



Fighting like with like

How technology can help schools and their pupils to beat the growing and disturbing trend of cyber-bullying.

Technology has become such an everyday part of life that most of us would be hard pressed to do without our various forms of communications gadgetry. For many children, however, the computers they use at home and school and their increasingly sophisticated mobile phones have provided a fast connection to fear. These children are among the rising number of young technology users who have fallen victim to a growing new culture: cyber-bullying.

Bullies have always been cowards, but never has it been so easy for the perpetrators to spread their venom with such accuracy and impact from a safe distance. Emailing, internet chatrooms, websites and texting provide a rich choice of conduits for the bully to utilise, often from the comfort of their own homes. And as technology becomes ever more sophisticated, so the job gets easier. The recent flurry of 'happy slapping' attacks, where a physical assault is recorded on mobile phone cameras before being circulated by email and even on the Internet, is a cruelly efficient way of hitting the victims both physically and mentally.

Earlier this year, children's charity NCH revealed that 16 per cent of 11-19 year olds have been threatened or harassed by text messages, five per cent have been bullied in internet chatrooms and

a further four per cent admit to having been targeted by bullies via email. But many believe this is only the tip of the proverbial iceberg. In 2002 the children's helpline, Childline, reported that 87 per cent of young people were too embarrassed to speak out about bullying, and two-thirds feared getting into trouble if they spoke out. Despite this, the charity reports a 42 per cent rise in the number of children counselled on bullying last year.

Taking it seriously

The Government is well aware of cyber-bullying and encourages schools to act on complaints of malicious texting and emailing. Advice for teachers, posted on the TeacherNet website, encourages teachers to warn children to be careful who they give their phone number to, to keep a record of the date and time of any offensive messages they receive and to let a member of staff see these. It goes on to say: 'When pupils report bullying text messages the school needs to take the complaint seriously and the child's family might also need to contact the police. The same also applies to malicious emails sent by other pupils.'

But this advice relies on young people having the courage to report incidents to their teachers in the first place. They must be confident that their time-poor teachers will routinely be both accessible and sympathetic. So what can schools do to ensure their students can enjoy the obvious benefits of the latest technology without putting themselves at risk from the misery of the cyber-bullies?

Ironically, technology itself provides some of the most innovative solutions to this problem. Ground-breaking technology companies such as Truancy Call Ltd and Securus Software Limited have come up with products that beat the cyber-bullies without interfering with the functionality of computers or mobile phones.





Text Someone

For example, school communication specialists Truancy Call Ltd have developed a service called *Text Someone*, which allows children to report incidents of bullying, theft, crime or any antisocial behaviour directly to schools via text message, voice message or email. The system encourages children to report incidents, as it offers them a communication tool which they are comfortable with without the need for them to speak directly to another person in the first instance. They can simply leave their message by phone, text or email. Once the incident has been reported to *Text Someone*, students will be reassured that the school is aware and that their problem will be followed up.



Schools are given a dedicated mobile phone number, a local rate phone number and email address for *Text Someone*, which can be promoted to pupils via posters and through the issuing of a 'Text Someone Card' to each pupil containing all the details they need. Whenever a pupil sends a message to the service, it will automatically appear on the *Text Someone* system in the school and a reply sent to the pupil to let them know their message has been received. A member of school staff can securely log onto the system to see all voice, text and email messages reported by pupils. The system can even send a text or email alerting school staff to a new message from pupils.

The system helps tackle cyber-bullying because it provides the evidence that schools and parents need to take things further. Pupils can forward offending calls, texts, emails and web page links to the system, where they are recorded and stored.

Growing concerns

Stephen Clarke, managing director of Truancy Call Ltd, says *Text Someone* was developed in response to growing concerns about the misuse of mobile

phones and computers – most children now have access to computers at school if not at home. Currently 41 per cent of girls and 30 per cent of boys aged between 5-18 in full-time education own a mobile phone, and the numbers are growing.

He explains: "With bullies using mobile phones, email and the Internet, there is no place for the victim to hide. Children do not like to speak out about bullying for fear that this will make the problem even worse – and they don't want to get caught out by the bully while waiting to report issues to the teacher. And bullying does not just happen inside the school gates.

"Reporting bullying can now happen 24 hours a day and saves the child from having to wait possibly overnight, fearful and worrying, before trying to track down a teacher. Perhaps most importantly, children can rest assured that their complaints will be believed and taken seriously."

Securus

The dramatic increase in computer use within schools led to the development of *Securus* from Securus Software Limited. This is a computer monitoring solution which can help schools to identify cyber-bullying immediately. Whether a pupil is working online using the Internet or offline in other applications, such as *Outlook* or *Word*, the system captures screen shots every time a violation occurs, saved with details of the user, workstation, time, date and nature of the incident. It thus provides evidence for the school and not only keeps students focused on their work but also makes it unnecessary to disrupt the class or risk confrontation. All incidents are recorded and can be dealt with after consideration, within a controlled environment.

Founding director Bill Jenkins believes the sole use by schools of blocking and filtering systems leaves huge areas of exposure to very real dangers: "No filtering software is foolproof, and an alarming

number of sites get past in unrecognised guises. There is a growing ability among pupils to deliberately circumvent traditional blocking and filtering systems, and pupils know they cannot generally be caught, nor their actions proven. The limitations in coverage and updating of even the best blocking and filtering systems mean that children can enter pornography and gambling websites and even shop for weapons or drugs, despite legal age restrictions.

"The advances in ICT over the years have led to children accessing unsuitable and potentially dangerous material and some individuals or groups using it to offend or harm others with relative ease. This is not just confined to online visits to inappropriate websites and chat rooms: bad behaviour offline using ICT can include anything from internal cyber-bullying and racism to the unacceptable use of obscene language," he says.

Acceptable Use Policy

Bill advises that schools should make their rules governing internet usage and safety clear from the outset. School managers should ensure that pupils, parents and members of staff are all brought on board to jointly develop and then sign an Acceptable Use Policy (AUP).

With the increasing sophistication of technology and its availability to young people, opportunities for cyber-bullying are likely to rise in the future. Implementing reliable and proven systems like these products can give schools a fighting chance of allowing children to travel freely along the ICT superhighways, while making sure that bullies discover only cyberspace cul-de-sacs.

Information

For further information on *Text Someone* tel: 0870-046 4246, Email: sales@textsomeone.com or go to www.textsomeone.com

For further information on *Securus* tel: 01932-255 480 or browse: www.securus-software.com

