

Photo illustration by Keith Simmons, USA TODAY; photo by H. Darr Beiser, USA TODAY

Hurtful messages can hit kids anytime, anywhere

By Jon Swartz
USA TODAY

SAN FRANCISCO — When Joanne had a row with a longtime friend last year, she had no idea it would spill into cyberspace.

But what started as a spat at a teenage sleepover swiftly escalated into a three-month harangue of threatening e-mails and defacement of her weblog. "It was a non-stop nightmare," says Joanne, 14, a freshman at a private high school in Southern California. "I dreaded going on my computer."

The bullying eventually stopped after her parents and school officials intervened. But Joanne remains shaken by the experience.

The incident reflects the latest way technology is altering the social lives of children at an

age when they are especially vulnerable to insults. The emergence of cyberbullying has intensified adolescent angst. It allows bullies to unleash put-downs, nasty rumors and humiliating pictures in e-mail and blogs that can strike victims at home and at any time. The damage can be devastating, psychologists say, even as it is not always obvious to parents and teachers.

Cyberbullies, mostly ages 9 to 14, are using the anonymity of the Web to mete out pain without witnessing the consequences. The problem — aggravated by widespread use of wireless devices such as cellphones and BlackBerrys — is especially prevalent in affluent suburbs, where high-speed Internet use is high and kids are technically adept, says Parry Aftab, executive director of WiredSafety.org, an online safety group.

"Some kids can't wait to get home so they can continue taunting," says Aftab, who is also

Cover story

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Power, vengeance, even defending a friend can lead to cyberbullying

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an Internet lawyer.

"Maybe we need to protect kids from one another online as much as we shield them from dangerous adults."

Often, the social cruelties escape the notice of schools, which focus on problems on campus, and of parents, who are unaware of what their kids are doing online.

Many victims don't tell their parents, out of fear they'll be barred from using the Internet, Aftab and others say.

Cover story Several parents agreed to have their children interviewed by USA TODAY, but only if their last names were not used and a parent monitored the call. They feared their children would face another round of taunting if they were publicly identified.

"What happens online, stays online. There is a code of silence," says Nancy Willard, a tech lawyer and executive director of Center for Safe and Responsible Internet Use in Eugene, Ore.

'No one can help you'

"You feel as if no one can help you," says Alyssa, 14, who waited two weeks before telling her mother she was being bullied by a boy who called her a "loser" and "stupid" in instant messages. "It's a lonely, scary feeling."

The problem appears to be growing, as more kids chat on the Internet. Half of 3,000 U.S. children surveyed the past six months said they or someone they know have been victims or guilty of cyberbullying, WiredSafety.org says.

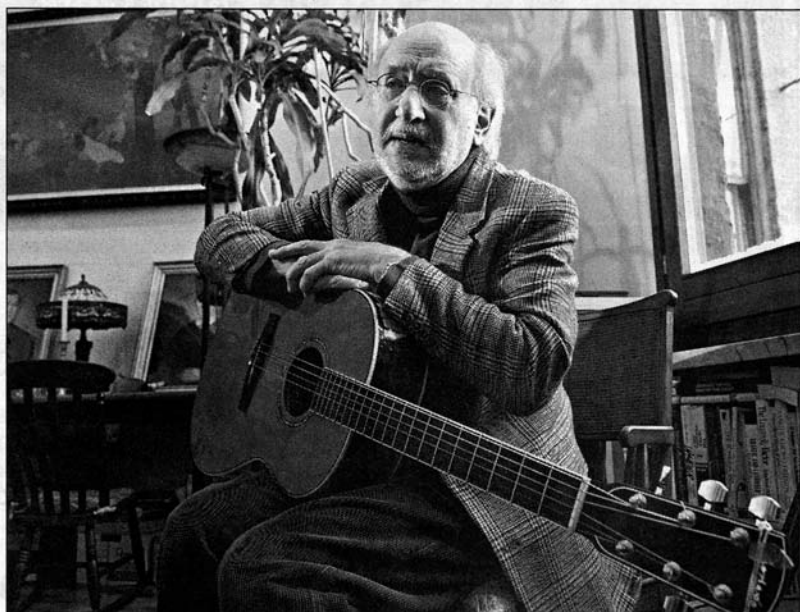
In Louisiana, a 15-year-old girl was arrested in January and accused of "cyberstalking," posting photos of a male student on a website.

At Oak View Elementary School in Fairfax, Va., last year, sixth-grade students conducted an online poll to determine the ugliest classmate, school officials say.

Cyberbullying is so pervasive in Westchester County, N.Y., that officials held a half-day conference last month for students, parents, teachers and law-enforcement officials. Six hundred attended.

When 200 students were asked how many had been a victim or perpetrator, or had a friend who was either, all but six raised their hands, county officials say.

The Internet has changed the dynamics of schoolyard bullying, counselors and teachers say. Before, a big, intimidating boy typically



By Jennifer S. Altman for USA TODAY

"Ways for kids to hurt each other": Folk singer Peter Yarrow, the founder of a group called Operation Respect that promotes tolerance in schools, says cyberbullies are the newest way for kids to hurt one another.

pushed people around or stared them down. Now, the technically astute — boys and girls — harass for different reasons.

Victims and bullies

According to Aftab, there are those who fancy themselves "vengeful angels" who come to someone's defense but go too far; "mean girls" who gang up on others as a glorified social activity; the "power hungry," a direct descendant of the classic bully who tries to assert control over those considered weaker; and inadvertent bullies, who don't realize they've hurt someone's feelings.

"Two burly kids can take an issue outside and settle it with their fists," says Teri Schroeder, CEO of i-Safe America, a non-profit that teaches Internet safety to children. "Cyberbullies can turn tormenting into a long-pitched battle involving dozens of people."

