

Fighting the unseen foe; the cyber bully

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Nicholas went to school in the morning, came home in the afternoon. He didn't talk much about what he endured in his day. "I go to school from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m., and I endure bullying," said Nicholas, 17, a student in Orange County, Calif. "I come home and check my MySpace and there it is again. It's like there's really no escape from it."

It? Bullying, in the early years in school in human form and later, on the Internet, known as cyberbullying. Now he is sharing his story in hopes of helping others. Nicholas told an audience gathered at a recent discussion panel on cyberbullying, organized by the Orange County Human Relations Commission, about the years of emotional torture he had endured. He admitted to trying to end his own life by overdosing on 30 pills after he couldn't take the bullying any longer. He passed out for 18 hours and later spent four days in the hospital.

Since his unsuccessful attempt at ending his life, he has taken to speaking out, even appearing on the Oct. 6 episode of "Dr. Phil," titled "Bullied to Death." Nicholas has been proactive in increasing awareness about the dangers of cyberbullying, spurred in his case by both his physical appearance and his sexual orientation.

But the teenager's experience with cyberbullying is not uncommon. In a poll conducted by Fight Crime: Invest in Kids (FCIK), it was estimated that more than 13 million children in the U.S. ages 6 to 17 were victims of cyberbullying. The poll also revealed that more than 2 million of those victims told no one about being attacked.

Even though cyberbullying technically refers to incidents involving minors, a recent case making headline news was the death of Tyler Clementi, 18, a freshman at Rutgers University who jumped to his death off the George Washington Bridge into the Hudson River last month after being secretly taped by his dormmate while having a sexual encounter with another man.

"The insidious aspect about cyberbullying is that it can occur any time of the day or night as we know from Tyler's case," said Judy Iannaccone, an Orange County Human Relations Board member who served as a moderator for the panel discussion on cyberbullying. "Cyberbullying messages and images can also be distributed very quickly to a wide audience."

With the advent of the Internet, bullying has mutated into a faster and more pervasive method of tormenting adolescent peers. Alison Lehmann, 35, director of the BRIDGES program for the commission, said, "We have taken an old problem into a brand new era, and this new era has made bullying even more powerful, efficient and unfortunately even more effective."

Lehman went on to explain the double-edged sword of the Internet. "We are simultaneously becoming more diverse and more wired, or even wireless at this point, and this combination has brought us so much information and so much understanding, but it has also given us the freedom to be anonymous when we lash out at others and we are hurtful and harmful to those who we often might not even know or certainly don't know well."

The effects of this lashing out through cyberbullying can be quite lethal, as illustrated by Clementi's suicide and Nicholas' attempted suicide. In a recent study this year for the Cyberbullying Research Center, Sameer Hinduja and Justin W. Patchin referred to the strong relationship between cyberbullying and suicide as "cyberbullicide."

Hinduja and Patchin interviewed 2,000 randomly-selected middle-school students in one of the largest school districts in the United States and found that cyberbullying victims were almost twice as likely to have attempted suicide compared to youth who had not experienced cyberbullying. "Suicide is a permanent solution to a temporary problem," Nicholas said. His own advice on how to respond to cyberbullying involves three steps: don't respond to the message; block the person who sent the message; and tell a trusted adult.

For those pursuing legal action, Melissa Carr, a lawyer who works for the Anti-Defamation League in the Orange County and Long Beach region, offered some hope. "There are currently several states with anti-bullying laws in place," she said. Several of those laws include bullying by electronic means (Internet, cell phone, camera phone, etc.). California is in particularly good shape as it has such laws in place that really give schools the ability to address the issue of bullying and cyberbullying and threats." But, she added, "The real solution is school programs that engage the entire school community and rely on a system that holds mutual respect in the highest regard."

Lehman, who works closely with various schools in Orange County through the BRIDGES Program, agreed with Carr. "As a community, we have to partner with our schools," she said. "There are laws that protect students, but we are the people who breathe life into those laws. There is no one who comes to every school every week and says, 'Are you complying?' We are the people who get to support schools in that effort and make that vision of a safe and inclusive campus real."

Help protect your kids from cyberbullying

Bullies are notorious for tormenting their victims face to face — at school, on the playground, in sports. But now, cyberbullying (or online bullying) opens the door to 24-hour harassment through computers, cell phones, gaming consoles, or other Internet-enabled means. Here are some ways to protect your children,

- Talk with your kids about cyberbullying. Ask your kids what they're doing online and encourage them to report bullying to you. Promise that you will take action on their behalf and explain what you will do. Reassure them that you won't curtail their phone or computer privileges.
- Keep the family computer in a central location. If your kids play video games, keep Internet-connected game consoles in a central location also. Teenagers have so many ways to access the Internet that putting the computer in a central spot isn't always effective. With older kids, it's especially important to have frank discussions.
- Look for signs of online bullying. For example, watch for kids getting upset when online or a reluctance to go to school.
- Don't tolerate cyberbullying at home. Let your children know they should never, under any circumstances, bully someone. Make the consequences clear.
- Keep passwords secret. Urge your kids not to share passwords or other information that could be used to bully them, or to lend their cell phones or laptops.
- Encourage your children to make friends and to help friends look out for each other. Cyberbullies are less likely to target those whom they perceive as having strong friendships. If a victim has friends who rally around him or her, the bullying usually stops.
- Get help from technology. Turn on the safety features available in most programs and services.

What to do if someone is cyberbullying your child

The best support for a child being cyberbullied is positive, active, knowledgeable and predictable support.

- Act immediately. Your child needs to know that you can and will help. Don't wait to see if the abuse will stop. If you feel that your child is physically at risk, call the police at once.
- Every effort should be made to find the cyberbully and hold him or her accountable. If the bully is a student consider reporting it to the school. Report bullying to the website where the bullying is happening. Many services have moderators and places to report abuse — for example, abuse@microsoft.com. Ask cell phone companies to track calls and take action.
- Tell your kids not to respond to the cyberbully or retaliate because bullies are looking for a reaction. Don't answer phone calls, or reply to (or even read) text messages or comments.
- Block cyberbullies. Most Web services will allow you to block anyone whose behavior is inappropriate or threatening in any way. Check with the service — social networking, IM, cell phone to find out how.
- Save the evidence. Save text messages, e-mails, and other evidence of cyberbullying in case the authorities need it.