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## Bully for you - the hidden world of online cruelty

**"CAN I say the swear words?"**

Johnelle Hosking, a 14-year-old from Tauranga, is about to read out a Bebo page, which a school friend put online last year.

Deep breath.

"OK. There's a slut mole bitch slag-face whore named Johnelle... since she sucked up to all the teachers she got voted head girl of our school... there's so much we could tell you about her, we don't like her, we never will."

This is the first time Johnelle has seen this page. It was pulled off Bebo, a social networking website, four days after it was set up, but her mother, Megan, keeps a printout. Megan says she had been expecting someone to have a go at her "tall poppy" daughter.

But Johnelle had no inkling that anything was wrong until 11am on Saturday, August 18. "I was sitting in my room, on the phone to my friend. She was looking at Bebo at the time. She said, 'Oh, Johnelle, there's this quiz thing on here about you it says, 'Do you think Johnelle's a two-timing slut?'" The Hosking family didn't have a computer so Johnelle couldn't look at the quiz, which her classmates were loading on to their Bebo pages.

"Later that day my best friend called me up and said, 'Um, Johnelle, there's something I need to tell you and it's on Bebo.' She said, 'blah-blah and blah-blah [Johnelle's not giving out names] have made a hate page about you'."

"I just went all quiet and stuff." Johnelle says she thought about the page "every minute". After two days she folded.

"Mum came to me and said, what's wrong, you're not yourself... I just blurted it all out and I started crying and I told her."

JOHNELLE'S EXPERIENCE of online bullying is by no means unusual. But telling a parent is.

NetSafe, a government-funded education group, last year surveyed 963 New Zealand teenagers about their experience of cyber bullying.

The full results have not yet been published but NetSafe released key findings to the Sunday Star-Times, showing that of the one in five students who have been bullied via mobile phone, only 16% had told an adult.

Those who were bullied on the internet were even more secretive: only 6.8% told an adult. Most of the bullying involved "mean, hurtful or nasty" messages, but one-third had received physical threats.

So why the hush-up? NetSafe's principal knowledge officer, John Fenaughty, says it's simple: kids know that their parents will remove the phone, or internet access.

Parents might see their child's constant text messaging and mucking around on the internet as a waste

of time, but Fenaughty says research shows these "online settings" play a critical part in young people's social and emotional development.

NetSafe, run by the Ministry of Education, has a hotline taking up to 2000 calls a year. The group runs classes at schools across the country and regularly puts out information packs for teachers and parents.

But none of the teenagers or parents spoken to for this piece had ever heard of NetSafe.

Fenaughty says it is difficult to reach young people on their own, online turf. The agency is trying, with an MSN and a Bebo page. "The message is getting out to some people. But definitely not getting out to everyone ... We need all the help that we can get."

For two New Zealand families it is too late.

Daniel Gillies, 16, took his own life in 2002, back when only the luckiest teenagers had mobile phones and Bebo wasn't even a blip on the online horizon.

Daniel suffered from neurofibromatosis, a genetic disorder that can cause bone defects. It had left his face disfigured. He was lucky, he had a phone, but he was badly bullied at school and soon started getting abusive texts from his schoolmates.

After one text-filled night, Daniel left home in the early hours of the morning and biked through the rain to Oamaru Harbour. He climbed a rocky 80m cliff, and stepped off. His body was found at 2pm the next day.

"I used to love hearing the rain on the roof at night," Daniel's mother Helen Algar said.

"I always felt comforted by it. Safe and protected. All I can think about when I hear it now is that my son was out alone in the rain and desperate enough to want to die."

Four years later Alex Teka, a 12-year-old Putaruru girl, took her own life after being text-bullied. By then 86% of households had a mobile phone (up from 58% on Census night 2001); perhaps this is why her death, which was not so different to Daniel's, hit a national nerve.

Steve Maharey, who was then education minister, commissioned an urgent report. Police met NetSafe and the big telecommunications companies. Schools stepped up blanket bans on mobile phones.

But Bebo has left parents completely in the dark. The bright, bitchy and particularly cruel site, launched in 2005, is now New Zealand teens' favourite social networking site. Worldwide it is a second home to 42 million users, who spend an average of 30 minutes a day on their page. Bebo seems to attract younger teenagers they put up risque pictures, answer personality quizzes (Auckland kids are playing "Which Otago gangster are you?") and talk in a weird mix of slang, abbreviations and capital/lower case letters.

