

Schools Caught in Middle On the Cyberbullying Issue

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While it is true that children have bullied and teased one another since the beginning of time, some of us old enough to remember the days before cell phones, personal computers and the Internet can recall what it was like when the bullying stopped at the schoolyard gates. Being picked on was no fun but we knew if we could get to the final bell, the bullying would usually stop.

Today, bullying can be a 24/7 activity. Technology has made it more pervasive, commonplace and anonymous. Parents who hear the nonstop chirping of a child's cell phone receiving dozens of texts until all hours of the night understand that, without proper supervision, there is virtually no technology downtime for children. When the content of those text messages and online posts becomes mean-spirited and hateful, kids enter the world of the cyberbully.

The impact of cyberbullying can be tragic. Schools can be held liable to charges of negligence, a demand for damages because of emotional stress, and even a demand that the school pay the cost of enrolling a student in a private school to escape uncontrolled or unaddressed bullying. If the bullying is based on a child's race, ethnic origin, national origin or disability, the school could even be held liable for a civil rights violation and lose federal funding.

How is it possible for any administrator or teacher to maneuver safely through this minefield of conflicting liabilities and still keep students safe? Schools need to begin by establishing clear, written policies as to what is permitted in "cybertalk" and what is not. Students should be encouraged to report violations, and teachers should be trained to recognize bullying in all its forms and coached as to what actions to take. Students should also be told that their Internet communications through school computers, and even private computers using school-provided Internet service, are not private and can be searched. Above all, complaints should be taken seriously and addressed.

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