Cyber-Bullying: Is Your Teen at Risk?

By Corrie Pelc

There's a new bully in town and you won't find him in the schoolyard or hanging on the street corner. Instead this new bully prefers to travel the information super highway and harass its victims through electronic means, such as email, instant messaging (IM), Web sites, message boards, blogs (online diaries) and cell phones.

"Basically cyber-bullying is a form of online bullying that more and more kids are participating in today," explains Raji Bains, youth task force coordinator for Santa Clara County. "It can have the same effects as regular schoolyard bullying, but usually it's anonymous and it produces the same threat feelings that normal schoolyard bullying would."

And the ability to be anonymous is one of the main reasons why cyber-bullying is gaining in popularity with kids. "When you log on to a message board you can log on with an alias, so they're not looking at suffering any immediate consequences or association because the messages are not tied to them," says Lt. Rich Saito, program manager for the Community Services Division at the San Jose Police Department. "It's a way for them to express their aggression without personal repercussions or accountability."

One local example of cyber-bullying that Saito gives is a recent issue in San Jose area high schools where students were using the cameras on their cell phones to take photos of other students partially undressed or in embarrassing situations and then posting them on the Internet. "Some of them were done inside girls' restrooms or locker rooms and that can be horribly embarrassing for a child," he adds.

"It makes it easier and there's less chance of detection," adds Amy Brinkman-Viall, prevention specialist with the Department of Alcohol and Drug Services for Santa Clara County and project coordinator of the bullying prevention program at East Side Union High School District in San Jose. "Unless a parent is monitoring emails that a child receives or sends, it's pretty hard to know. (And) sometimes it takes longer to be detected — there have been stories of people having Web sites made against (them) that they didn't know about for long periods of time until everyone at school turns on them."

And while many would assume that cyber-bullies were just schoolyard bullies that had decided to go online, that's not necessarily the case says Parry Aftab, executive director of WiredSafety. "It's a different kind of bully and a different kind of kid. Often the cyber-bully is the victim of an offline bully."

According to StopCyberBullying.org, there are four different types of cyber-bullies. The "vengeful angel" doesn't see themselves as bullies at all, but rather someone who is protecting others from the "bad guy" they are victimizing, while the inadvertent cyber-bully usually has no clue they're being a cyber-bully at all and are bullying unintentionally.

As for the other two types, the "power-hungry" or "revenge of the nerds" and the "mean girls," both these groups have offline equivalents. "The 'power-hungry' is usually a big, strong kid who beat you up in the schoolyard (and) the 'mean girls' are the girls that tend to be very catty and mean in the hallway, at slumber parties and wherever it is you're not invited," Aftab explains. "And then you have a new component of the 'power-hungry' cyber-bully, which are the kids who are victims offline and they realize that they can now be the mean, hulky guy and they like it and that's 'revenge of the nerds.'"

Talking it Over

So now that parents have an idea of what cyber-bullying is all about, how can they approach their teen if they think they might be having trouble with it without scaring them off?

"Being able to talk to kids about this kind of stuff is difficult lots of times because kids don't refer first to a parent when they're at that age," Brinkman-Viall says. "The older the kids get, they tend to identify more with their peer group and so they might bring it up to their friends. So in terms of what parents can do, I think that it's important to notice any significant changes in a student's behavior — if suddenly they don't want to go to school and they've always loved school or if they don't want to be in a certain class anymore and it just seems out-of-the-blue."

And parents shouldn't be afraid of finding out what their child is doing while on the computer. "Any kid who's spending one to five hours of time on the computer each night, parents need to be very

Eyes Wide Open

For parents who want to keep an eye on what their teen is doing while on the computer, WiredSafety recommends a computer software called Spector Soft. "It's a monitoring software — it's a keystroke logger and it will tell you everything your kids say and everything said to your kids and every place they go and how long they were there and what they did when they were there," explains Parry Aftab, executive director of WiredSafety.

According to Spector Soft's Web site, www.spectorsoft.com, the software records chats, instant messages, emails sent and received, Web sites visited, keystrokes typed and programs launched all in the exact sequence that someone does them on the computer, acting like a surveillance tape. And all the recordings are placed in a hidden area on the computer. "Whatever it is, it will tell you exactly what happened, email addresses and most importantly the code I need to find the people in real life — it does it all for you so I never have to worry about trying to teach you how to do it right," Aftab says.

Additionally, the software has a warning system that will inform a parent if the computer is being used in an inappropriate manner as established by the parent. "(It) will actually send you an email at work something bad is happening with your kids or they're talking to the person you said they're not supposed to talk to," Aftab says.

According to Aftab, WiredSafety started recommending the software after it helped one of their own teen volunteers out in a cyber-bullying situation. "The cyber-bully did what they often do, which is try to make it look like the victim had started it and her father believed that his daughter had started it and if he didn't have Spector Soft on his computer for whatever reason he had, he wouldn't have found that his daughter was being set up," Aftab details.

