



Sara h's Secret

Background Information

Today, people all over the world have the capability to communicate with each other with just a click of a button. People communicate by weblogs, email, cell phones, text-messaging and other technological advancements in communication. Because it is so easy to communicate with others, a growing concern is cyber-bullying. Cyber-bullying occurs when individuals “[use] the Internet and electronic communication technologies to transmit hostile messages and images” p. 63 to another person (Dyrli, 2005).

Although anyone can become a victim of cyber-bullying, many teens become victims due to their desire use modern technology and their failure to use safe internet practices. Keith and Martin (2005) reveal that some teens use the Internet to build websites to bully other teens and post embarrassing pictures and messages on websites or online journals. Often it is difficult to determine the person who is responsible for cyber-bullying because false names are used. Occurrences of cyber-bullying should not be taken lightly because cyber-bullying is much more damaging to teens than traditional bullying since harmful messages and images can be communicated to a much larger audience (Strom & Strom, 2005).

Most occurrences of cyber-bullying occur while teens are at home; however, often teachers and administrators are forced to deal with the repercussions during the school day (Blair, 2003). For this reason, it is important that schools develop a policy that addresses how to deal with cyber-bullying and educate their students about the consequences of cyber-bullying. In addition, it is important that they provide their students with prevention methods to help decrease incidents of cyber-bullying. Schools should develop clear policies for the use of technology in their schools, ensure that these policies are implemented, and enforce consequences for students who violate these policies (Franek, 2006). In fact, Franek (2006) reports that students should be aware that all communications can be traced back to the source computer by using the computer's IP (Internet Protocol) address. In addition, schools should educate their students about the dangers of giving out too much personal information on the web.

Because most incidents of cyber-bullying occur outside of school, parents and family can help prevent children from receiving harassment from a cyber-bully and keep their children from becoming cyber-bullies themselves. Franek (2006) suggests that parents should place their computer in a family room and talk with their children about Internet safety on a regular basis. In addition, parents should become technology literate, be aware of how and when their children use the Internet and use filtering software on their home computer (Keith & Martin, 2005).

Sometimes students do not openly reveal that they are being cyber-bullied. Keith and Martin (2005) reveal that there are several ways to help parents and teachers identify when a teen is being cyber-bullied. These include: “spending a lot of time on the computer, having trouble sleeping or having nightmares, feeling depressed or crying without reason, [showing] mood swings, feeling unwell, becoming anti-social and falling behind in homework” p. 226 (Keith & Martin, 2005).

In conclusion, cyber-bullying is a growing problem especially for teens that rely heavily on modern methods of communication. Cyber-bullying can be very damaging to teens and can take on many forms. In today's schools, when a student reports an occurrence of cyber-bullying it is imperative that school officials immediately investigate a student's claim before other incidents occur (Franek, 2006). In addition, parents should be aware of prevention methods and how to deal with cyber-bullying should it occur in their home.

Preview

Cyber-bullying occurs when someone uses technology to harass, threaten or bully another person. Cyber-bullying is a growing problem in today's schools as most students have access to a wide variety of technological communication methods such as cell phones, text-messaging, weblogs, email and social networking websites. Cyber-bullies and cyber-predators often remain anonymous to their victims; however, they might also be someone known to the victim.

Focus Questions

As you read this case study, keep the following questions in mind: (1) Is there anything that Sara's parents should do differently? (2) Is there anything that Sara should do differently? (3) How should Sara's school deal with the issue once the problem is known?

The Case

Sarah's Secret

At the beginning of the school year, Sara moved into a new school. At first, things were great and Sara was very popular. She immediately fit right in and made many new friends. However, after a couple weeks at her new school, her parents noticed that she seems depressed and anti-social. They observe that she rarely talks to her friends on the phone or goes shopping with them. Instead of going out with her friends, Sara spends most of her time in her room doing homework and using her computer.

Sara's parents are worried about her and suspect that something is not quite right at school. They try to talk to Sara, but she is reluctant to talk. She tells them that she and her friends had an argument and are not getting along. Sara's parents do not realize the problem is more dangerous than a disagreement between friends. Sara's problem started about a month after she moved into her new school.

One day as Sara arrived at school, other students began to giggle and laugh at her as she walked to her first class. Some even made strange remarks about her eating lunch in the lunchroom. Sara was embarrassed and confused so she hurried on to her class. Sara did not mention this to anyone that day and thought that it would just go away. To Sara's satisfaction, things during the day seemed to get better and back to normal as the day progressed.

That day Sara went home feeling a little better and glad to be home. After arriving at her house, Sara realized that she had a research report due the following week and decided to start working on the report. After logging onto her computer and the Internet, Sara decided to check her email. She had one email from a person that she did not recognize, but she opened the email anyway. Inside the email, was an embarrassing picture of Sara in the lunchroom eating. Immediately, Sara realized that this picture was the reason that all the students had been laughing at her when she arrived at school that day. Another student must have taken this picture in the lunchroom at school and sent it to everyone in her class. Sara was alarmed and began to cry. She thought that everyone in school really liked her, and she did not know of anyone who would do this to her. Sara immediately deleted the email and did not tell anyone about the email.

As the weeks passed, the incidents escalated. Sara received more and more embarrassing and sometimes even threatening emails from the person. As Sara did the first time, she deleted each and every one. One day Sara even received an email that contained a link to a website. To Sara's horror, the website was about her and contained many upsetting pictures of her as well as threats and derogatory comments aimed at her. Sara was too humiliated to tell her parents even though her parents encouraged her to talk about her problems. Sara's teachers even noticed that she had begun to fall behind in school and seemed to be very depressed. Like her parents, Sara's teachers do not have clue to what is really going on.

Questions for Discussion

1. Pretend that you are Sara, what would you have done differently if you were in her place? If you were one of Sara's parents, would you have done anything differently? If so, describe how you would have reacted differently.
2. Sara demonstrates many of the warning signs associated with being a victim of cyberbullying. Discuss these warning signs. Research online articles and journals to find other warning signs.
3. Once Sara's parents and teachers identify the problem, what policies and procedures can the school put in place to prevent future incidents from occurring?
4. What should happen to the student(s) responsible for the incidents of cyberbullying?

Links

Cyberbullying – www.cyberbully.org

GetNetWise – www.getnetwise.org

i-SAFE – www.isafe.org

NetSmartz – www.netsmartz.org

Parents Guide to the Internet – www.ed.gov/pubs/parents/internet

Stop Cyberbullying – www.stopcyberbullying.org

WiredSafety – www.wiredsafety.org

The University of Alabama Computers and Applied Technology Program (2009). *Technology Education: A series of Case Studies*. Available at <http://www.ua.edu/edtechcases>.

Resources

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- Strom, P., & Strom, R. (2005). Cyberbullying by adolescents: a preliminary assessment. *The Educational Forum*, 70(1), 21-36.