(Hint: POS stands for parent over shoulder. It's code for "I'm lying".) Bebo has also pushed the private hurt of bullying onto a platform that could not be more public. Receiving an obscene text message is bad enough many teenagers feel their mobile phone is sacred, an extension of themselves but when you get hassled or hacked on Bebo, the world watches.

EVEN AANA Teka, Alex's older sister, has a Bebo page.

The Sunday Star-Times stumbled across it last week. Aana, a 19-year-old trainee beauty therapist filling in time at a meatworks, has abandoned the page but left it open to the public.

The main picture is a photograph of Aana's "gawjus sister" Alex and a friend, both with their faces painted, grinning. Aana has filled her page with tributes to her sister and most of the comments (Bebo "chats" happen in a kind of guestbook section - you write on mine, I write on yours) are hellos from friends.

And then, early this year, along came a commenter, presumably male.

He wrote: *just letting you no I think your fat share the luv ok Aana didn't reply.*

But 10 weeks later he was back: *hey well I think ur a hidious ginger skank who should get a new face rather than flunting that thing u got now SICK arse munching whore* Finally, his apparent ex-girlfriend chimed in with this: *oi actual \*\*\* u u ginga [writer's] tha shyt look how many views he has u got like nun u sicko callum 4 life \*\*\* ginga hoes hahaha shame u batty bitch*

Aana is determined not to react; she says these two charmers are "just randoms ... They have no reason to say anything to me, yet they do. What can you say? I really don't know ... [I] just leave them. They can say what they want". Aana says she and her mother Deanne, and older brother Daniel, have picked themselves up after Alex's death ("yeah, we're good, we're good").

But the messages hit close to home. Aana is now staying off Bebo, although one day, she hopes, she might log in again.

"Possibly. Hopefully. Miss it!" Really? "Yeah, I do. I have to admit."

LAST MONTH Hastings police charged a 19-year-old woman with hacking a 16-year-old's Bebo account: although hundreds of Kiwi kids know how to hack, and do, the move is thought to be a first.

As Google, or many teenagers will tell you, all a hacker needs is an email address (often published on your Bebo page) and a good guess. They go to your email account and try to sign in as you. Email sign-in pages always have a "forgotten your password?" button. The hacker clicks that, and then usually has to answer a security question like "What's my favourite food?" or "Who do I love?". If the hacker has trouble guessing they head back to Bebo and check out who you're dating, where you live, what your pets are called - whatever your question, chances are the answer is there.

Once the hacker answers the question your email address is theirs. They can change your password (so you can't get in) print out all your old emails and send new ones to everyone in your address book. That email address is also the key to your Bebo page, in that a "forgot my password" will deliver it to the email inbox they've just hacked. What a high school hacker does to a Bebo page once they're in is not particularly sophisticated either. Girls are called sluts, whores, bitches, hos, slags; boys get away with just "retard" or "freak" - but in virtually every case the hacker also has a go at their sexuality. One boy's nickname was changed to "GAY Homo Man" with the plea: "Yes well i had to build up a lot of confidence to say it to everyone, but i realized that there is no use keeping it a secret any longer ... Please do not mock me about this as i am still very fragile ... Thank you for being so understanding."

RAPE PREVENTION head Dr Kim McGregor says that as teens live more of their lives online, they are seeing sex as less "real".

At NetSafe's international cyber safety conference, held in Queenstown at the end of July, McGregor told a panel discussion about a question her team is asking teenage girls, as part of an education programme delivered to 25 Auckland high schools.

"We ask them, would you trade a mobile phone for a blowjob? Some of them say `Yep!'"

Others ask what type of phone.

In contrast, Johnelle doesn't own a mobile phone, and doesn't want one, because, "if I did I would have gotten heaps [of abusive messages]".

Often, this is exactly how online bullying campaigns play out. It's not just a few nasty texts, and it's not just a mean comment on a Bebo page, or a hacker. It is those things, but in combination, and it means no let-up for kids who have a hard time at school.

"A large majority who are bullied at school will be bullied in cyberspace when they get home," Fenaughty says.

Johnelle has been through all that. She is a strong, stropky girl; she soldiered on and now, life is back to normal - although she still cringes when people click that she is "that Bebo girl". But without a few loyal

friends and a very watchful mother, she knows things could have turned out much worse.

And she has one message for her peers: "I'm telling you this so that it helps other people... If it's happening to you, don't keep it a secret. Even for those two days it just crushed me. Thinking about it minute after minute - I couldn't stop thinking about it. Even if it's going to get you in trouble, for maybe starting it or something, you should still tell."

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