And if parents do choose to install Spector Soft or a similar software on their computer, Aftab advises them to install it and forget that it's there. "Think of it as the security camera in the corner of the bank that no one ever watches the tapes until there's a break in," she explains. "Put this on the computer and don't think about it until something bad happens. Hopefully you'll never need it, but if they're cyber-bullied it's there."

aware of what their doing on the computer," says Dr. Tom Tarshis, child and adolescent psychiatric fellow at Lucile Packard Children's Hospital.

He advises parents to spend some time in the same room as their teen that is on the computer and make note of what their child's reaction when receiving instant messages or emails on their computer. "And just by having a little more awareness about what your child is doing, that's the best way to lead in to a discussion of 'it seems like you got really upset about some of the things that came up on the computer screen' and that's a good way to start talking about the issue," he adds.

Parents should also not be afraid to initiate a conversation on cyber-bullying to get their kids talking. "Let your kids know I heard about this, there's something new called cyber-bullying going around, have you heard anything about it and just have a general discussion with them — what do you think about it, have you heard about it," Bains explains. "Because then if it does happen to them,

they may feel more comfortable approaching their parents about it because they've already had a general conversation."

How to Deal

And if parents do find out their teen is the victim of cyber-bullying, what can they do about it?

One of the first things parents should not do is just brush off the cyber-bullying as something all kids have to go through. "Lots of times parents get disconnected from middle schoolers and teens and assume everything's OK in school or I was bullied when I was a kid, so that's OK and these are all the attitudes were trying to change and help people understand that it's not OK to be bullied in any form," Tarshis says.

And unlike with schoolyard bullying, victims of cyber-bullying many times can't get away from it, says Aftab. "People think cyber-bullying is not such a big deal because kids aren't going to end up with broken bones, (but) cyber-bullies can find your kid wherever they are — if they're at *Continued on the next page*

Cyber-bullies

grandma's house in Florida they'll find them if they're accessing their cell phones or checking their IM," she explains. "It used to be when you had a schoolyard bully that once you got past them or you found a new way to walk home you were safe. There's no safe place from a cyber-bully – it's a terrible situation."

Tarshis adds one of the easiest ways to initially stop the cyber-bullying is to back away from the computer. "For cyber-bullying you can make a choice to not be connected to the Internet at any time and it's an immediate solution." But if that's not an option for teens, Tarshis says another thing that can help with cyber-bullying through instant messaging is to use the security feature that many providers offer that will limit the people who can contact your child when they're online. "So if you were being targeted a lot, one solution is that you could only allow the people you knew were your friends to be able to instant message you," he explains. "And some of the kids I talked to weren't aware of that and that's where parents can come in and work with their teen to figure out, let's only allow these five friends to talk to you and then that will put a stop to it."

As for getting law enforcement involved in cyber-bullying cases, according to Aftab while there are laws against cyber-harassment in almost every state in the U.S., that doesn't apply here because cyber-harassment refers to when either an adult is being harassed or is harassing a child, and cyber-bullying is when there are only children involved. "If you have an instance of cyber-bullying that involves death threats you can seek legal ramifications and if there are continuous harassment – lots and lots of IMs, messages, cell phone calls – those things you can deal with under the harassment laws," she explains.

However, for the most part when parents want to figure out who the cyber-bully is, they need to turn to their Internet Service Provider, or ISP, for help. "You track the electronic code that allows them to communicate with you or post something on the Internet – we leave a trail of cyber breadcrumbs behind us all the time," Aftab explains. Then with that information parents can determine who the cyber-bully's ISP is – such as AOL or Earthlink – and can contact

