What is Cyberbullying?

Cyberbullying is a term created by Canadian Bill Belsley. It refers to bullying through information and communication technologies, basically using the internet and mobile phones.

Cyberbullying is “bullying for the 21st century using email, text messages, and the internet”¹

A recent poll has shown that one-third of teenagers have had mean, threatening or embarrassing things said about them online. 10 percent of teenagers were threatened online with physical harm. 16 percent of teenagers who were victims told no one about it.

“Cyberbullying has the same insidious effects as any kind of bullying, turning children away from school, friendships, and in tragic instances, life itself.”²

Any type of bullying is not harmless. In some cases, it can constitute criminal behaviour. In extreme incidents, cyberbullying has led kids to suicide. Most victims, however, suffer shame, embarrassment, anger, depression and withdrawal. Cyberbullying is often seen as anonymous, and the nature of the internet allows it to be spread to hundreds and thousands of people.

“Ghyslain Raza became known throughout the Internet in May 2003 as the ‘Star Wars Kid’ when a video clip he recorded of himself was leaked online.”³

Ghyslain became an internet sensation in May 2003 when four classmates discovered a private video of him pretending to be a Star Wars Jedi Knight. The classmates decided it would be funny to upload the video to the internet. Within weeks it had been seen by millions.

Ghyslain is now the most downloaded male on the internet. The most downloaded female is Paris Hilton.”⁴

While the world laughs, and spin-offs are created at an average of one per day, Ghyslain and his parents don’t find the situation very funny. The parents have filed a lawsuit against the classmates that uploaded the video. The lawsuit is accompanied by instant messaging transcripts, in which the classmates gloat over their success. Ghyslain was forced to drop out of high school, and finished the year at a faculty specialising in child psychiatry.

Cyberbullying is a fast growing trend, that experts believe is more harmful than typical schoolyard bullying. Nearly all of us can be contacted 24/7 via the internet or our mobile phones. Victims can be reached anytime and anyplace. For many children, home is no longer a refuge from the bullies. “Children can escape threats and abuse in the classroom, only to find text messages and emails from the same tormentors when they arrive home.”

“There’s no safe place anymore. You can be bullied 24/7...even in the privacy of your own bedroom.”⁵

“It’s 24/7” — you can be reached virtually anywhere, at any time of day. Many teenagers leave their phone right next to their bed when they go to sleep – switched on, in case someone wants to contact them. If

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¹ ABC Radio National: The Buzz, 30th October 2004, <www.abc.net.au>
² “What can schools do about cyberbullying?”, 2005, Principals' Digest, Volume 11 Number 19. Published Hamilton, New Zealand
⁵ “Electronic Bullying”, 2005, Dolly, April, Issue 414, page 90

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“you’ve got your phone on in the middle of the night, then nothing is going to stop somebody from sending a nasty message to you”.

“No child should have to endure the cyber bullying I endured. I was scared, hurt and confused. I didn’t know why it was happening to me. I had nowhere to turn except to my Mom. I am speaking out now because I want other kids who are bullied online or on their cell phones to know that they should tell their parents or other adults. You don’t have to put up with it. Something can be done,” – Kylie, 15 yrs

At this point, parents often tell their children to turn off the mobile phones or stay off the computer. Many parents don’t understand that the internet and mobile phone act as a social lifeline for teenagers to their peer group. The child without the mobile phone is the one often left out, and often unintentionally as well. Victims often don’t tell their parents because they think their parents will only make the problem worse, or – that they might even remove the technology – take away their mobile phone or their internet access. While bullying is something that is often ‘under the radar’ of adults, cyberbullying is even more so. Teenagers are increasingly communicating in ways that are often unknown by adults and away from their supervision. They have whole conversations over email, SMS and instant messaging. They organise their social lives through these mediums. Friendships are made and broken over these mediums.

For children, the internet and mobile phone act as a kind of social lifeline to their peer group. Friendships are made and broken over these mediums.

The Spin Sweeney Report, which researches the lifestyles of young Australians, found that one in six Australians count their mobile phone as their most prized possession. Other studies have shown that children count their mobile phone as one of their most prized possession. Imagine if your most prized belonging was infiltrated by a bully. How would you feel? One 17-year-old girl has had enough of the bullies. Each time a bully gets her mobile phone number, she contacts her phone company and changes her number to a new one. She is up to her sixth mobile phone number.

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Despite complaints that cyberbullying is totally anonymous, it frequently is not. Every time you visit an site on the internet, it is logged and recorded by your internet service provider (ISP), a company like Telstra BigPond or Optus. Mobile phone companies have records of every call and message sent and received. Activity can be traced. If copies of threatening emails or text messages are kept, they can be used as evidence of a child’s claim that they are a victim.

“The challenge is in raising awareness to such a level that people – victims and witnesses – will feel comfortable enough to speak up.”

‘So what can we do about it?’ many people wonder. The best weapon, is awareness. If children feel that they can talk about the problem, that parents, teachers and friends understand the problem, then cyberbullying will come out of the mobile phone inboxes and out of the computers, and into the open.

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