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Cyber World Bullying

By Connie Goddard

From The Illinois School Board Journal

A TEENAGE girl's hands decorated with iridescent blue nail polish type a nasty text message into a cell phone: "sooooo ugly, shoes 2" and "every1 H8S her."

The cover of a *Chicago Tribune Magazine* says it all about the most recent manifestation of an ancient phenomenon—bullying. The image represents two trends that present new challenges to counselors, teachers, and administrators—especially in middle and junior high schools: Girls are bullying more than ever before and it's gone electronic.

An expert in cyberbullying—as the latter is now called—suggests that girls are particularly drawn to electronic meanness.

"It's possible," wrote Jessica Reaves, the *Tribune* article's author, that girls "are simply responding, superficially, to a less generous, faster-paced, more cutthroat soci-

ety" by behaving more like—or worse than—boys.

And girls who are being bullied "totally lose their focus," said Barbara Kalina, who taught 7th grade for three decades. "Boys are more physical and overt. It's a self-esteem thing."

Kalina knows from experience what anthropologists know from research: males in most cultures (human or otherwise) bully others as a means of establishing a hierarchy. It's a rite of passage. Girls—or females of most species—indulge in similar behavior to attract male attention, which is probably why "mean" girls tend to be those with more social power. They focus on how their victim looks, picking off easy potential competitors by demeaning them.

In her article, Reaves admitted to having been a bully herself in

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fourth grade. “[E]ach of us more insecure than the next [circled] our weakest member and picked the living daylight out of her.” The memory now makes her blush with shame, but she ended her article by posing a good question: Is some of this behavior hard-wired into us?

Hard-Wired to Bully

Bullying “is a specific form of aggression and one that is used deliberately to secure resources,” noted Anthony Pellegrini, a University of Minnesota psychologist, in *Bullying in American Schools*. It is a “way in which boys gain and maintain dominance status with peers” and is particularly prevalent during adolescence, “a time when youngsters challenge adult roles and values as they search for and construct their own identities.”

Dominance is “renegotiated” as individuals make a transition from one social group to another, in this case from the more secure environment of the elementary school into larger secondary schools. Hence, bullying is most prevalent in middle schools, when students experience rapid body changes, gain interest in the opposite sex, and adjust roles they may have assumed when younger.

Bullying by boys is usually proactive and often physically aggressive, while bullying by girls is more often “relational” or indirect. “Mean girls” with cell phones are more likely to comment caustically about

another girl’s looks or dress; boys will harass or attack someone on the playground.

Pellegrini cited behaviorists who claim that Charles Darwin explained these phenomena as aspects of sexual selection. Males and females use different strategies to attract mates. Being larger and stronger, males use physical aggression to gain dominance among other males—usually for who gets to mate with the most appealing female.

Females, on the other hand, being physically smaller, “are more concerned with protecting themselves and their future offspring. Thus, they choose dominant mates and, when they are aggressive against their peers, do so indirectly.”

Reaves acknowledged that genes may influence bullying behavior: “I’ve resigned myself to the fact that Mean Girls will never disappear completely. Social Darwinism, which is simply a fancy term for people walking all over each other, may be, for better or worse, intrinsic to the human condition.”

Addressing the Impact

School officials nevertheless feel a certain obligation to minimize—or at least monitor—bullying’s destructive impact. This became particularly apparent when a Secret Service report issued after the Columbine High School murders noted that the perpetrators of that and other school slaughters felt they had been bullied when younger. ►

Cyberbullying and more direct aggression by girls also bring broader attention to the psychological damage bullying can do, particularly to children not well protected by nurturing homes.

Gary Weilbacher, a school counselor, dates the current interest in bullying to 2000, the year after Columbine. He thinks bullying has taken on a new meaning: "When I was a kid, we had bullies," but they were regarded as just a normal part of growing up. Now, given the rash of school shootings, "we may be less tolerant."

Weilbacher also wonders whether the increase in bullying—or attention to it—is a reflection of how society has become so much more regulated. "Kids today may not have an outlet to negotiate disputes among themselves," Weilbacher said. "They have become more dependent upon adults."

"School is supposed to be a healthy place, emotionally and socially," he added, but "the more impersonal the school environment, the more bullying you will see."

And the current emphasis on testing may contribute to a sense of insecurity. "Though we recognize the importance of emotional safety, there is so much pressure for academic performance, schools are anything but emotionally safe," Weilbacher said.

This is most apparent in schools where children need an emotionally secure environment because they

lack one at home. "In schools that are successful, their concern with testing is minimal; their concern is with the kids," he said.

These various contradictions lead to an interesting conundrum: Bullying may be better understood and schools more committed to diminishing it, yet the environment may be encouraging it, both directly and indirectly.

Recent research suggests that teachers and administrators feel they can control bullying in their school, but the Internet makes it more difficult to monitor. Widely available electronics also make both bullying and retaliation easier.

Tendencies and Deterrence

Until Norwegian researcher Daniel Olweus began studying bullying in the 1970s, neither researchers nor school officials paid it much attention. Then increases in the amount and severity of school violence in Europe and later in the U.S. persuaded many to take the subject more seriously.

The Secret Service study on Columbine spurred school districts to respond, according to Dorothy Espelage, an educational psychologist at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. Some adopted a "zero tolerance" policy, in some cases running afoul of compulsory attendance laws. These policies were also overly rigid and difficult to enforce.

Now, Espelage warns, there's a

new danger that untested anti-bullying programs will be adopted wholesale without considering whether they suit a particular district's needs.

A better policy would deal with the complexities of the issues involved, advised Topper Steinman, a school counselor who now consults with school administrators.

"Couple disturbing events that grab headlines with changes in family structure and social norms, and we have an explosive combination," he said. "We are too quick to advise students to 'just say no.' This is a very shallow strategy, and it is not fair to the kids."

