

## **Cyberbullies an increasing problem with technology boom**

*By BECKY WILKES/Starkville Daily News*

Most of us know what a bully is - a person who is habitually cruel or overbearing, especially to smaller or weaker people, according to Mr. Webster. Now combine that with the technology of a cell phone and a computer, and you have a cyberbully.

Cyberbullies use e-mail, instant messages, chat rooms, and text messaging on cell phones to achieve their purpose. One New Jersey college student recalls being cyberbullied:

"I was in middle school, and my best friend started a rumor about me. It mushroomed and I was bullied through the computer. People threatened me with text messages on cell phones. I'd get messages saying not to go to the bathroom alone, or to watch my back at school the next day. Harassing me became the 'cool' thing to do."

Samantha Hahn, the victim, said the computer harassment was particularly unnerving because it was anonymous. Screen names were changed, false profiles created, and name calling began - all without her knowing who was responsible. She even received death threats.

Her grades dropped and her health suffered. She finally switched schools. That made the school part better, but the harassment continued.

"I wouldn't turn the computer on for two weeks or so at a time, and as soon as I went back online, there it was again," she said. "I couldn't walk down the street without wondering if someone was following me."

Now a college junior and 20 years old, Hahn readily talks about her experience. It lasted six years before the police got involved. She wants parents to know what to look for.

"Parents play a big role in this. Teachers get classes on computers but it's very important for parents to understand computers. Some people don't want to know about them, but if your kids are using one, you need to know about it. There is a whole different language involved," she said emphatically.

Since Hahn's experience, some of her former classmates have apologized for being part of the bullying.

But others weren't so fortunate. A 13-year-old boy in Vermont committed suicide as a result.

His father, John Halligan, said, "Ryan was harassed online by his school day bullies, and he unfortunately tried to retaliate in unhealthy ways. As a parent, I know now that I should have stepped up the monitoring of my son's computer activities. I wish I had known the potential for this to occur and how to prevent it."

"Every school has an acceptable computer use policy," said Nadine Gilbert, Information Technology Planner for the Mississippi Department of Education. "Each year, teachers address on-line etiquette and personal safety. They talk about

personal information that students shouldn't give out. Students are provided with this every year, and before a student can utilize a school computer, they have to have a signed letter of agreement saying they'll abide by those rules."

Most parents respect their children's privacy and consider their computer time part of that privacy. A teenager comes home from school, goes into his/her room, and turns on the computer. They may spend hours there without a parent knowing what's going on.

In Louisiana, three high school students were arrested for cyberbullying. According to a report on WAFB News, the situation began when a 15 year old female student created a website featuring derogatory pictures of a 14 year old male student. The male student responded with his own web site, which featured poems so graphically violent that investigators said they "crossed the line." Both were arrested.

I-SAFE America, Inc. is a non-profit foundation whose mission is to educate and empower youth to safely and responsibly take control of their Internet experiences. Their website ([www.i-safe.org](http://www.i-safe.org)) offers these tips:

They also warn students against giving any identifying information (name, sex, age, address, school, teams) online; it only takes a little information for a predator to identify someone. Responsible adults do not pursue relationships with kids and teens.

I-Safe suggests that students take these steps online:

€ Make your username generic and anonymous.

€ Make your online profile generic and anonymous.

€ Know how to exit an inappropriate website.

€ Attachments in e-mails from strangers can contain Viruses and Worms.

€ Pictures are great to hand to a friend, but it's not cool to send them to an Internet "friend."

€ Posting your picture on the Internet gives hackers the chance to doctor your picture and make fun of you to everyone on the World Wide Web.

€ Chat room "friends" are not always who they say they are.

I-Safe points out that this is the first generation to grow up with the Internet.

"Technology only changes the advantages kids and teens have. It does not change the way you parent," the site says.

It offers these suggestions for parents:

€ Always keep your child's computer in an open area. Never allow a computer with Internet access in your child's bedroom.

€ Communicate. There is no better tool to bridge the Digital Divide.

- € Become a part of your child's online experience.
- € Respect your child's privacy.
- € Regularly review your computer files.
- € Teach your child the responsible use of online resources.
- € Talk to your child about online dangers. Let them know you are there to help them get out of a bad situation.
- € Educate yourself on the ins and outs of the Internet.
- € Talk to other parents about your experiences. It will help everyone.
- € Let your child know responsible adults do not pursue relationships with minors.

Samantha, the cyberbullying victim, agrees that parents have to play an active role in knowing what's going on on-line in their children's lives.

"It's not a matter of invading your child's privacy, it's a matter of being a parent," she said.

For more information on how to combat cyberbullying, visit the I-Safe website at [i-safe.org](http://i-safe.org). I-SAFE America is a non-profit foundation whose mission is to educate and empower youth to make their Internet experiences safe and responsible.