

**Stalked by a Cyberbully**  
**Cellphones and the Net are kids' social lifelines.**  
**They can also be their social death.**  
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**MICHAEL SNIDER with KATHRYN BOREL**

AMY BOUCHER learned early how mean kids can be. In elementary school, she was taller than the rest of the girls and that made her an easy target for ridicule. Often teased and excluded, the Montreal teen would come home and escape into her drawings or play on the computer. So when she discovered a Web site about art where she could chat with others, it gave her a sense of belonging and, more importantly, acceptance.

But all that changed when she got into a spat with another girl on the site over an unanswered e-mail. Amy tried to make up, but the girl rebuffed her attempts, and for the next three years made her the object of an on-line bullying campaign that drove Amy to tears and eventually to depression. A posse of girls would taunt her over e-mail or sign onto the site under her name before launching attacks on other members that she would then be blamed for. "I kept thinking, 'What's wrong with me?'" says Amy, now a chatty 15-year-old. "Why does everybody hate me?"

Bullying, whether it occurs in the schoolyard or on-line, is at its core about power and control. And today, when kids cruise around the Internet the way they do around their neighbourhood, getting slammed on a Web site can be just as bruising as getting slammed against a playground wall. Through e-mail or over cellphones, tormentors can get right into victims' homes, harassing them while their parents sit in the next room. It's called cyberbullying and, for both parents and teachers, it's a growing concern. According to the Media Awareness Network, an Ottawa-based non-profit group that monitors on-line activity, a quarter of young Canadian Internet users report having received material that said hateful things about others. These can be threats, gossip -- or worse. Groups sometimes gang up on one student, bombarding them with "flame" e-mails or infecting their computer with viruses. One jilted boyfriend posted his ex's personal information on porn sites, while a girl who visited Toronto became the subject of a rumour that she had SARS.

"It's so far beyond the passing of notes," says Jan Sippel, coordinator of abuse prevention at the Vancouver School Board. "This bullying gives kids the same feelings of powerlessness and hopelessness as the traditional form."

Cyberbullies' weapons of choice are e-mail, cellphones that can send text messages, and instant-messaging programs that allow users to chat

electronically in real time. With IM chat the No. 1 on-line activity among kids, practised by some 60 per cent, it's a natural medium for abuse. Some bullies post slurs on Web sites where kids congregate, or on personal on-line journals, called Weblogs. In a macabre twist on the American Idol craze, sites have emerged where

> students vote on their school's biggest geek or sluttiest girl. "Who here hates teressa as much as i do," asks a student with the screen name silentgothicell on a site called Schoolscandals2.com. "She is such a f\*\*\*ing poser who thinks she is so kewl and awesome and pretty and she is DEFFINATLY NOT!" "Yeah," responds Do\_a\_crazydance. "She's freaken ugly."

Bill Belsey, a father and education consultant in Cochrane, Alta., who runs Web sites about bullying, has studied the growing phenomenon of cyberbullying and says the anonymity of the Internet emboldens the culprits. "When kids feel there aren't consequences for the communications, they take liberties," says Belsey, whose sites, bullying.org and cyberbullying.ca, receive nearly a million hits a month. Kids and parents write in to the sites about their own experiences. "[My daughter] set up a Web site for herself and asked people to sign her guest book," writes one anonymous mother. "A gaggle of girls started signing it, telling my daughter she should just die and that everyone hates her."

Perhaps the most famous victim of cyberbullying is Ghyslain Raza, the 15-year-old boy from Trois-Rivières, Que., who became an unwilling celebrity when a film he made of himself emulating a Star Wars fight scene was posted on the Internet by some classmates. Millions downloaded the two-minute clip and the media dubbed him the "Star Wars kid." He was so humiliated he sought counselling, and his family has launched a lawsuit against his tormentors.

The growing number and severity of cyberbullying incidents are leading educators and the authorities to start taking action. Calgary police recently issued a warning about such electronic activities, pointing out that written death threats are a crime. In Vancouver, a group of Grade 7 girls were caught in a game where they'd vote via instant messaging who should be their next target for ostracism. "We've had quite a number of these incidents," says Sippel of the Vancouver School Board, who has organized about a dozen parent meetings about cyberbullying. But schools are having trouble addressing the issue because much of the abuse occurs outside the classroom. "Bullying is taken very seriously," says Tamara Grealis-Ellam, head of guidance at Toronto's Woburn Collegiate Institute. "But unfortunately, with cyberbullying, you need the student to come forward and tell you."

Part of the problem in combatting cyberbullying, say experts, is that parents and kids relate to technology very differently. Most adults approach computers as practical tools, while for kids the Internet is a lifeline to

their peer group. "Cyberbullying is practically subterranean because it lives in the world of young people," says Belsey. "Kids know there is a gap in the understanding of technology between themselves and their parents, and their fear is not only that the parents' response may make the bullying worse, but that the adults will take the technology away."

That was Anne Boucher's first impulse. Amy's mother saw her daughter's depression and urged her to stop going to the art Web site. But Amy still had friends there, people with whom she had been communicating for years. And her drawing was getting really good (one work sold for \$300 at an on-line auction). "She'd get up the next morning and she would still be feeling down and then she'd go to the place where she felt comfortable and she'd get attacked again," says Anne. "I kept telling her not to go back, but it was her little community." Amy eventually left the site for awhile, and when she went back, the bullying stopped.

Belsey says that parents, teachers and the police need to meet cyberbullying head-on. And to some degree, that is happening. Belsey has contacted more than 40 schools across the country, asking them to participate in a cyberbullying survey. And at the end of the month, he will speak at a conference for educational administrators. This is just a start, he says, but "people are beginning to understand the genie is out of the bottle."