A Virtual Epidemic

The Impending Threat of Cyber-Bullying

"The Internet is the new playground."

-   *Emily Noble*[i]

Introduction

Imagine being able to connect with nearly two billion people with the click of a computer mouse. In a matter of milliseconds, a message can be sent to China, Zimbabwe, Greece or Italy. It was a mere decade ago that the Internet was virtually unheard of. The idea of an instantaneous communication system, research tool and source of entertainment and amusement that would invade millions of home around the world seemed ludicrous! Today however, it is estimated that 21.9% of the world's population uses the Internet on a regular basis.[ii]

The Internet is used as a means of communication and entertainment and as an information source in homes, schools and workplaces alike. However, like any good thing, the Internet comes with many risks. One of the most prevalent risks this virtual playground presents is that of cyber bullying.

As defined by the National Crime Prevention Council; cyber bullying is "when the Internet, cell phones, or other devices are used to send or post text or images intended to hurt or embarrass another person".[iii] Until recent years, bullying was confined to face-to-face encounters in which the older and stronger harassed and humiliated those who were

younger, weaker, and different. Today, bullying has escalated into a whole new forum – the online world.

Perhaps one of the most highly publicized cases of cyber-bullying to ever surface is the case of Megan Meier. A thirteen year old girl from Dardenne Prairie, Missouri, she was described by parents as a girl who "loved swimming, boating, fishing, dogs, rap music, and boys. But her life had not always been easy. She was heavy and for years had tried to lose weight. She had Attention Deficit Disorder, and battled depression." [iv] Meier, after opening a strictly monitored MySpace account, befriended a boy from another town supposedly named Josh Evans. This boy was flattering, kind and friendly with Megan through continuous online messaging and chats. However, over time, his messages went from kind to cruel. His messages begin using crude language to describe Megan, bullying her, and tearing her down with blows at her appearance, weight and personality. These messages eventually became so intimidating, vulgar and threatening that Megan became fed up. On October 13, 2006, Megan ran to her room – where she was later found by her parents, with a belt hung around her neck – hanging in her closet, having committed suicide. Following Megan's death, it was discovered that "Josh Evans" was, in actuality, the mother of a friend that Megan had feuded with – in an attempt to get revenge on Megan. [v]

Sadly, cases like those of Megan Meier are not all that rare. According to "*Cyber-bullying: Our Kids' New Reality*", 70% of the 2,500 adolescents surveyed had been bullied online. [vi] Online harassment and abuse is quickly becoming an epidemic, and **something** must be done about it.

Knowledge Is the Key

Cyber-bullying has been, for the most part, a silent plague. Unlike bullying in the classroom or on the playground, which has been going on for decades, cyber-bullying is a relatively new offense, and education regarding this topic is very limited.

However, education and knowledge are the keys to stop cyber-bullying from progressing. In July 2008, 150 young people from around the world gathered in London, England to participate in the first ever International Youth Advisory Congress. These young people gathered to compose the *Children and Young Person's Global Online Charter*, a document outlining recommendations, that upon their implementation would protect young people and children from sexual harassment, humiliation, and bullying online. This document will be submitted for consideration under the 2009 Resolution to the United Nations Charter on the Rights of a Child. [vii]

This Congress was a landmark in the fight against cyber-bullying, as it provided a means of education regarding online abuse and harassment for young people from 19 nations. However, this Congress is just the beginning of what is necessary to eliminate online abuse.

In reality, the key to preventing cyber-bullying is the education of people across the entire world. Young people and adults alike need to be aware of the immense problem of online abuse that exists in every corner of the globe. Most parents are unaware that cyber-bullying is even a possibility and are oblivious to the fact that there is a seven in ten chance that their child is a victim of Internet bullying.

We, as a society, must begin to recognize cyber-bullying as a major offense. It is

important that programs, such as the recently developed *Cyber-bullying: Encouraging Ethical Online Behavior,* are prioritized and implemented in schools and community groups throughout our nation.

Developed in cooperation with the Government of Canada, and the Canadian Teachers' Foundation, the *Cyber-bullying: Encouraging Ethical Online Behavior* program has been created to "give students a better understanding of the ethical and legal implications of cyber-bullying, and to promote positive Internet use." [viii]

Programs such as this one are crucial in empowering students, teachers and parents alike with knowledge. They need to be aware that cyber-bullying is a major offense which causes incredible harm, leading to consequences as severe as depression and suicide. As people become aware of the reality and severity of cyber-bullying, attitudes surrounding the issue will change.

