

CHILD CARING

## Cyberbullying is a problem that parents could be missing

By Barbara F. Meltz, Globe Staff | November 18, 2004

Students at Dana Hall School in Wellesley organized an Internet Safety Club this year. They want middle-school students to be more aware of the dangers to be found on the Internet. They also want parents to pay more attention. "Kids are getting trashed online and parents don't even know it," says cofounder Lauren Krone of Westwood, a senior. Think about this. Teenagers are telling parents to get more involved.

Think about this, too: In a recent national poll of 20,000 students in grades 5 through 12 and their parents, a third of the students said they do not have any rules at home for Internet use, yet 92 percent of parents said they do. The survey was conducted by i-SAFE, a California-based nonprofit that promotes Internet safety education.

It's not that people are lying. More likely, it's a matter of perception.

Perhaps parents aren't addressing the critical online activity, or they think they are done once they've bought parental control software. But even software companies say nothing substitutes for hands-on involvement, from eyeballing what's on the screen to teaching their children how to evaluate a site, from providing netiquette (that's Internet etiquette for the uninitiated) to identifying red-flag behavior they should bring to your attention. Perhaps the biggest reason parents are so clueless is that even the technology-savvy fail to grasp that children use the Internet differently. "Adults go online to get information. Children go online to socialize," says Jonathan King of i-SAFE ([i-safe.com](http://i-safe.com)).

Being connected to friends is important, and the Internet is a terrific way to do it. That's the first message Krone's club wants parents to know. Increasingly, though, socializing is fraught with danger. They want parents to know that, too.

"Online fighting and bullying are huge," Krone says.

Parents tend to think that chat-room predators are a child's biggest online threat. They are still a danger, but instant messaging has replaced them in popularity, and that has spawned cyberbullying. "The growing threat is no longer from strangers but from people students know -- classmates -- who use online venues such as instant message or bulletin boards to embarrass, humiliate, or otherwise harass," says Kathy Merlock Jackson, Batten professor of communication at Virginia Wesleyan College. Her area of specialty is children's culture. Katya Gifford of [cyberangels.org](http://cyberangels.org), an Internet safety organization that offers free, online safety classes for parents, says bullying has developed into a huge problem in the past year.

It often starts innocently, says Dana Hall junior Allie Levy, also an Internet Safety Club member. "You could say in person to someone, 'You're so stuck up!' and they would know you're teasing. But when it's in print, you don't know how to read it, so maybe you respond by saying something that's mean."

"The next thing you know," says Krone, "a printout is being passed around: 'Look what she said about me.' "

From there, it's a matter of bad luck how far it spreads and how vicious it gets. She notes that boys and girls are just as likely to be bullies as bullied. Content can range from "You're a slut" to "I'm gonna kill u." A student can be "stalked" with nasty instant messages, cellphone text messages, or a webpage of embarrassing photos taken, say, in the locker room.

"Everybody has had it happen," says Ally Carolan, a Dana Hall junior, but it's worse in middle school, she says, because kids are so desperate to fit in. That makes them more likely to divulge personal information online and to be more devastated if details later are used against them. They also tend not to have the tools to cope, "something as simple as putting JK (just kidding) or a smiley face" to a comment that might be misconstrued. That's where parents should come in. Krone says, "My dad won't let me make a profile," referring to information students post for their IM buddy list. She says students protest limits, but she thinks they are grateful to have them nonetheless.

Students also tend not to realize that personal information can end up in the public domain. Even away messages, meant to tell buddies why you can't answer them now, can be a hazard. "You're giving up habits and routines," says Jackson.

"In middle school, students think you should answer honestly," says Levy. They need coaching to learn to fudge.

Gifford, the mother of five children ages 11 to 19, has strict rules about Internet use that vary by their age:

**No chat rooms.** Even moderated chats are no guarantee of safety. In one recent case in Salt Lake City, a 15-year-old was lured to meet offline someone he met in a church-sponsored, moderated chat room that his parents had sanctioned. The only exception Gifford makes is for her oldest son, who is allowed to visit role-play game sites, known as RPGs, and that's only because she has software that gives her a daily log of sites he has visited.

**No X-rated sites.** The conversation she has with her sons goes something like this: "I know you're exploring issues of sexuality. That's normal. But porn sites are degrading. Not in this house." They know she uses parental-control software, including a program that allows her to see what's currently on the screen of other computers in the house. "It's not spying if they know about it," she says. She also has penalties just as she would for any misbehavior. Miss a curfew? Lose the car for a week. Disregard computer guidelines? Lose the computer for a week.

**No IM with strangers.** The only people you can talk to online are those you already know offline. She helped her 11-year-old draw up a list of people she can talk to online. Blocking software keeps others out.

**No personal information.** Tweens understand what this is about when it comes to filling in a form, but what about blogs like [livejournal.com](http://livejournal.com), [friendster.com](http://friendster.com), or [xanga.com](http://xanga.com). Starting at an early age, Gifford gave each child guidelines: "Would this be something you would talk to someone about face to face?"

More than anything, though, what children need is ongoing dialogue. Start as soon as they are interested in the Web by asking them to show you sites they like. Help them compare it with other sites on the same subject. What kind of language does it use? Is it racist or sexist? "They need to learn not to take everything they see at face value," Jackson says. Belinda Sproston of CyberPatrol, which markets parental-control software, urges parents

to view software only as one weapon in their arsenal. "Parents also need to make sure a child has a healthy balance of on- and offline activity," she says. Parents should also gauge the role online activity plays in a middle-school child's life. "In some cliques, kids find the most outrageous, bizarre sites so they can brag about it the next day in school," Sproston says.

What the members of the Internet Safety Club want parents to make sure their child knows is that you're available as a resource. That if something bad happens online, they can come to you and you'll be supportive, not angry.

"It's easy to be frightened," says Krone. "It's a lot worse if you think you can't go to your parents."