21st Century Bullying: Cyberbullying and the Need for Teaching Internet Safety

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Abstract:

21st century bullying: cyberbullying is a present threat amongst our schools and students in this digital age. Although cyberbullying is a rising problem in the 21st century, proactive measures can be undertaken to decrease this technology threat that include: educating our students, parents, and community about Internet safety, multiple layers of Internet and technology support, and up to date technology committees.
21st century bullying “cyberbullying” is a present threat amongst our schools and students in this digital age. School districts have identified cyberbullying as a rising problem and some have begun to teach internet safety in their schools. In 2006, Digital Trends staff conducted a research study on reported cyber crimes and the results were, “at least 15 per cent of children have received threatening messages online or on their phones, the majority of those bullied being girls. Another survey puts the figure as high as 25 per cent for text message bullying” (Staff, 2006). Cyberbullying can be defined as, “when one young person uses digital technology to hurt another young person,” (Aftab, 2009). Although cyberbullying is a rising problem in the 21st century, proactive measures can be undertaken to decrease this technology threat that include: educating our students, parents, and community about Internet safety, multiple layers of Internet and technology support, and up to date technology committees.

Teaching our students, parents, and community members about the importance of Internet safety is an essential piece in our fight against cyberbullying. School districts have a personal responsibility for the safety and well being of their students while at school. The Webster Groves School Districts mission statement states, “The Webster Groves School District community is committed to academic and personal success for every student” (WG Staff, 2010). To acquire academic and personal success for every student, every student must feel safe and comfortable while attending their school system. With the increase in technology, students are now able to bring home technologies to school such as cell phone or mobile devices that provide the students with mediated forms of communication. Through handheld devices, students are now able to communicate virtually without supervision and without permission. The job of an educator is to teach their students about the need for safety while using any form of technology as well as its impact on others. Internet safety lessons are essential for teaching students about appropriate on-line use both at school as well as at home. The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children created a website titled NetSmartz to help teach students, parents, and teachers the need for Internet safety. Through the use of this website, students become engaged and aware of the various dangers they might encounter while on the Internet. The lessons were created for school age students using vocabulary that is familiar and current. Through interactive videos, music, and activities students learn what to do when they encounter anything on the web or through a mobile device that makes them feel uncomfortable or afraid. For example, NetSmartz introduces to students characters titled the WizzyWigs. Each of the WizzyWigs character symbolizes a different on-line threat. Viewers are given information on each WizzyWig character (the Oogle, the Hot-Head, the Follow-You-Fiona, the NumBut, and the Spamazoid) through interactive lessons. After each of the lessons the user has options for additional interactive activities challenging them to identify the different threats they might encounter while working on the Internet.

Just teaching students is not enough when most cyber crimes are committed outside of the school day. “Traditionally, home was a place where a kid could go to escape his bully.
With advances in technology, home is no longer a haven. Glenn Stutzky, a School Safety Violence Specialist at Michigan State University, said that today’s bullies use technology to spread rumors and threats, making life miserable for their victims throughout the day and night” (Keith, 2005). In our digital age students use the Internet for school activities, research, gaming, as well as a tool for communication. Keith also states, “Websites can provide places where children can gain knowledge and communicate with others who share the same interests. This same benefit can also be used to do harm. Some children are now using Websites to mock, harass, and torment others” (Keith, 2005). Parents need to be aware of their child’s Internet use as well as various different cyber crimes that they might encounter. The U.S. Department of Justice: Federal Bureau of Investigation created an online parents guide to Internet safety. This article highlights for parents any on-line red flags and conversation starters for their children when looking at their child’s technology use. The article indicates what measures parents should take if they find evidence of cyber crimes committed against their children. The article states, “This guide was prepared from actual investigations involving child victims, as well as investigations where law enforcement officers posed as children” (U.S. Department of Justice, 2010). The article explains to parents what to do if their child begins to receive phone calls or text messages from unknown senders, inappropriate materials are sent to or sent from your home computer, as well as an on-line guide to help minimize the chances of your child being exploited through an on-line source.

Multiple layers of student and teacher support is necessary in today’s schools. School districts have created on-line/technology user policies for students, parent, and teachers to help make them aware of the expectations of their use with school district technology. School districts have begun to block specific Internet websites that provide the students with the ability to communicate virtually (some social networking sites) or acquire inappropriate material. “Among the activities that children and teens engage in online, peer-to-peer file sharing has again come under serious scrutiny from government officials and groups committed to keeping kids safe, online and off” (Secor, 2003). Teachers and school administrators need to present the material to the students and parents discussing what cyber crimes and inappropriate technology use consists of. “Each student needs to feel safe at school, so effective teachers discuss what to do if a student ever feels bullied or threatened by another student in or out of school. However, in an increasingly technological society, creating a safe classroom and school community also means teaching children about cyber safety and cyber bullying, and how to respond to negative situations” (Borgia, 2010). The SafeKids and NetSmartz websites provide educators, students, and parents with information on Internet safety. Prior to students using any form of school technologies the students and parents should discuss the technology policy in detail and sign their agreement to their appropriate use of school technology. The technology policy should consist of both the physical technology itself as well as the use of the technology.

Schools have a responsibility to not only maintain its technology for educational use from year-to-year but to ensure that students’ safety is met while at school while using this technology. The Webster Groves School District has each child and parent sign an acceptable technology user policy identifying appro-
appropriate technology and Internet use while at school. This includes at school on school district technology as well as technology a child brings with them from home to school. Through the use of on-line firewalls and network settings districts can block undesired websites from students use. The main problems that school districts are encountering are students bringing in unwanted material, cyber crimes through their mobile devices. “Children and youths use electronic technology such as the Internet more than any other medium through which to communicate and socialize. Students and parents need to be aware of school level consequences that might occur if their children bring in incriminating pictures through a mobile device. If a student brings in and shows/reads material from a mobile device while at school it then turns it into a school level issue and most times to law enforcement.

Building level and district level committees are necessary with the evolution of technology devices being used in classrooms. These committees need to not only discuss new products for the classroom but also the Internet safety required for their students. Integrating new technologies in the classroom can affect the way a child learns, the way a child develops, as well as the way a child views themselves. Districts need to be aware of the true nature of each technology and how all children can be affected by its implementation. For example, introducing blogs into the classroom for discussion based lessons without the voice of Internet safety or cyberbullying could turn your webpage into a gossip column for students. In addition, allowing handheld device game systems such as Nintendo DS’s allow students with the opportunity to interact virtually through the Picto Chat feature. Teachers and students need to be aware of the importance of the technology, the benefit when used properly.

Each year in the media we view students who have been affected by cyberbullying and we can only hope that our efforts as educators or as parents will help decrease this threat. “After being bullied in school and online this year, 15-year-old Phoebe Prince hung herself outside her Massachusetts home” (Converge, 2010). Being aware of current technologies and its use by students is key for understanding the importance of Internet safety. The goal of an educator is to create a safe learning environment for the students both inside and outside of the classroom. While teaching in an eMINTS (enhancing Missouri’s Networked Teaching Strategies) classroom I have learned of the importance of Internet safety and technology lessons. My students are utilizing technology on a daily basis both inside and outside of the classroom and they need to be aware of the dangers that they might encounter while working on-line. Internet safety lessons, multiple layers of student and teacher support, and school/district technology committees can help decrease this technology threat.
References:


