

January 2008

Virtue In Action

Virtual bullying, Real consequences

VIRTUE IN ACTION

FOSTERING CITIZENSHIP THROUGH CHARACTER EDUCATION

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Virtual bullying, Real consequences

THE BULLYING WAS VIRTUAL, BUT THE IMPACT WAS VERY REAL.

On Oct. 17, 2006, 13-year-old Megan Meier was sobbing after she was victimized by a hurtful incident of cyberbullying. That day Megan committed suicide. Megan's tormentor harassed her through MySpace calling her "fat," a "slut," and questioning her value as a human being.

Her tormentor-- later revealed to be the mother of one of Megan's childhood friends posing as MySpace friend named "Josh" -- could not be punished by any existing laws.

Sadly, this dangerous form of bullying is not limited to a phony MySpace friend. Harassment, humiliation and threats via mobile phone, Web sites, email, and instant messaging are becoming a more common phenomenon, easier to initiate by tormentors who are physically removed from their intended victims. The majority of cybersbullies are pre-teens and teens. Common methodologies include posting online or forwarding private e-mails, IMs or text messages without permission; spreading online rumors; sending threatening e-mails, IMs or texts; or publishing embarrassing photos of someone without consent.

Approximately 32% of all teens who use the Internet regularly have reported being victims of cyberbullying, according to a 2007 poll by Pew Internet and the American Life project. That may seem low compared to the 67% of the teens who said that offline bullying is more common, but the speed and severity of cyberbullying attacks make them an even more dangerous threat.



Tina Meier, 37, holds two pictures of her daughter Megan who committed suicide last October after receiving cruel messages on MySpace, in this Nov. 19, 2007 file photo, in St. Charles, Mo. (AP Photo/Tom Gannam, File)



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By examining cyberbullying's spread and its effects, we can learn how hurtful, even lethal in Megan's case, our online actions can be to others. Most importantly, we learn that by exercising **prudence** and remembering to maintain **respect for others** in all of our communications, we can stop cyberbullying.

What happened to Megan?

Shortly before she died, things seemed to be looking up for Megan Meier. As a seventh grader, she had been the target of teasing about her weight and rejected by a group of popular kids at Fort Zumwalt West Middle School. But Megan—who took prescribed **anti-depression** medications—had been feeling much better about herself as she approached her 14th birthday, Megan's mother, Tina, told the New York Times.

The teen had transferred to a new school, found a new group of friends, lost 20 pounds and was a member of the volleyball team. Another high point in her life: an e-mail from a MySpace friend who said his name was Josh Evans. The boy, who appeared to be a cute 16-year-old on his MySpace profile, said he didn't have a working phone and was home-schooled. He and Megan became friends, and for a month corresponded online.

Megan's mom was slightly worried about the strange nature of the purely online friendship. "I was just that nervous mom," Tina Meier told ABC News, adding that she attempted to get police to tell her whether the person behind the account was real.

Then, Josh's odd behavior got even stranger. Within a few weeks of the friendship, Josh seemed to turn on Megan and began voicing his feelings throughout the MySpace community. On Oct. 15, 2006, he sent Megan a message saying: "I don't know if I want to be friends with you any longer because I hear you're not so nice to your friends," Tina Meier said. In addition to this, Josh began posting cruel comments about her saying "Megan Meier is a slut.

Megan Meier is fat," according to the Associated Press.

A day later, Megan Meier committed suicide. Her parents were devastated, but even more so when they found out the last message that was sent to Megan—the potential catalyst for her death: "The world would be a better place without you," Josh had written.

Even more shocking than the message was who was really behind it. Josh turned out not to be a home-schooled teenage boy at all. The Meiers later found out that "he" was a "she," the mother of one of Megan's childhood friends with whom she was no longer close. The neighborhood mom, Lori Drew, then 47, told other neighbors that she was behind the Josh account.

"That's the biggest tragedy of this whole thing: An adult did it," Ron Meier told ABC News.

Drew had used the account to fish for information about how Megan felt about her daughter. But things turned uglier when Drew decided to attack Megan online. The Meiers were particularly jarred

because she said that Drew had taken Megan on vacations before and knew about her daughter's antidepressant prescription. They sensed that Drew knew she was dealing with a particularly **vulnerable** teen.

"I felt like such a fool," Ron Meier told the New York Times. "I'm supposed to protect my family, and here I allowed these people to inject themselves into our lives."

"I believe they are the ones who took her to the edge of the cliff and forced her to go over," Ron Meier, said on "Good Morning America."

