REPORTtoPARENTS

Cyber-Bullying

There is a new kind of humiliation in schools these days—bullying on the Internet. Children are using the anonymity of the Internet to harass other children, spread cruel rumors, and sometimes even threaten physical harm. And the worst thing is that it can happen anywhere, anytime. The same technology that has brought so many benefits is also bringing pain to far too many children, while allowing others to brutalize their peers without the chance of getting caught.

● **New pain, old problem.** There's nothing new about bullying, but the Internet has made it a far easier thing to accomplish. By simply creating a separate screen name or instant message (IM) identity, kids can use the Internet to send hate mail that, in most cases, can't be traced.

● **Not an isolated incident.** Studies have found that as many as one in four children has been harassed online.

● **IMs are the biggest problem.** Instant messaging (IM) has replaced the pre-teen and teen rituals of the past—passing notes and talking on the phone. IMs are where the vast majority of bullying takes place online. Unlike computer screen names, people can create an unlimited number of IM names for themselves. Kids use this as an opportunity to create untraceable identities that they use to bully others online.

● **Bad judgment can cause a lifetime of hurt.** Children sometimes, without thinking of the consequences, send very personal information to others over the Internet. Love-sick girls have sent obscene photos or videos of themselves to the boys they like, and vice versa. Once they're sent, they're "out there." The person who receives the images can send them to others, and on and on. Some parents have been shocked to find that there are pornographic images of their own children available to anyone on the Web.

Here are some tips for parents:

● **Discuss the topic with your child.** You may be surprised to learn that your child already has been a target of cyber-bullying. If so, the most important thing is to find out what kind of bullying is taking place. Are the words just cruel, or are threats involved? If your child is being victimized, make sure he or she lets you know when it's happening.

● **Keep records.** Use your computer to copy and print all of the offending IMs or e-mails, including the "buddy name" of the perpetrator. Print them out and take them to your school principal and discuss the problem. If physical harm is being threatened, you must talk to the police. Although it is difficult to discover the identity of an Internet name, authorities can do so if a life has been threatened.

● **Monitor your children when they are on the computer.** Listen for signs that they are being unkind (cruel laughter as they send or read an IM or e-mail), as well as for indications that they are being bullied. Then take action. Your children need your help.