

Technology Safety and Cyberbullying: What School Staff Can Do To Support Our Students

Our students today have access to resources and opportunities to collaborate around the world via the Internet in ever-expanding ways. High-speed and mobile access has made the Internet and technology more interactive and has increased various communication-modality possibilities to our students. While it is commonly seen that young people tend to adopt new technologies more quickly than adults, they often do not have the experience or knowledge to understand the potential risks. (Virginia Department of Education [VDE], 2007). For example, a poll of over 1,200 individuals ages 14 to 24 indicated that only roughly half (51%) said that they have considered that things they post online could come back to hurt them later and nearly half (45%) report that they see people being mean to each other on social networking sites (Associated Press [AP]-MTV 2009).

It is our job as educators to encourage our students to take advantage of technology's benefits while teaching how to reduce the risks that come along with it. This article is a compilation of resources designed to outline potential technology risks and provide guidelines on how to teach our students to make positive technology choices.

Technology provides a wealth of information but also includes risks. NetSmartz lists, among others, the following risks:

- Cyberbullying - using Internet applications and technologies such as instant messaging, social networking sites, and cell phones to harm others.
- Exposure to Inappropriate Content – appropriate and inappropriate content are both just a click away. Sometimes misspelling a web address by one character can land a user on an inappropriate website. Inappropriate content can include sexually explicit material, how-to videos of illegal or harmful activities, or videos that glorify risky or illegal activities.
- Revealing Too Much Personal Information - Youth can be made especially vulnerable by sharing personal information, such as home addresses and phone numbers, private thoughts and feelings, and pictures. Predators, scammers, and cyberbullies can use this shared information in a harmful way. In addition, it is also becoming more common for coaches, college admissions officers, and employers to screen applicants by checking their online profiles and postings. Postings by an individual can have results that youth are not considering.

Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying can occur in a variety of technology mediums and devices and can exist in a variety of forms. Williard (2005) describes 8 forms of cyberbullying to be aware of:

- **Flaming.** Online fights using electronic messages with angry and vulgar language. *Joe and Alec's online exchange got angrier and angrier. Insults were flying. Joe warned Alec to watch his back in school the next day.*
- **Harassment.** Repeatedly sending nasty, mean, and insulting messages. *Sara reported to the principal that Kayla was bullying another student. When Sara got home, she had 35 angry messages on her social networking profile, some from complete strangers.*
- **Denigration.** "Dissing" someone online. Sending or posting gossip or rumors about a person to damage his or her reputation or friendships. *Some students created a "We Hate Joe" group where they posted jokes, cartoons, gossip, and rumors, all dissing Joe.*
- **Impersonation.** Pretending to be someone else and sending or posting material to get that person in trouble or danger or to damage that person's reputation or friendships. *Laura watched closely as Emma logged on to her account and discovered her password. Later, Laura logged on to Emma's account and sent a hurtful message to Emma's boyfriend, Adam.*
- **Outing.** Sharing someone's secrets or embarrassing information or images online. *Greg, an obese high school student, was changing in the locker room after gym class. Matt took a picture of him with his cell phone camera. Within seconds, the picture was flying around the phones at school.*
- **Trickery.** Talking someone into revealing secrets or embarrassing information, then sharing it online. *John sent a message to Jessica pretending to be interested in her.*

Over a few days, Jessica responded, ultimately sharing intimate personal information and a very provocative image. John then sent this image to many other people.

• **Exclusion.** Intentionally and cruelly excluding someone from an online group. *Millie tries hard to fit in with a group of girls at school. She recently got on the “outs” with a leader in this group. All of the girls have now deleted their friendship links to her social networking profile.*

• **Cyberstalking.** Repeated, intense harassment and denigration that includes threats or creates significant fear. *When Annie broke up with Sam, he sent her many angry, threatening, pleading messages. He spread nasty rumors about her to her friends and posted a sexually suggestive picture she had given him in a sex-oriented discussion group, along with her e-mail address and cell phone number.*

Bullying online is very different from face-to-face bullying because messages and images can be:

- Sent 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year
- Shared to a very wide audience
- Sent anonymously

(stopbullying.gov)

Cyberbullying can have particular effects on those who are targeted. Research has found that young people who have been cyberbullied are significantly more likely to:

- Use alcohol and drugs
- Skip school
- Experience in-person bullying or victimization

(www.stopbullying.gov)

Signs someone may be a victim of cyberbullying:

