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Socket <sup>61</sup>tech talk:

## To catch a cyberbully

**Columbia, Mo.** • Now that kids have returned to school, parents are again taking a look at everything from their kids' math and reading scores to how they behave with their peers. With school-aged children using the Internet in record numbers, technology gives bullies an avenue to antagonize targets outside the classroom. This new breed of bullying is known as cyberbullying.

Most parents are now familiar with the Megan Meier story, a Dardenne Prairie, Mo., teenager who committed suicide after feeling rejected by a fictitious boy later found out to be created by the mother of Megan's former friend. While not all cases of cyberbullying are this severe, the problem is more prevalent than most parents think.

Sean Rand is a technical support agent at Socket, a Missouri-based telephone and Internet provider, and father of a pre-teen son. Rand recommends that the earlier parents can teach their kids about acceptable and appropriate behavior online, the better.

"Just because the Internet wasn't around when we were going to school doesn't mean we can ignore the importance it plays in our children's lives," said Rand. "Kids tend to accept things online as literal truth since it is there for everyone else to see."

To understand the ubiquitous nature of cyberbullying, parents need to be aware of all the ways their children can access the Internet. Instant messaging, social networking sites, e-mail, text messages on cell phones and online video gaming communities are all potential areas where one child could inflict emotional distress on another. The anonymous nature of the Internet can often embolden the bully's cruel actions and cause additional embarrassment to the victim since the information is or a shared public resource for everyone to see.

Ines Segert, Ph.D., is a member of the Columbia Board of Education and a psychology professor at the University of Missouri.





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"Since the perpetrators of cyberbullying are usually anonymous, they are less likely to be limited by any social norms that guide appropriate behavior," said Segert. "This anonymity frees them to make more serious or frequent threats without fear of negative consequences."

It is crucial to recognize the early signs of cyberbullying and intervene immediately. A child who is angry or upset after using a computer or cell phone can usually be a strong indicator. But getting children to confide in their parents about the incident is no easy task. "Most of the time they are just embarrassed," said Rand. "But they also fear that parents will overreact and respond by restricting or curtailing cell phone and Internet activities out of fear for their safety."

"It is important to be proactive in discussing safety issues when using the Internet and cell phones," said Segert. "Proactive discussions can help set up an atmosphere of trust, so the child will approach the parent with cyberbullying incidents."

Segert recommends that parents monitor and supervise their children's Internet habits and activities online early during their developing years to minimize the likelihood of problems. Start by placing the computer in a common area, such as a family room or kitchen, where the child's online activities are out in the open.

"Don't allow your children to make you feel nosy for looking over their shoulder while they are online," said Rand. "They may protest, but you have to convince them you are acting out of genuine concern for their safety."

Monitoring can also alert parents to conflicts their child may be instigating. Make sure children understand that the rules of good behavior apply equally to cell phone and Internet use, and if problems persist, cell phone and computer privileges could be suspended.

"Unlike schoolyard bullying, cyberbullying is an easy





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activity to hide," said Segert. "For example, cyberbullies can text or e-mail without tipping off anyone else as to their behavior, even if adults are present in the room."

Online security experts outline several options for parents who suspect their child is the victim of cyberbullying. First, identify the cyberbully or cyberbullies and save or print any evidence of malicious activity. Next, contact the child's school, because if the cyberbullying occurred on a school computer there are protective or disciplinary measures they can take.

"Schools have little legal authority to punish a student who engages in cyberbullying off school grounds and not on school computers," said Segert. "However, they can work with parents to develop solutions to the problems."

If it is possible to correctly identify the bully's true identity, contact the bully's parents by phone or in person. Explain what happened, present the evidence and discuss potential solutions to the problem. If the bullying continues, consider filing a formal complaint with the cyberbully's cell phone or Internet provider.

If the bully's parents do not respond, legal measures could be a potential option. Some legislators are taking action to make cyberbullying a crime. The mayor and city alderman of Dardenne Prairie recently made Internet harassment a class B misdemeanor, punishable by a \$500 fine and 90 days in jail. At the federal level, Congress recently introduced House Resolution 6123, also known as the Megan Meier Cyberbullying Prevention Act, which would impose criminal penalties on anyone using communication intended to coerce, intimidate, harass or cause substantial emotional distress to another.

"Above all, let kids know that use of the Internet and a cell phone is a privilege," said Rand. "Doing so will help them make informed, responsible decisions online."

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