

Cyber bullying

In an earlier column this fall, I identified the various forms of bullying . . . most of which many of you are already familiar with, but cyber bullying is a new one!

Cyber bullying involves using technology, like cell phones and the Internet, to bully or harass another person. Surveys conducted by the Cyberbullying Research Center indicate that about half of young people have experienced some form of cyber bullying, and 10 to 20 percent experience it regularly.

The research center also notes, “Just like other forms of bullying, cyber bullying can be very damaging to adolescents and teens. It can lead to anxiety, depression, and even suicide. Also, once things are circulated on the Internet, they may never disappear, resurfacing at later times to renew the pain of cyber bullying.”

As we use technology in our schools, we strive to make students aware of Internet safety rules, teach students how to make responsible choices when using technology and how to be a responsible and respectful digital citizen.

Longhorn Leaders at Abilene Middle School have also taken on the task of informing their peers about cyber bullying. According to their sponsor, Mark Shreve, seventh and eighth grade students participate in counselor-facilitated discussions in the classroom that include lively interactions on how to respond to cyber bullying and the powerful effects of this form of bullying. He also noted, “Longhorn Leaders helped me facilitate a lesson in the sixth grade classrooms which included peer level discussions about cyber bullying and the different ways the Longhorn Leaders have personally dealt with cyber bullying. This was really awesome to watch and help direct!”

Just recently I attended a KASB (Kansas Association of School Board) conference and a speaker put another spin on cyber bullying—he referred to online access, chat rooms and social media sites as digital playgrounds. He said that it is important that adults monitor the digital playground just as we would monitor a traditional playground.

Technology is not going away. As adults, educators, parents, grandparents, or anyone involved with children, modeling appropriate use of the computer is powerful. It’s important to educate students on the ways in which digital tools are dynamic but also let them know the ways they can mess up one’s life.

Bullying Statistics (www.bullyingstatistics.org) also has some suggestions for parents and teens to help reduce cyber bullying:

- Talk to teens about cyber bullying, explaining that it is wrong and can have serious consequences. Make a rule that teens may not send mean or damaging messages, even if someone else started it, or suggestive pictures or messages or they will lose their cell phone and computer privileges for a time.
- Teens should keep cyber bullying messages as proof that the cyber bullying is occurring. The teens’ parents may want to talk to the parents of the cyber bully, to the bully’s Internet or cell phone provider, and/or to the police about the messages, especially if they are threatening or sexual in nature.

- Try blocking the person sending the messages. It may be necessary to get a new phone number or email address and to be more cautious about giving out the new number or address.
- Teens should never tell their password to anyone except a parent, and should not write it down in a place where it could be found by others.
- Teens should not share anything through text or instant messaging on their cell phone or the Internet that they would not want to be made public — remind teens that the person they are talking to in messages or online may not be who they think they are, and that things posted electronically may not be secure.
- Encourage teens never to share personal information online or to meet someone they only know online.

For additional tips and information, including the forms of cyber bullying, go to <http://www.bullyingstatistics.org/content/cyber-bullying-statistics.html>.