

Cyber Bullying

Last week I wrote about two kinds of bullying, overt and covert bullying. This week's topic, cyber bullying, is yet another kind of bullying and can, ironically, be both covert and overt. Cyber bullying is a fairly recent phenomenon, having risen to prominence in the past five years. I think it is safe to say that the instances of bullying have skyrocketed since the use of technological devices has become so prevalent. In the publication *Bullying in the Digital Age*, cyber bullying is defined as "bullying through email, instant messaging, in a chat room, on a website or gaming site, through digital messages or images sent through a digital phone." The ways in which people can belittle, embarrass, criticize, and humiliate each other have become almost unlimited—as if we needed any more.

Unlike much traditional bullying, cyber bullying usually occurs outside of school. Many times, however, it gets brought to school when students say or "post" harsh things about each other after school hours on their phones and personal computers at home. This activity is so frustrating for teachers and school administrators; we have more than enough to do to try to keep the schools running smoothly with a minimum of student conflict. Cyber bullying ensures that we get to handle outside conflicts that have nothing to do with school.

All bullying is wrong, hurtful, and damaging, but I think cyber bullying can be the most egregious. Two things make it more harmful than the traditional kinds of bullying: (1) it can be much more widespread; and (2) it can be done anonymously. With Facebook, MySpace, YouTube, and other social media websites, it is very possible to send messages to thousands of people instantaneously with one keystroke. With other websites, the user can use false names to set up an account and say virtually anything about anyone, no matter how foul, untrue, and damaging the message is. After the first post is sent, then "mob mentality" sets in, and all of the other cyber bullies can jump in and add their scathing vitriol. Finding the true identity of the sender(s) is virtually impossible. Friendships, marriages, and careers have been literally destroyed by people with nothing better to do than spread malicious gossip.

Cyber bullying is especially infuriating to me because it is so cowardly. Cyber bullies do not have to have the courage to face their victims. They can lash at their victim with hateful, hurtful messages and hide behind anonymity, unlike their victims who have no place to hide. After a message is out in cyber space, it is there forever for everyone to see. The victim is figuratively exposed to the world. Although the message may be absolutely false, a percentage of people are going to believe it because it seems to be a quirk of human nature to believe the worst about other people.

Cyber bullying is hurtful to anyone, but I think it is especially damaging to teenagers. Although we don't often stop to think about it and they sure don't seem so, teenagers are fragile in many ways. Any teacher who has had experience dealing with adolescents knows this. Most teenagers have limited life experiences and a

narrow frame of reference to enable them to discern what is important and what is trivial. Because of this, whatever is happening in their lives at the moment takes on gargantuan importance and becomes a crisis: an argument with a friend; a bad grade; disagreements with parents; break-up with boyfriend/girlfriend; a rumor being circulated; not making the team, and all of the other life disappointments we've all experienced. Teenagers often don't understand that a temporary problem is just that—temporary. I can't imagine how damaging it would be to be a teenager and be the target of cyber bullying where a group, or dozens, or even hundreds of people are able to berate you. It shouldn't be a surprise that some teenage victims have resorted to extreme measures to stop the bullying---harming others or killing themselves. Two weeks ago a high school freshman from a neighboring county killed herself because of long-term bullying by acquaintances and school mates. I cannot imagine the depth of pain that her parents feel. Also, I wonder what those people feel who bullied her. Do they have the courage to acknowledge that they may have contributed in some way to her death, and vow not to treat someone else the same way? I pray so.

Next Week—Causes of Bullying