Cyber relationships

Andrew Fuller

On-line relationships are becoming as important as face-to-face ones. In fact cyber friendships are so important to young people that many of them would endure pain rather than lose access to them. As one young man commented, *" I'd rather lose a leg than access to facebook".* On average, young people have 56 online friends.

The strength of on-line relationships mirrors the best and at times, the worst of face-to-face relationships. The only problem is that when things go badly on-line, they go really badly. As we know, what goes on the net stays on the net.

In fast paced heated interactions in chat rooms, people who are usually friendly and positive can post nasty and hurtful comments with devastating consequences. For this reason, we need to develop netiquette- standards of behaviour for people on-line.

Cyber-safety is about relationships and how people behave rather than about technology.

Almost two thirds of children have had a negative experience on-line and 20 % feel badly about something they have done on-line.

The following guidelines have been compiled from suggestions made by thousands of young people and may be useful to consider or use as a discussion point.

The Suggested Rules of Netiquette.

1.What goes on the net stays on the net.
Virtual words have real life consequences. If you wouldn't do it IRL (in real life) don't do it online. Use the nana rule- if you wouldn't want your nana to know about it, don't put it on the web. Your future employers, friends and partners can and probably will, trace your cyber –trail.

2. Don't ban, plan! Parents should not threaten to ban access to the internet if bullying occurs. The main reason young people do not tell their parents when they are cyber bullied is because they fear they will lose access to the computer.

Parents should let their children know that they will help them to cope with upsetting events on-line but won't insist they stop using the computer.

3. Take a STAND against cyber-bullying:

Silence – do not respond to abusive messages. The number one rule for dealing with cyber-bullying is: don't respond, don't interact and don't engage.

Take a copy of all abusive messages- these may be useful legally later on. Create a new folder, called "Abuse", and move hate mail and messages into this folder

Accept that bullies don't think like you do -trying to sort it out with them or asking them to stop won't work. Recognise that you are not dealing with a person who has the same mindset as yourself. Cyber-bullies are cowards who often try to hide their identity and behave in nasty ways to build themselves up and to put other people down. Cyber-bullying is a pathetic act.

Never deal with this problem alone- get help! No one can cope with this alone.

Don't be provoked. Some cyber-bullies play "the baiting game". A provocative comment is made and those who respond in irritation are encouraged to engage in conflict with those who respond assertively. The provoker watches, waits and stirs the pot.

Become an observer. Although you may be the

target of the cyber-bully's anger, you can train yourself to act as an observer. This takes you out of the firing line and enables you to study the bully and collect evidence.

4. Know that people take cyber-bullying seriously and that you will be taken seriously.

If you are bullied on-line, let your school know and let the police know. There are legal avenues that can be taken to stop cyber-bullying.

5. Develop a code of Netiquette. Some ideas include:

-Don't bully or be mean to others on-line.
- Let people know that cyber-bullying is a weak and cowardly act of hatred on-line.
-Don't harass or stalk people on-line
-Don't pass on embarrassing photos or posts about others.
-Parents should not allow kids to have webcams in bedrooms. Skype should only be allowed if the computer is in a family room. Chat roulette should be discouraged.
-Know that circulating some photos means that you risk being charged with child pornography.
-Only add friends that you know and do not add 'friends of friends'
-If someone on-line wants to meet you in person, ask an adult to accompany you.

6. Be a responsible user of technology.
We need people to be good cyber-citizens. Be honest with yourself. Computer games reduce dopamine. This means it is hard to get motivated to do anything else once you have been on-line for a while. Do your study before you go on-line.

Advergaming
Most of us think that the major dangers to children on-line are pedophiles posing as young people and either showing them inappropriate images of themselves or luring kids into meetings with them. This does occur though kids are much sharper at picking an adult who tries to be younger on-line than most parents believe.

Corporations have also got in on the act of trying to manipulate young people's thinking. Advergaming is a mix of advertising and entertainment that takes the form of games.

Games may be located on a website owned or sponsored by a corporation. Companies use personal information about users to further tailor their marketing.

Other companies develop special games that develop positive attitudes towards a product. One example is the USA army's game America's Army, which was specifically designed to increase recruitment.

Products are also linked to games or strategically placed to promote a desire among young people to buy a product.

Here come the *Cyber Doctors*

Adults will never know enough to completely protect young people when they are on-line. For this reason, some schools are setting up groups of students called "*Cyber Doctors*".

This is a group of students who can help others when bad things happen on-line. They educate themselves about cyber relationships and then are available for anyone in the school who needs them.

If someone has done something on-line that they regret or have experienced something negative for themselves on-line they can request a meeting of the cyber doctors who work with them to resolve the issue.

Often young people are in the most powerful position to help others cope and disentangle the complexities of cyber-bullying.

The Cyber Doctors have an adult who also meets and co-ordinates the group as well as collecting information about the types if incidents that occur.