Steinman suggests creating a culture where students can believe in themselves and respect others. "Young people need to be equipped with strategies so they can respond without feeling violent."

A 2007 survey of urban school climate by the National School Boards Association found at least some good news. Three-quarters of teachers surveyed felt they were able to discourage school bullying, even though a similar percentage felt that they could not stop it outright.

Middle school administrators, on the other hand, feel that their teachers are more efficacious in this regard than the teachers do: Nearly 95 percent of administrators felt their teachers could stop someone from being a bully, but only 65 percent of middle school teachers felt

they could. Two-thirds of the teachers surveyed also reported that they address bullying behavior in their classrooms at least once a month.

If teachers find themselves having to address bullying and other forms of school violence more often now, other studies suggest that some aspects of bullying do not change, and that the tendencies in Western European schools are roughly similar to those in the U.S.

Psychologists at Rowan University in New Jersey report that being bullied is associated with negative consequences to mental health, particularly anxiety and depression.

Figures on how many students contend that they have been bullied vary. A large-scale U.S. study, conducted in 1998 and involving more than 15,000 students in grades 6 through 10, found that 30 percent of students report being involved directly with bullying. Thirteen percent reported being perpetrators, 11 percent victims, and the rest both. (That bullies report being victimized as well is a common finding and seems to apply to more males.)

A more recent smaller-scale study of black and Hispanic 6th-through 12th-graders in an urban Texas district found the percentage of victims and victim-bullies similar to the earlier study. (For the most recent compilation of facts about bullying, visit the National Youth Violence Prevention Center Web site at www.safeyouth.org.) ►

Using Technology

Cyberbullying “is taking humiliation to a frightening new level,” according to *Our Children* magazine, published by the national Parent Teacher Association. Cyberbullying’s anonymity is one reason. Another is that what is said online can be protected as free speech.

Also, because most of it originates on home computers, school administrators resist getting involved. But everyone leaves footprints in cyberspace.

Parents or teachers who find a child being taunted can trace the origin of Web pages, e-mails, and instant messages through Internet service providers (ISPs) or special services such as www.whois.com.

Popular Web services such as Facebook and MySpace attempt to monitor what students post. However, both also make retaliation easier, and they facilitate the assumption of a false identity—both by bullies and victims. Because online, bedroom-based battles can carry over to school the next day, educational psychologist Espelage suggests that school administrators get a MySpace account of their own.

“This is their life,” Espelage noted. “This is where students are finding their identity, where they are terrorizing each other.” She worries that cyberbullying will “contribute to a whole generation of socially maladjusted adults.”

School administrators, worried about how to respond to this threat,

can consult materials prepared by Oregon-based lawyer Nancy Willard, whose Center for Safe and Responsible Internet Use offers helpful information at www.csriu.org. Among other things, Willard’s research has confirmed that cyberbullies tend to be the members of the “in-crowd,” rather than the socially maladjusted, as previously thought. She also claims an interesting, if not surprising, gender difference: Though girls do more direct taunting online, boys’ online violence tends to be through gaming, with fictional characters.

Willard noted that online communication can facilitate student harassment of school staff members, too. Students can, for example, cast aspersions on a teacher’s sexuality or competence, without realizing that their comments are usually traceable.

Willard outlines legal issues administrators face. When, for example, can a school search or seize student records and files? How does free speech apply to the Internet?

Her advice: “It is clearly necessary to distinguish between the mere expression of views, words, symbols, or thoughts that some people, or even many people, find offensive and material that has created a hostile environment that is sufficiently serious to deny or limit a student’s ability to participate in or benefit from an educational program or a situation that could cause substantial disorder, including violence.”

“Re-Imaging” Bullying

As school counselor Steinman noted, our biological and social programming—along with our competitive culture—suggest we may not be able to eliminate the hierarchies we establish among ourselves. Though intensified by technology and the rather violent temper of our times, bullying seems part of our makeup.

Ronald Jacobson, a teacher and researcher at the University of Washington, asks whether this highly undemocratic tendency among us might be altered. Could teachers and schools help the bully to no longer desire to bully?

He ponders whether specific types of relationships could be cultivated in schools to head off bullying before it begins. Though Jacobson contends that bullies' behavior results from “rational decision making,” he also asks whether bullies and their victims lack the social skills necessary for peaceful coexistence. Further, might schools institute incentives that would encourage other students to apply social pressure that would diminish bullying?

Although he does not discuss its possible hard-wired nature, Jacobson wrote that to eradicate bullying, schools need to find ways to address issues of status and power, identity, security, and competition. Might it be possible to help students split their need for self-assertion from their need for recognition, so

that they do not have to get the latter at the expense of others? Might schools help students thrive in ways that foster internalized security, thus lessening their need to dominate?

None of these are easy questions to answer. But they do suggest that bullying—along with other social problems schools face—needs to be addressed by the culture at large.

Reaves' *Tribune Magazine* article pointed out that Chicago's Girl Scout organization has taken up combating meanness, electronic or otherwise, as its cause. And our neighbors in Canada might also have some lessons to offer. The cities of Toronto, Montreal, and Vancouver have become as diverse as any in the U.S. This, and a cultural tendency to stress couth rather than competition, may have led Canadian educators to rethink bullying.

Among them is Joseph Kirman, an author of books on ethics in schools, who teaches at McGill University. He argued that bullying is a human rights violation and thus should be part of the social studies curriculum and proposed one that does just that. He warned, though, that any such curriculum can be a “double-edged sword.”

If students are taught that bullying is wrong and a violation of others' human rights, he said, bullies must be quickly disciplined. Otherwise teachers and administrators appear to be hypocrites and encourage students' contempt for authority. 