimes difficult for youngsters to grasp. Being beaten up in the schoolyard is a straightforward proposition. It's wrong. Everyone can agree on that, the victim, the assailant, school authorities, parents.

Victims of rumour and criticism need exactly the same kind of support as victims of physical violence. They need tools with which to defend themselves. But more than anything else, all students need to be taught how to communicate respectfully.

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