Victims are often targeted because they are considered different — usually those considered overweight, small, with a learning disability or overly sensitive. Many face dirty digital tricks that range from derogatory comments about them online to embarrassing e-mail attributed to them intended to insult friends and crushes.

Boys and girls are both bullies and victims. MindOh Foundation, an e-learning company for kids who have trouble in school, found widespread online bullying by 5,502 U.S. boys and girls it surveyed in January.

There is a pattern to their meanness. While girls generally mock others for their physical appearance, boys tend to make more sexually explicit comments, says Mary Worthington, an elementary-education counselor for Network of Victim Assistance (NOVA). The non-profit group offers prevention-education programs to students and parents.

Ashlee DuPont, a former elementary school teacher in Birmingham, Ala., says she was "sickened" by the manner girls manipulated one another with instant messages. "I grew to hate that," DuPont says.

Excluded from buddy lists

Sometimes, excluding a classmate from buddy lists and online communities can be as damaging. "What used to happen with cliques, with kids making others feel they don't belong, is part of the Internet experience," says Donna O'Brien, coordinator for curriculum and instruction at Lake Zurich Community Unit School District

near Chicago.

She says it is common for middle-school girls there to dictate who can wear what the next day. "A typical exchange is, 'Only the cool girls wear leopard-skin pants, and you can't,'" O'Brien says.

"Kids without empathy are getting sucked into posting derogatory comments to be part of a group," Worthington says. "There's no malice aforesought."

Bullies called grievers even lurk on multiplayer gaming sites.

Michael, 11, a fifth-grader in the Los Angeles area, stopped using his computer for six months after a brush with a griever. After he beat another boy in an online game, several of the boy's friends threatened Michael in a chat room.

"If I find you, I will beat you up," one message read. Frightened, Michael blocked their IM addresses but didn't tell his parents for two weeks. "It scared me," he recalls. "It was the first time I was bullied."

Michael's mother, Patty, encouraged him to use his PC again — but with limits. He and his 16-year-old sister are barred from chat rooms and limited to one hour a day online, unless homework requires more time. "Cyberbullying is a scary thing, but kids need to keep up with technology," she says.

Most cyberbullies are unrepentant, but some insist their remarks

What to do

If you're being victimized by a cyberbully, you have options that should be pursued in this order:

► Ignore the cyberbully and block further online communications.

► Save evidence and try to identify the bully.

► Contact parents of the cyberbully and present them with evidence. Request that the behavior stop.

► Inform school officials.

► Contact an attorney or file a claim in small-claims court. The parents of a bully can be sued for defamation, invasion of privacy and intentional infliction of emotional distress.

► Contact police if there are threats of violence, extortion, hate crimes or sexual exploitation.

Source: Center for Safe and Responsible Internet Use

were in retaliation and may have gone too far.

When Gerald, 14, was accused by another student of using a racial slur to describe a female friend, he went on the attack late last year. He spread a rumor that his female accuser was a prostitute.

His instant message ended up on a website popular among students at his high school in Tampa. He apologized to the embarrassed girl, and she told him she was sorry for starting the online exchange.

"This is so common at our school," says Gerald, who spends about three hours a day exchanging instant messages.

Fighting back

School officials walk a tightrope to protect victims without trampling the free-speech rights of bullies — many of whom operate anonymously.

If schools harshly discipline alleged cyberbullies, they risk litigation from angry parents.

"It's a delicate balance of free speech, child protection and parental supervision," says Andrew Spangler, county executive for Westchester County, N.Y.

A lawsuit filed by Stuart and Laura Beath on behalf of their son, a former student at a private school in St. Louis, claims he was wrongfully expelled. School officials say Matthew Beath, 17, was booted for his role in circulating sexually explicit photos of a freshman girl over the Internet.

A trial is scheduled for July in St. Louis County Circuit Court. The school had no comment. Gerard

Carmody, a lawyer representing the Beaths, says Matthew is "a good kid" with no disciplinary history.

To minimize the threat of lawsuits and take pressure off school administrators, at least one lawmaker — Washington state Sen. Jeanne Kohl-Welles, D-Seattle — has sponsored a bill that would add an electronic component to a state law prohibiting traditional bullying. Under the bill, cyberbullying would not have to occur on school property, during school hours or with school equipment, as long as it has an adverse effect on a student or school. Punishment would be up to each school.

Until new rules are in place, however, many schools are holding anti-cyberbullying assemblies. "Kids are willing to openly discuss their problems if you put them in a group setting," says former victim Alyssa, who now helps others by speaking about her experience at schools nationwide. "When you do, they're pumped and want to help each other."

Kids need to be sensitized

Experts in face-to-face bullying, meanwhile, are devising new strategies to cope with the Internet's impact. They advocate workshops for education and community leaders to detect and respond to the problem, tutorials on how technology influences behavior, and a grounding in legal issues.

Ultimately, they say, kids need to be sensitized to the sting of being bullied. "There are ongoing ways for kids to hurt each other," says folk singer Peter Yarrow of Peter, Paul and Mary, and founder of Operation Respect, a non-profit that teaches tolerance in schools. "If it isn't the Internet, it's reality TV or something else."

The best advice for cyberbully victims is to get parents and school officials involved as soon as possible and not suffer in silence, NOVA's Worthington says. Fighting back only engages bullies, who want a reaction. "Handling bullying online is different than staring down someone in the schoolyard and asking them to stop," she says.

The encouraging news is that more students, parents and administrators are learning about — and coping with — the newest form of bullying.

"Maybe we're less tolerant of people being pushed around," O'Brien says. "We used to tell kids to get over it, that boys will be boys. But there can be long-lasting scars that sometimes result in violence if we ignore this."