Cyberbullying: a worldwide threat

Meier's tragic death may be an exceptional example of the potential damage of cyberbullying, but sadly millions of teens are victimized by cyberbullying, most often by other teens.



Approximately 32% of all teens who use the Internet regularly have reported being victims of cyberbullying

A single whisper of gossip that once took weeks to get around a school, can now take seconds to be posted and re-posted among hundreds of MySpace or FaceBook friends. An embarrassing picture or cruel note once taped inside of a locker can be forwarded through phones or posted with a message in cyberspace and exposed instantly to an entire community.

Girls are the most frequent victims, according to the Pew Internet and American Life Project survey, though it also happens to young boys. Approximately 41% of girls, between the ages of 15 and 17, reported being bullied through virtual channels, compared with 29% of boys within that age range. It's a disturbing trend that is growing, also affecting younger kids between the ages of 8 and 14, according to statistics from attorney Parry Aftab, an online crusader against cyberbullies since the late '90s. Aftab said that approximately 90% of middle school students that she has surveyed reported having their feelings hurt online, with 65% admitting that they had been directly or indirectly involved in an act of cyberbullying.

The most common form of harassment was private communication being forwarded or publicly posted without the victim's consent, according to 15% of students surveyed. Another harmful effect of cyberbullying: the spread of rumors at a rapid-fire rate.

Though schools across the country, and in the United Kingdom and Canada, are taking steps to stop cyberbullying, the activity is so new that there are no specific laws against it. Even in the extreme case of Megan Meier, police had no grounds to arrest her harasser, of whom they told the New York Times she had

done something "immature, but not illegal." Given the Constitution's protection of freedom of speech, some question whether laws can be passed against cyberbullying outside of someone making a specific criminal threat.

In many cases in life, we can't look to the government to protect us from the harmful acts of others, especially when it comes to emotional harm. Our best protection from this type of bullying is to affirm within our community a greater sense of **respect for others** and **prudence**.

In a community where we emphasize the value and dignity of each person, it is less likely for cyberbullying to occur and especially for it to have its full impact. For example, if we refuse to pass along and to believe the rumors others spread through online communications, then those who want to harm someone would be less likely to engage in cyberbullying.

Megan's case is also a powerful lesson in the importance of **prudence**. Megan's tormentor should have thought more about the impact her online statements would have on Megan, whom she knew suffered from depression. If each of us more carefully assesses the impact of our communications on others, whether it's what we directly state on line, or what we chose to pass along, we can substantially reduce the **incidence** of cyberbullying.

The technology and manner of our communication will continue to evolve and change; however, what shouldn't change is our commitment as individuals and as a community to always think through the impact of our communications on others and to respect others.

Vocabulary:

Anti-depressant:

medications: A drug used to prevent or relieve mental depression

Cyberbullying: is when a child, preteen or teen is tormented, threatened, harassed, humiliated, embarrassed or otherwise targeted by another child, preteen or teen using

the Internet, interactive and digital technologies or mobile phones (stopcyberbullying.org)

Prudence: thinking through the implications of our actions and decisions.

Respect for others: showing full appreciation of the worth and dignity of others; living by "the golden rule": do unto others as

you would want done unto you.

MySpace: an online community that allows friends – at a minimum age of 14 – to keep in touch while meeting new people who host their own pages on the site

Vulnerable: susceptible to physical or emotional injury

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Connecting Virtues to Our World