The preface that "education is the key" is continually reiterated in our society. This approach has been used as a preventative method in many fields. It has been effective in lowering the numbers of sexually transmitted diseases and lessening crime rates. Education can also be effective in inhibiting cases of cyber-bullying.

In recent years, there has been some debate about including education about cyber-safety as an addition to the list of basic rights in the United Nations Charter on the Rights of a Child. *The Children and Young Person's Global Online Charter* states that, "We believe every child is entitled to an education and information about cybersafety. The UN needs to listen to our views and to value the importance of online safety and education for children and parents."[ix]

Our world is continually evolving and children and young people in every corner of the

globe are accessing the Internet. As they do, they are putting themselves at risk for online harassment. In our new and virtual society, it is essential that we make sure every child is given education about online safety and is made aware of the ever-present risk of cyber-bullying. Along with their parents, these children need to be informed of how to remain secure online and what actions they can take if online harassment occurs.

As our society becomes more knowledgeable and educated about the severity of online harassment and its risks – this epidemic can be stopped in its tracks.

Consequences in a Cyber World

Following the death of Megan Meier, a burning question was posed by families, law enforcement agencies, and educators across the world. "When does activity in the online world become a crime?"

Part of the reason that online bullying is so easy is that there are no real consequences in place. Young people who harass someone in a public setting know that there are consequences which can range in severity, and can be implemented by parents, teachers and in extreme cases, the law.

The online world, however, has no boundaries or laws. Extending into 148 countries across our world[x], it seems as though "what happens online stays online."

However, in order to stop severe online offenses, that range from personal libel, to sexual harassment, pedophilia and death threats, consequences must be implemented. One of the propositions from the *Children and Young Persons' Global Online Charter* was that "governments should implement trans-border agreements between nations to protect all children."[xi]

In order to execute consequences around our world for cyber-bullying, governments must work together to make this proposition a reality. Children around our world need to be protected from instances of online bullying. In order to do this, grave consequences must be put into place across the entire globe for those who choose to harass people online. There are laws in nations all around the planet that prohibit harassment, threats to a person's wellbeing, and hate speech. In our own country, both harassment, and defamatory libel (a statement that could powerfully harm a person's reputation) can be punished with up to ten years in prison.[xii] Governments in many nations, including Canada, United States of America, Australia, United Kingdom, Italy and the Republic of Ireland, are working to have these offenses made punishable by law when they occur online. With laws such as these in place, they will serve as a deterrent for those who choose to bully online; therefore decreasing the number of offenses that occur.

It is also important that penalties are established for students who choose to use online bullying in schools and other public settings. Recently, in Ontario, the Safe Schools Act has been edited to include consequences for online behavior, meaning students can be suspended or expelled for cyber-bullying, even if the act takes place outside of school. [xiii] Penalties like these need to be implemented all across our nation and around our world, allowing young people to realize that cyber-bullying is not a minuscule offense, but rather it has serious repercussions.

As crimes are reported, and retributions are put into place by law enforcement agencies and governments all across the world, online offenses will diminish. Cyber bullies will be inhibited and deterred from harming others as they realize the severity of the sentence that will result.

Ideas for the Industry

Despite the vigilance of government and law enforcement agencies as they work to put consequences in place, it is also crucial that the industry takes some responsibility in preventing online abuse.

The online industry and internet service providers need to be responsible for monitoring online activity including the exploitation and abuse that occurs on the Internet.

In November 2008 controversy arose when a nineteen year old boy broadcasted his suicide live on a popular video chat site: Justin.tv. The teenager, Abraham Briggs, overdosed on pills on camera while being mocked and encouraged to commit the act by the hundreds of people watching.

The video was eventually removed from the website after being flagged by its users.[xiv]

This prime example of inappropriate content that was motivated by severe online harassment and abuse, could not be prevented by law enforcement agencies.

The Children & Young People's Global Online Charter states that "all information and intelligence regarding reports of child exploitation and abusive images should be passed to law enforcement agencies." [xv]

Internet service providers, social networking sites and websites that stream videos such as YouTube and Justin.tv, need to take responsibility for monitoring the content published on their sites. Any form of harassment, sexual content, threats, inappropriate postings or derogatory comments need to be flagged and reported to law enforcement agencies. This is vital in preventing cyber-bullying and online abuse from becoming widely accepted and broadcast across the World Wide Web.

Industries also need to be responsible for creating a mechanism in which cyber-bullying

can be reported. Another recommendation from the *Children & Young Person's Global Online Charter* states, that "a mandatory and universal-browser based mechanism should be embedded on the toolbar of all social networking sites so that threatening behavior can be reported in just two clicks, without even leaving the website."[xvi]

A common venue in which cyber-bullying takes place is on social networking sites such as MySpace and Facebook. In order for cyber-bullying to be prevented and punished, it is strategic that there is a mechanism which allows victims to report instances of abuse. This is currently not available on the majority of social networking sites, chat rooms, or when instant messaging.

