



'Cyber bullying' a growing concern

By Christina Pandapas/Special to the Reporter

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Marblehead - Teens and pre-teens in Marblehead and across the country are engaging in inappropriate and abusive online behavior that has serious consequences, say local school administrators and law-enforcement officials.

Hiding behind the relative anonymity of the Internet, local students are “cyber bullying,” conducting cruel attacks on fellow students through online postings and messaging. It is a growing, disturbing trend among youth and its impact on both the victims and the perpetrators can be devastating, say officials.

“I think this is potentially the most dangerous thing building in our community, even more than drugs and alcohol,” Marblehead Veterans School Principal Libby Moore said. “It can destroy a child’s life.”

Agreed Marblehead High School Principal John Ziergiebel, “It’s horrifying. I could show you things that you wouldn’t believe.”

Those “things” include bogus profile pages on social-networking Web sites like MySpace and Facebook set up by one student or a group of students dedicated to humiliating a specific person, and e-mail strings that take teasing to a level few parents could begin to imagine. Unfortunately, the incidents are not isolated, and increasingly they are crossing legal boundaries.

“Parents would be shocked to know how abusive online behavior can become, and how common it is for nice kids to engage in ‘cyber bullying,’” said Dr. Elizabeth Englander, director of the Massachusetts Aggression Reduction Center and professor of psychology at Bridgewater State College. “We tend to focus on online predators, but the biggest risk is that the children themselves will commit a crime through their online interactions.”

Bullying is not new. Most adults remember bullying during childhood, but this technology-enabled form can take on a life of its own. It bombards victims 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and targets them in a very public forum. It is often not just one or two kids ganging up on another, either. It can escalate to 15, 20 or more posting nasty messages, sending strings of e-mails that copy any number of recipients, and text messaging to cell phones at all hours. That is when the conduct can become a crime.

According to the Essex County District Attorney’s Office, kids can be prosecuted for criminal harassment or even stalking based on these online interactions. Just three incidents targeting an individual and causing that person distress constitutes illegal behavior. If those interactions include attacks on a person’s religious or ethnic background or sexuality, then it can constitute a civil-liberties violation, and a felony offense.

“The incidents have been increasing over the last couple of years,” Marblehead Police Chief Robert Picariello said. “We have people at the department who monitor sites like Facebook and MySpace, but there aren’t any

quick fixes. It has to be a partnership between parents, police and school. Parents really have to be diligent.”

One parent of a Marblehead High School freshman said that a recent cyber-bullying incident traumatized her child and her entire family. The parent wished to remain anonymous to protect her 14-year-old, whom she said was devastated when a classmate created a Facebook page on which a group of 15 kids posted malicious things about her child. She discovered it when she saw that her teen received a Facebook e-mail message with a link to a new posting.

“The e-mail account is on my computer, so I check it,” she said. “I couldn’t believe it. I knew these kids who were participating. I considered them to be decent kids. I couldn’t believe they were doing this.”

She printed the postings and contacted the participants’ parents. All the kids involved were punished and wrote apologies, but while the Facebook page has been removed, the emotional impact remains.

According to recent studies, 58 percent of kids in grades four through eight report that someone has said mean or hurtful things to them online. One third of all teenagers who use the Internet say they have been targets of annoying and potentially menacing online interactions, including threatening messages, private e-mails or texts being forwarded without their consent, an embarrassing picture being posted, or having rumors about them spread online. However, 58 percent do not tell an adult that they have been bullied or harassed online.

And while no one wants to think that his or her own child could be a cyber bully, surveys show that over half of teens admit to having said hurtful or mean remarks online, with more than a third having done it more than once. All parents should be on the alert for their child being a victim or an active participant, since there can be serious fallout on both sides, officials said.

“Parents routinely underestimate how kids are living their lives online and how easy it is for things to get out of hand and cross moral and legal limits,” said Englander. “Ask any kid involved in cyber bullying, and he’ll say it was just a joke. They think it is all just kidding around.”

Ziergiebel says that Marblehead High School deals with cyber-bullying incidents approximately once a month, but he knows the issue is much more pervasive than what is reported to the school.

The Veterans School guidance office is also dealing with students distraught over what is being posted and sent online. Moore said that students come in crying with pages of hurtful material in their hands.

“Kids are saying vicious things,” Moore said. “They form a MySpace account and then 100 kids are now communicating from it. They start a rumor, trash a student, and it spreads rapidly.”

Moore is particularly upset that Veterans School students are creating these pages because MySpace prohibits users under the age of 14 and Facebook prohibits those under the age of 13. But she said that no one is checking, and it is easy for kids to simply lie about their birth date when they sign up.

The issue presents a dilemma for school administrators because they say that the e-mails and postings are not occurring at school. Students cannot access sites like MySpace from school computers, but the antagonism reverberates through the hallways and can impact students’ ability to function in the school environment. This is especially true of the victims, who may be feeling unsafe.

“Bullying is bullying,” Marblehead School Superintendent Paul Dulac said. “The Marblehead schools have a zero-tolerance policy for bullying in any form. Even though a lot of what’s happening online is happening at home, it doesn’t matter because it shows up at school. We need to make it very clear, as educators, parents and a society, that none of it is acceptable.”

Moore said she notifies Veterans School parents right away when an incident arises and discusses appropriate courses of action, including suspending the student or students responsible. Marblehead High School enforces a

harassment policy when cyber bullying is reported. Ziergiebel said that parents are notified immediately, and a hearing is held at the school.

“The parents are usually horrified,” Ziergiebel said. “The kids are often horrified, too, about what they have done once they have it all in front of them.”

Educators and the child-psychology community agree that the detached nature of the Internet is the root of the problem, and it extends beyond cyber bullying. Because kids do not necessarily see the Internet as the real world, they fail to realize that what they do there can come back to haunt them.

“Kids have had their futures ruined or seriously compromised,” Englander said. “They can be denied college entry or a summer job or internship because the organization did a search on them and found online postings that made them question the teenager’s integrity.”

Englander stresses that kids need to understand they will be held accountable for what they do online.

“They don’t think what they do online counts, and they don’t anticipate that they will be judged by the outside world based on their online interactions,” she said. “It isn’t fair to hold kids to a standard but not give them the rules to go by.”

Englander wants parents to know that they do not have to be computer savvy to set limits. They just need to understand the basic principles and talk to their children about the potential consequences of their online activities. She added parents must make sure their kids fully aware that everything they post online is public and that every e-mail they send to one person can be forwarded to a hundred people in less than a minute.

What parents can do

Keep all computers in public places.

Talk with children about online activities.

Ask you child about cyber bullying.

Search for your child’s name online.

Check MySpace.com and Facebook.com.

Made sure kids understand everything online is public.

Contact police if your child is being made uncomfortable by ongoing online interactions.

Parents: Learn more

Dr. Elizabeth Englander, director of the Massachusetts Aggression Reduction Center, will present “Understanding the Online Social World of Pre-Teens and Teens,” Tuesday, Dec. 4, 7-9 p.m., Tower School Performing Arts Center. Admission is \$5. Pre-register at www.TeamUpMarblehead.com. This event is produced by TeamUp and funded by the Marblehead Female Humane Society.