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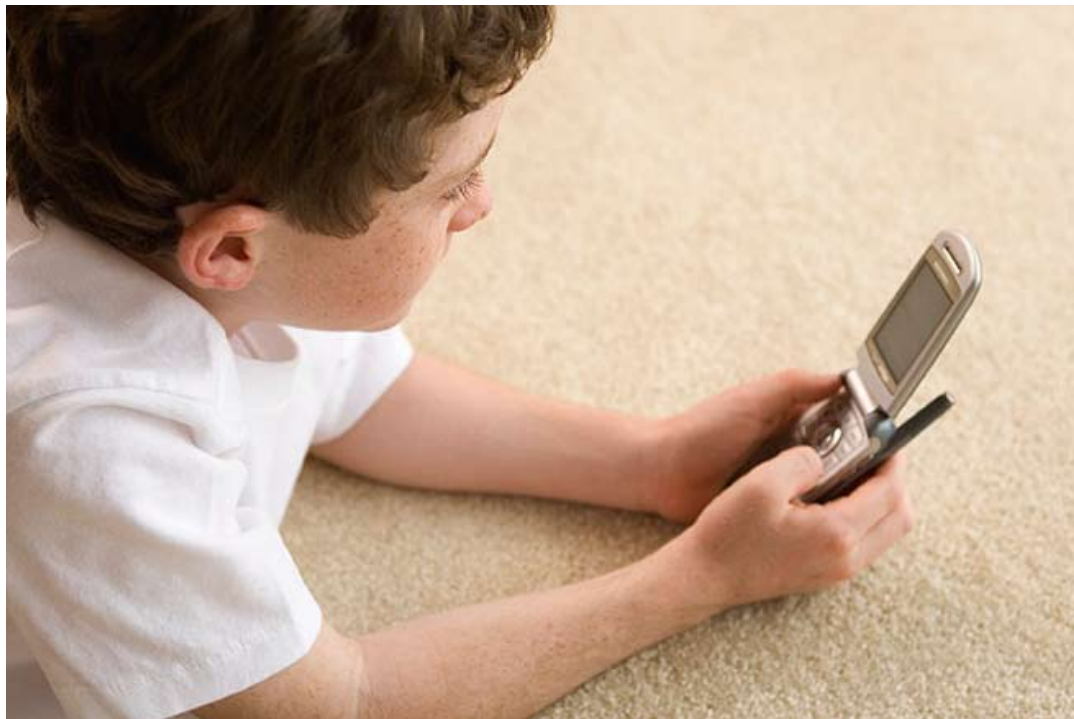
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Lesson Goals:

- Help students to realize the potential destructive power of modern communications technology, specifically social networking sites, instant messaging and emails
- Develop awareness of the different forms of cyberbullying and ways that communications technology can be abused in undermining the value and dignity of others
- Encourage student self-reflection as to whether they are guilty of cyberbullying
- Inspire students to develop their own standards for how they will personally avoid cyberbullying and encourage others to do the same.
- Develop understanding of the virtues of respect for others and prudence and to see how these relate to cyberbullying and modern communications technology.



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Discussion Question Ideas:

1. How would you define cyberbullying?
2. What virtues can we focus on to reduce the incidence of cyberbullying?
3. What factors influenced 13-year-old Megan Meiers to take her own life?
4. Explain what punishment, if any, do you think should have been given to Megan's online harasser and why? If you think a law should address cyberbullying, how would you address the constitutional protections of freedom of speech?
5. Of girls and boys, who is harassed more often online, according to the Pew Internet/ This American Life survey? Why do you think this is the case?
6. Among young people is there more bullying and showing disrespect for others because modern communications technology frees you from physically facing the intended victim, or is the level of bullying the same and now simply comes in other forms?

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7. How is cyberbullying more powerful than conventional forms of bullying? (Discussion tips if needed: number of people a bully can reach nearly instantly, the power of pictures)
8. What can you personally and as a peer group do to lessen the frequency of cyberbullying? (Discussion tips, if needed: commitment to not pass along or assume cyber disseminated gossip is true, respectfully confront those who do pass along untrue statements)
9. Mr. Meier's was regretful that he allowed someone he didn't know to come into his family's life through MySpace. Do you think you, and or your parents should have a policy against engaging people online who you don't personally know, or know through another friend?

Journal Writing Ideas:

1. Have you or a friend ever been the victim of cyberbullying? Explain what happened and how you made it feel.
2. Why do you think bullies victimize others? What is so bad about bullying? What actions do you think could stop bullying – physical and online—among your peer group?
3. Have you ever bullied another person? What factors influenced you to do it (peer pressure, anger, jealousy), and what – if anything – did you do to make up for your actions?
- 4) Write a personal statement outlining your policies for how to handle cyberbullying. What specific actions will you commit to taking to reduce cyberbullying?

Extended Learning Activities:

1. Have each member of the class write out a personal resolution for the New Year pledging not to engage in cyberbullying and highlighting the "rules" they have set for themselves to avoid being a participant in such activities.
2. Have the class devise an "action list" of ideas of what to do if they find themselves bullied, for example, notify a parent, notify the school, so that they can avoid being victimized and humiliated online.

Internet Resources:

"Parents: Cyber Bullying Led to Teen's Suicide":

abcnews.go.com/pring?id=388250

"A Hoax Turned Fatal Draws Anger but No Charges": <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/11/28/us/28hoax.html>

Pew Internet & American Life Project: Cyberbullying Survey
http://www.pewinternet.org/PPF/r/216/report_display.asp

Stop Cyberbullying Web Site
www.stopcyberbullying.org



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