- Avoids the computer, cell phone, and other technological devices or appears stressed when receiving an e-mail, instant message, or text (Netsmartz)
- Withdraws from family and friends or is reluctant to attend school and social events (Netsmartz)
- Avoids conversations about computer use (Netsmartz)
- Exhibits signs of low self-esteem including depression and/or fear (Netsmartz/stopbullying.gov)
- Has declining grades (Netsmartz/stopbullying.gov)
- Has poor eating or sleeping habits or more health problems (Netsmartz/stopbullying.gov)
- Unwilling to attend school (stopbullying.gov)

What we can do as educators to help support our students:

- **Prevent and be proactive with cyberbullying** (www.stopbullying.gov):
 - **Educate students and adults about cyberbullying**, its dangers, and what to do if someone is cyberbullied.
 - **Discuss cyberbullying with students.** They may be knowledgeable about cyberbullying and they may have good ideas about how to prevent and address it.
 - **Be sure that your school’s rules and policies address cyberbullying.**
 - **Investigate reports of cyberbullying immediately.** If cyberbullying occurs on-campus or through the school district’s Internet system, you are obligated to take action. If the cyberbullying occurs off-campus, you can still help. Collaborate with your site’s administration to ensure the issue is properly and thoroughly investigated/addressed regardless of where the incident occurred.
- **Teach Digital Citizenship** (www.digitalcitizenship.net) - Digital citizenship is a way to prepare students/technology users for a society full of technology. Often students are expected to demonstrate digital citizenship without ever being taught what that is or how to demonstrate it. If a student is old enough to access the Internet, they are old enough to begin to learn digital citizenship. The Digital Citizenship website outlines the following 9 elements of digital citizenship:
 1. **Digital Access:** *full electronic participation in society.*
Technology users need to be aware of and support electronic access for all to create a foundation for digital citizenship. All people should have fair access to technology

no matter who they are. To become productive citizens, we need to be committed to equal digital access.

2. Digital Commerce: *electronic buying and selling of goods.*

The mainstream availability of Internet purchases of toys, clothing, cars, food, etc. has become commonplace to many users, but services which are in conflict with the laws or morals of some countries are surfacing (which might include activities such as illegal downloading, gambling, etc.). Users need to learn about how to be effective consumers in a new digital economy.

3. Digital Communication: *electronic exchange of information.*

One of the significant changes within the digital revolution is a person's ability to communicate with other people. These days everyone has the opportunity to communicate and collaborate with anyone from anywhere and anytime. Unfortunately, many users have not been taught how to make appropriate decisions when faced with so many different digital communication options.

4. Digital Literacy: *process of teaching and learning about technology and the use of technology.*

Learners must be taught how to learn in a digital society. As new technologies emerge, learners need to learn how to use that technology quickly and appropriately. Digital citizenship involves educating people in a new way— these individuals need a high degree of information literacy skills.

5. Digital Etiquette: *electronic standards of conduct or procedure.*

We recognize inappropriate behavior when we see it, but before people use technology they do not learn digital etiquette (i.e., appropriate conduct). We must teach everyone to become responsible digital citizens in this new society.

6. Digital Law: *electronic responsibility for actions and deeds*

Users need to understand that stealing or causing damage to other people's work, identity, or property online is a crime. Hacking into others information, downloading illegal music, plagiarizing, creating destructive worms, viruses or creating Trojan Horses, sending spam, or stealing anyone's identify or property is unethical.

7. Digital Rights & Responsibilities: *those freedoms extended to everyone in a digital world.*

Basic digital rights must be addressed, discussed, and understood in the digital world. With these rights also come responsibilities. Users must help define how technology is to be used in an appropriate manner.

8. Digital Health & Wellness: *physical and psychological well-being in a digital technology world.*

Eye safety, repetitive stress syndrome, and sound ergonomic practices are issues that need to be addressed in a new technological world. Beyond the physical issues are those of the psychological issues that are becoming more prevalent, such as Internet addiction. Users need to be taught that there inherent dangers in technology. Digital citizenship includes a culture where technology users are taught how to protect themselves through education and training.

9. Digital Security (self-protection): *electronic precautions to guarantee safety.*

In any society, there are individuals who steal, deface, or disrupt other people. The same is true for the digital community. It is not enough to trust other members in the community for our own safety. As responsible citizens, we must protect our information from outside forces that might cause disruption or harm.

www.digitalcitizenship.net/Nine_Elements.html

- **Provide parameters and continuous monitoring** – When students are granted access to the Internet during school hours, they must be monitored just as they would be if they were on a field trip. Filters are not fail proof, as savvy students can learn ways to work around them. Students should be given parameters and a purpose prior to accessing the Internet. (VDE, 2007) It is good practice to have students sign in to specific computers in order to track usage and Internet histories should be checked frequently. Consequences should be imposed for students who did not follow teacher directions or who manually deleted histories.

