

Cyber-bullying defies traditional stereotype

Girls are more likely than boys to engage in this new trend, research suggests

by Gregg MacDonald | Staff Writer

The advent of social networking sites and text messaging has allowed young girls the opportunity to take on a role traditionally reserved for boys, experts say.

The girls have become bullies - or, more specifically, cyber-bullies.

The Virginia Department of Education defines cyber-bullying as "using information and communication technologies such as e-mail, cell phones, text messaging, instant messaging and websites to support deliberate, hostile behavior intended to harm others."

Cyber-bullying in Fairfax County Public Schools seems to occur primarily in middle schools, said School Resource Officer Supervisor Sergeant William H. Fulton, of the Fairfax County Police Department.

"There are lots of threats and innuendos made through social networking sites, such as Facebook," he said. "A boy may break up with a girl and sides may begin to form against one of the two parties. Before you know it, exchanges are made online and can potentially lead to trouble back at school."

Social networking sites allow teens to post events in their lives in real time, added Ilana Reyes, a school counselor at Annandale High School.

"It is so easy to say negative things through texting and online because you are not face-to-face with the person you're talking about," Reyes said. "Bullies say things and feel all 'big and bad' because they are at home behind a computer, or on a phone, and aren't there to see the ramifications or the impact that it has on the other person."

Research into the trend suggests females are more likely than males to engage in cyber-bullying, but that both genders can be perpetrators, as well as victims.

"Without question, the nature of adolescent peer aggression has evolved due to the proliferation of information and communications technology," said Sameer Hinduja, Ph.D, of the Cyber-bullying Research Center at Florida Atlantic University, in Jupiter, Fla. "There have been several high-profile cases involving teens taking their own lives in part because of being harassed and mistreated over the Internet."

The center's research has shown that adolescent girls are significantly more likely than boys to partake in and experience cyber-bullying. Girls also are more likely than boys to report cyber-bullying to a parent or teacher.

The center's research also suggests that the type of cyber-bullying tends to differ by gender; girls are more likely to spread rumors, while boys are more likely to post hurtful pictures or videos.

A survey conducted by the center, involving about 2,000 randomly-selected middle-schoolers, found that cyber-bullying victims were almost twice as likely to have attempted suicide compared to youth who had experienced no cyber-bullying. Hinduja and the CRC have coined the term "cyberbullicide" to describe this phenomenon.

According to Virginia Department of Education guidelines, cyber-bullying can take forms including sending "mean, vulgar, or threatening" messages or images; posting sensitive or private information about another person; or intentionally excluding someone from an online group.

Potentially harmful consequences exist for victims and perpetrators alike.

Virginia Criminal Code considers a Class 6 felony making a written threat, including those made via texting, e-mail, instant messaging or the Internet. Someone convicted of a Class 6 felony faces either one to five years in prison, or up to 12 months in jail and a maximum fine of \$2,500, or both.

Falls Church resident Lucinda Crabtree knows the effects of cyber bullying.

When a friend's teen daughter committed suicide last year, potentially as a result of cyber-bullying, Crabtree decided she needed to act. Through her marketing communications firm, Crabtree & Company, she began researching ways to make parents more aware of their teen's online language and behavior.

"I felt there was a cyber-communications gap between parents and their teens," she said. "We've all had a sort of secret language growing up and kids today are no different. They have their own online and texting lingo. I felt that a better understanding of this cyber communication by my friend may have helped her recognize the warning signs in her daughter's behavior."

Crabtree formed a volunteer panel of teens, parents, teachers, health care workers and law enforcement professionals. For two months, the group researched the meanings of popular texting codes, Internet terminology and emoticons -- smiley faces in messages that impart meanings.

"It was a serious education," Crabtree said. "For example, I had no idea that a '%' sign can mean being high or drunk" or that a 'four-pounder' is code for a .45 caliber Colt pistol.

Crabtree last month unveiled a software application called "LRNtheLingo" that parents can use in the same way they might an online dictionary of cyber and slang terms. She is attempting to

form a partnership with national organizations to make the application available to public safety and school professionals.

"Teachers and school resource officers need to learn to identify this secret online language as well as parents," she said. "If this helps just one cyber-bullying victim, it will be very rewarding."

"Parents do need to get more involved and monitor what their kids are writing online," Reyes said. "Cell phone use in Fairfax County Schools is prohibited, so most cyber-bullying occurs off school grounds, outside the reach of teachers or school resource officers."

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