The introduction of a mechanism that allows threatening behavior to be reported instantaneously will help government, law enforcement and internet providers detect threats of cyber-bullying. It will also help in locating those who are responsible for these threats and assisting those who are victimized.

The online industry is perhaps one of the richest in the world. The heavy use of the Internet is highly publicized, promoted and advertised.

This industry must take responsibility for making the online world a safer place – by monitoring its content and making it convenient for online harassment to be reported. As these recommendations and ideals become a reality, virtual exploitations and the misuse of the Internet will become a thing of the past.

Rooted In a Lack of Respect

Education, prevention and the execution of consequences regarding cyber-bullying are necessities in stopping this crisis. However, this cyber-bullying craze is deeply rooted in

a lack of respect. Cyber-bullying is a much deeper problem than what someone types into a message online. The lack of respect we express for others, who are different than us, escalates into horrible bullying encounters. These encounters are becoming increasingly popular in the online world.

People who are different than us – whether it be due to learning disorders, disabilities, sexual orientation, race, religion, age or gender are often the victims of bullying. Our society, despite our technological and economic advances, still expresses intolerance, fear and disrespect for people who do not fit our views as 'normal'.

This disrespect has penetrated the virtual world and is the cause of the hatred expressed through harassment and humiliation online.

In order to prevent cyber-bullying, we must learn to express respect for the people around us. As members of society, it is vital that we embrace the diversity within our communities and learn to value and esteem all individuals in our world, not just those who are the same as us.

As we learn to embrace respect and become more tolerant and acceptant of differences, cyber-bullying can be eliminated.

Conclusion

Bullying has been a crisis for many years. It has struck people of every age, race, and societal group alike. Cyberspace has allowed bullying to become a more powerful force than anyone had ever envisioned. Cyber-bullying is a crisis that is striking young people all across our nation. We must, as a society, begin to take a stand against this crisis. Firstly, it is imperative that we recognize the severity of online bullying offenses. We must then begin to educate and inform people about preventative measures and

implement programs that provide information about the risks that the Internet and online bullying present.

It is also essential that consequences are put in place to prevent cyber bullying, and that governments reach trans-border agreements to stop online bullies. The Industry must also take responsibility for providing mechanisms that monitor activity online and allow inappropriate behavior to be reported.

Finally, promoting **respect** is critical if we wish to see the cessation of cyber-bullying. Acknowledging the importance of respect and promoting acceptance and tolerance of people of all races, ethnic origins, cultures, sexual orientations and abilities is vital, as a lack of respect is the root of the cyber-bullying epidemic.

In the words of Harry S. Truman, "We must build a new world, a far better world – one in which the eternal dignity of man is respected."

We must revolutionize our society by beginning to respect those around us and honoring differences; rather than tearing them down.

As we do, the world of Cyberspace will be transformed into one that is much more secure, putting an end to online bullying everywhere.

Endnotes

[i] Cyberbullying Should Be a Criminal Offense: Teachers, www.cbc.ca/canada/story/2008/07/12/cyberbullying.html
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[iv] The Story: www.meganmeierfoundation.org
[v] *Story paraphrased from* The St. Charles Journal [07/11/2007] *as found on* www.meganmeierfoundation.org
[vi] Majority of Canadian Teens Surveyed Have Been Bullied Online: www.cbc.ca/canada/story/2007/08/14
[vii] Children and Young Person's Global Online Charter: www.iyac.net/iyac_charter.pdf

[viii] Classroom Resources to Counter Cyber-bullying: www.education-medias.ca/english/resources/educational
[ix] Children & Young Person's Global Online Charter: www.iyac.net/iyac_charter.pdf
[x] Internet Access Worldwide: www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Internet_access_worldwide

[xi] Children and Young Person's Global Online Charter: www.iyac.net/iyac_charter.pdf

[xii] Cyber Bullying & The Law Fact Sheet: www.education-medias.ca/english/resources/educational/lessons
[xiii] Ibid: www.education-medias.ca/english/resources/educational/lessons
[xiv] Web Suicide Viewed Live & Reaction Spurs A Debate: www.nytimes.com/2008/11/25/us/25suicides.html
[xv] Children & Young Person's Global Online Charter: www.iyac.net/iyac_charter
[xvi] Ibid; www.iyac.net/iyac_charter