- **Understanding why poor decision-making occurs** also can help us teach our youth prevention. Willard (2005) reports the following aspects of the online environment that can interfere with safe, respectful, and responsible decision-making:
 - **You Can't See Me.** The perception of invisibility or the ability to create an anonymous profile reduces concerns of detection that could result in disapproval or punishment. Social networking sites tend to reduce this concern because people are more visible.
 - **I Can't See You.** The lack of tangible feedback online can interfere with student's recognition that their actions have caused harmful consequences, as well as the associated empathy that should lead to remorse. Additionally, the lack of tangible feedback can make it harder to detect deception by others.
 - **Didn't Think.** Teens' frontal cortex, which supports rational decision-making, is restructuring. They are biologically unable to consistently think clearly but teens want to resolve their own problems.
 - **Who Am I?** Teen's exploration of identity can result in irresponsible attention-getting choices and measuring their social status by the amount of online activity. It appears that teens with higher levels of social anxiety tend to more routinely post riskier information or images and engage in shallow interactions with a greater number of "friends."
 - **Am I Hot?** Teens are maturing sexually in a culture that promotes provocative sexuality. They can be expected to explore personal relationships with a significant other online. This can lead to sharing of images that should be kept private and relationships that are based on fantasy, not reality.
 - **Everybody Does It.** Sometimes online social norms support risky or harmful behavior. Vulnerable youth often reinforce other vulnerable youth. Teens may also become desensitized and fail to recognize the concerns. Help students learn to resist negative online peer influence.
 - **How Far Can I Go?** Teens take risks to test boundaries. This is how they learn about limits. It should be expected that teens will take risks online.
 - **Doing What They Say.** Sophisticated techniques are used online by commercial entities, advocacy groups, and dangerous people to influence attitudes and behavior. Frequently, the key indicators are the provision of a "gift"--including complements, opportunities, coupons, and the like--and an effort to establish a "special relationship."

Technology is an ever-expanding part of education. We, as educators, are in a unique position to encourage our students to use technology to their benefit as well as teach them the associated dangers that come along with it. By being proactive, we can teach our students the digital citizenship skills necessary to make responsible and safe technology decisions.

Resources cited in this article:

Associated Press [AP]-MTV Digital Abuse Study Executive Summary (2009). Accessed through www.athinline.org/about

Digital Citizenship: Using Technology Appropriately.
http://www.digitalcitizenship.net/Home_Page.html

NetSmartz Workshop: A Program of the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children.
<http://www.netsmartz.org/>

StopBullying.gov, specifically the cyberbullying portion of the website:
<http://www.stopbullying.gov/topics/cyberbullying/>

Virginia Department of Education Division of Technology & Career Education, Office of Educational Technology (2007). Guidelines and Resources for Internet Safety in Schools, 2nd Edition. Accessed through the Virginia Department of Education's Internet Safety Resources page:
http://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/safety_crisis_management/Internet_safety/index.shtml

Willard, N. (2005). Educator's Guide to Cyberbullying, Cyberthreats, & Sexting. Accessed through the Center for Safe and Responsible Internet Use (www.csriu.org/)

Additional resources:

www.athinline.org - MTV's A Thin Line campaign, developed to empower youth to identify, respond to, and stop the spread of digital abuse in their lives and amongst their peers. The campaign is built on the understanding that there's a "thin line" between what may begin as a harmless joke and something that could end up having a serious impact on an individual or someone else.

www.connectsafely.org A great resource for safety tips and advice. Be sure to check out the Comprehensive Directory of Online Safety Resources found on the "Great Resources" page. A link to online-safety educational games can also be found on this page.

www.cybertipline.com A way to report crimes against children including: possession, manufacture, and distribution of child pornography; online enticement of children for sexual acts; unsolicited obscene material sent to a child; misleading domain names; and misleading words or digital images on the Internet

www.getnetwise.org This website has a nice collection of tools and how-to video tutorials on how to make the Internet experience more secure.

www.netlingo.com Have no idea what an acronym or an emoticon means? – You are sure to find it here. **Please note: this is a site for adults to reference, not for students to peruse.

www.netsmartzkids.org - the NetSmartz website made for kids; and www.nsteens.org/ - the NetSmartz website for tweens and teens.

www.wiredsafety.org – a charity that provides one-to-one help, extensive resources, information, and education to people of all ages on a myriad of Internet, mobile, gaming and interactive technology safety issues