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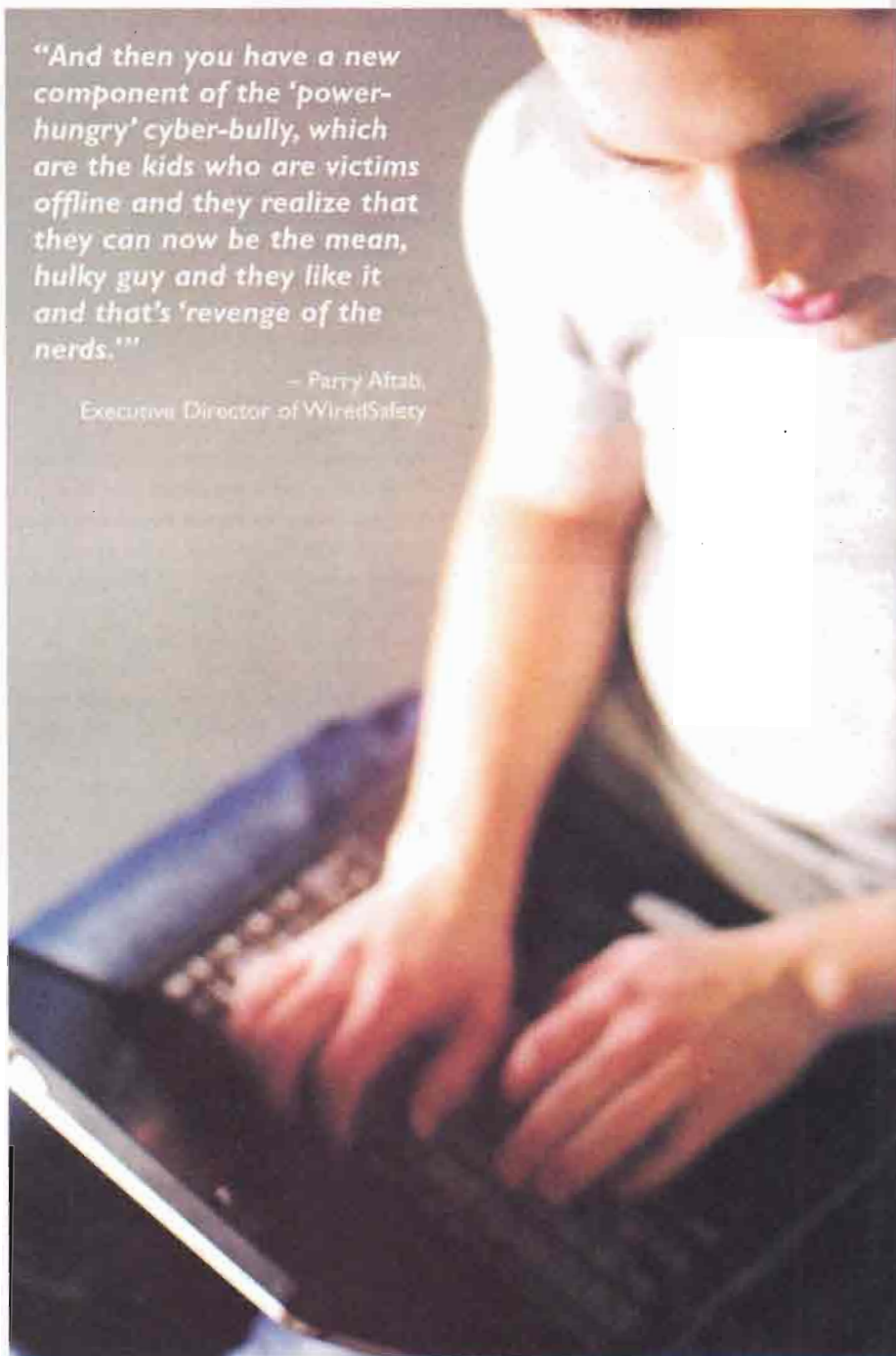
the ISP and complain that the cyber-bully has violated their terms of service – the contract signed when an account is opened. "Then they lose their account and their parents also (do) of course because it's their account," Aftab adds. "And the best thing you can do is to take the account away from the kid because then their parents get involved and punish them and now the kid is offline for a while, which tends to stop all of this much faster than bringing in law enforcement."

And for parents who find their child is a victim of cyber-bullying, they can access help on how to handle it through WiredSafety.org, Aftab says. "We've got a help line, so they go there and send an email to us and tell us what's going on and we help them – we help them figure out who it is, we help them reach out to the school if necessary or law enforcement," she explains. "One-on-one our specially-trained volunteers will help them with their own case for free."

Cyber-bullies

Bully Prevention

So is there anything that parents can do now to help ensure their teen does not become a victim of a cyber-bully?

"Education is the key – if parents don't even know about it, there's nothing they can do," Bains says. "They won't even try and speak to their kids about it and the kids aren't going to go to the parents and tell them what's going on and they're not going to feel comfortable."

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Parents can also get involved in their child's life by learning from them. "A parent could sit down and actually learn something – the parent could say what does this mean and the kid could show them that this means this, so parents can become aware of what the messages are looking like," Saito says.

"And at the same time the parent could sit down and say if someone says this type of thing on the Internet, how would you react and hopefully create that sense of responsibility for our young folks about taking responsibility about what they communicate."

And educating teens about cyber-bullying as far as what to look for and how to handle can also make a big difference. "If a parent can explain what kinds of things would be red flags that something is inappropriate that would be good and encourage direct communication – encourage the child to talk to somebody about it even if it's not a parent, some other adult or friend," Brinkman-Viall says.

But the main message for parents, says Tarshis, is to listen and support your teen. "What happens often is parents continue to minimize bullying episodes, so learning to take a step back instead of immediately trying to make comments or give advice. If you could just be a supportive listener to your child – let them talk, don't be judgmental and then problem solve together. That's going to be the best advice for parents specifically to help kids in the first step."

Resources

- **CyberAngels** – 610-377-2966, www.cyberangels.org. Internet safety organization has a Web site that offers information for kids and parents regarding cyberstalking, online predators and more.

- **GetNetWise.org** – www.getnetwise.org. Features resources and information on keeping children safe online, stopping unwanted email, keeping personal information private and more.

- **SafeKids.com** – www.safekids.com. A family's guide to making the Internet and technology fun, safe and productive.

- **Stop Cyber Bullying** – www.stopcyberbullying.org. Explains what cyber-bullying is and offers age-appropriate information for kids, tweens and teens.

- **WiredSafety** – www.wiredsafety.org. The world's largest Internet safety and help group.