

Written by Li Vasquez-Noone

The Latest Threat to Teenagers: Cyberbullying

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Being a teenager is hard enough these days. With school, homework, jobs, friends, and fitting in, there's enough to keep a teen constantly worrying about something. Could it possibly get worse? One Detroit metro area teen discovered that the answer to that question is "Yes."

Meet Taylor Brasseur, a sixteen year old target of cyberbullying.

She became a victim when other teens started posting mean things about her on the Internet. She began to receive taunts over Facebook, aimed at her and her unborn baby. She said, "At first I laughed, but as they got harsher and meaner, I realized I needed to do something about it."

Her cyber-attacker even went so far as to wish her harm. "He's told me that I should kill myself and do the world a favor," she said.

Unfortunately, Taylor's situation is not an isolated one. Cyberbullying has become a serious problem among teens. It's hard to pinpoint the numbers, but studies indicate that anywhere from 20 to 40 percent or more of all teens have been bullied electronically, whether through email, text messages, social media, websites, or instant messaging.

Unlike traditional schoolyard bullies, cyberbullies don't have to face their victims or see the damage they are causing. In fact, with the Internet today, they can remain completely anonymous. In many cases bullies may not even be aware of the effect they are having on the victim. This may make them feel that no one is really being harmed, and cause them to continue and even escalate their attacks.

With teens becoming more comfortable with technology and embracing it in every aspect of their lives, cyberbullying is just plain easy. Websites, Facebook pages, YouTube videos and instant messaging are all easy to set up and can go viral, meaning a large number of people can launch a cyber-attack on someone, all from the comfort of their own homes. And while teens are comfortable with technology, many parents don't understand how it all works. This makes it hard for adults to know what their kids are up to.

Adding to the problem is the fact that many adults don't take cyberbullying seriously. They dismiss it entirely or downplay the emotional effects on the victims. In reality, though, cyberbullying is quite harmful.

Taylor ignored the abuse for a while; then she laughed it off. But the taunts kept coming, and got more and more hurtful. After a while, "the stress gets to you," she says. "A lot of people go through a lot of stuff as a kid," she recently told a local news reporter. "Then

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when people bring them down, they're just like maybe it's true and they start to believe it, and then they think they have nothing.”

High stress is common in online bullying victims, according to Dr. Samir Hinduja and Dr. Justin W. Patchin of the Cyberbullying Research Center (www.cyberbullying.us). “Many targets of cyberbullying report feeling depressed, sad, angry, and frustrated.” Research shows that cyberbullying can contribute to low self-esteem, family and school problems, and violence. It’s not uncommon for teens who have been cyberbullied to have suicidal thoughts, and there have been several victimized teens recently who have taken their own lives.

Taylor tried many tactics to stop the bullying. When laughter didn’t work, she ignored the bullies; then she told them to stop. When that didn’t work she decided to tell her mom. She also reported the attacks to Facebook. “I don't want to run away. I just want it to stop,” she said. “I told my mom who said to tell the police, and then they didn’t help at all. So I told the news and ever since it’s calmed down, but started making other people talk bad.”

School and police could do little to help Taylor because there are no laws in Michigan against bullying in any form, and the police can’t step in unless the attacks become physical.

If you are being harassed online or electronically, the experts say that the best thing you can do is have an adult to confide in, someone you can talk to, like a parent or trusted teacher. “One of the first things we learned in our earliest cyberbullying studies was that targets were not telling adults about their experiences,” says Dr. Patchin. Next, keep evidence of the attacks. Learn to take screenshots of any instant messages or social networking posts. If you are being bullied by text messages on your cell phone, contact your service provider immediately. Cell phone companies keep a log of all cell phone activity, but only for a short time. Also, keep a log or journal to document any cyber attacks. This documentation will help build a case against your attacker if it ends up being investigated by the police or school officials.

It’s hard to know who has responsibility for stopping cyberbullying – the kids themselves, their parents, school officials, the police, or the providers of web services like Facebook, YouTube, etc. But there is one thing everyone can agree on: cyberbullying is a problem that will only get worse if society ignores it.

As for Taylor, she’s coping as best she can. “I’m ignoring the situation,” she says, “and keeping my mind off the boy who has made threats to harm me and my child. It’s quite easy.” She also has some advice for others in this situation. “I think that others should speak up and let people know what’s going on. Most are scared because they think no one will listen, but they will. They should...ask for help, block the person, and report it to people who care, such as bullying websites. Then just ignore them and let things move on and pass, because they will.”

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At the time of this writing, Michigan was one of only three states in the U.S. that had no bullying laws of any sort. On November 2, The Michigan State Senate passed SB 137, a bill aimed at curtailing bullying. However, the bill was worded so as not to prohibit expression of religious or moral viewpoints. Proponents of the bill say the intent is to get each school district to write an anti-bullying policy, while those opposed fear it will be used to justify harassment of gay, lesbian or transgendered students. It was sent to the State House of Representatives, where it stalled in committee.

Meanwhile, the House passed HB 4163 on November 10, a similar bill that does not contain language allowing for religious exception. This bill is now headed to the Senate for a vote.

For more information on cyberbullying, please go to The Cyberbullying Research Center at <http://www.cyberbullying.us>.

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