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As Bullies Go Digital, Parents Play Catch-Up

By JAN HOFFMAN

Ninth grade was supposed to be a fresh start for Marie's son: new school, new children. Yet by last October, he had become withdrawn. Marie prodded. And prodded again. Finally, he told her.

"The kids say I'm saying all these nasty things about them on [Facebook](#)," he said. "They don't believe me when I tell them I'm not on Facebook."

But apparently, he was.

Marie, a medical technologist and single mother who lives in Newburyport, Mass., searched Facebook. There she found what seemed to be her son's page: his name, a photo of him grinning while running — and, on his public wall, sneering comments about teenagers he scarcely knew.

Someone had forged his identity online and was bullying others in his name.

Students began to shun him. Furious and frightened, Marie contacted school officials. After expressing their concern, they told her they could do nothing. It was an off-campus matter.

But Marie was determined to find out who was making her son miserable and to get them to stop. In choosing that course, she would become a target herself. When she and her son learned who was behind the scheme, they would both feel the sharp sting of betrayal. Undeterred, she would insist that the culprits be punished.

It is difficult enough to support one's child through a siege of schoolyard bullying. But the lawlessness of the Internet, its potential for casual, breathtaking cruelty, and its capacity to cloak a bully's identity all present slippery new challenges to this transitional generation of analog parents.

Desperate to protect their children, parents are floundering even as they scramble to catch up with the technological sophistication of the next generation.

Like Marie, many parents turn to schools, only to be rebuffed because officials think they do not have the authority to intercede. Others may call the police, who set high bars to investigate.

Contacting Web site administrators or Internet service providers can be a daunting, protracted process.

When parents know the aggressor, some may contact that child's parent, stumbling through an evolving etiquette in the landscape of social awkwardness. Going forward, they struggle with when and how to supervise their adolescents' forays on the Internet.

Marie, who asked that her middle name and her own nickname for her son, D.C., be used to protect his identity, finally went to the police. The force's cybercrimes specialist, Inspector Brian Brunault, asked if she really wanted to pursue the matter.

"He said that once it was in the court system," Marie said, "they would have to prosecute. It could probably be someone we knew, like a friend of D.C.'s or a neighbor. Was I prepared for that?"

Marie's son urged her not to go ahead. But Marie was adamant. "I said yes."

Parental Fears

One afternoon last spring, [Parry Aftab](#), a lawyer and expert on cyberbullying, addressed seventh graders at George Washington Middle School in Ridgewood, N.J.

"How many of you have ever been cyberbullied?" she asked.

The hands crept up, first a scattering, then a thicket. Of 150 students, 68 raised their hands. They came forward to offer rough tales from social networking sites, instant messaging and texting. Ms. Aftab stopped them at the 20th example.

Then she asked: How many of your parents know how to help you?

A scant three or four hands went up.

Cyberbullying is often legally defined as repeated harassment online, although in popular use, it can describe even a sharp-elbowed, gratuitous swipe. Cyberbullies themselves resist easy categorization: the anonymity of the Internet gives cover not only to schoolyard-bully types but to victims themselves, who feel they can retaliate without getting caught.

But online bullying can be more psychologically savage than schoolyard bullying. The Internet erases inhibitions, with adolescents often going further with slights online than in person.

"It's not the swear words," Inspector Brunault said. "They all swear. It's how they gang up on one individual at a time. 'Go cut yourself.' Or 'you are sooo ugly' — but with 10 u's, 10 g's, 10 l's, like they're all screaming it at someone."

The cavalier meanness can be chilling. On a California teenage boy's Facebook wall, someone writes that his 9-year-old sister is "a fat bitch." About the proud Facebook photos posted by a 13-year-old New York girl, another girl comments: "hideous" and "this pic makes me throwup a lil." If she had to choose between the life of an animal and that of the girl in the photos, she continues, she would choose the animal's, because "yeah, at least they're worth something."

This is a dark, vicious side of adolescence, enabled and magnified by technology. Yet because so many horrified parents are bewildered by the technology, they think they are helpless to address the problems it engenders.

"I'm not seeing signs that parents are getting more savvy with technology," said [Russell A. Sabella](#), former president of the American School Counselor Association. "They're not taking the time and effort to educate themselves, and as a result, they've made it another responsibility for schools. But schools didn't give the kids their cellphones."

As bullying, or at least conflict, becomes more prevalent in the digital world, parents are beginning to turn out for community lectures, offered by psychologists, technology experts and the police. One weekday night this fall, Meghan Quigley, a mother from Duxbury, Mass., was among the 100 or so parents who attended a panel featuring [Elizabeth Englander](#), a psychologist who consulted on the new Massachusetts bullying law.

"I absolutely have to be much more techno savvy than I want to be," said Mrs. Quigley, who does not know how to text, although two of her children use cellphones just to text their friends. "But it is overwhelming to me."

These lectures typically combine technology primers so elementary that elementary-school children might snicker, with advanced course work in 21st-century child-rearing.

Dr. Englander reminded parents that while children may be nimble with technology, they lack the maturity to understand its consequences.

Then she demonstrated how to adjust Facebook privacy settings. Many parents peered at her slides, taking notes.

Don't set too much stock in those settings, she said: " 'Privacy' is just a marketing term." A child's Facebook friend, she noted, could easily forward the "private" information.

In a study last year of 312 freshmen at Bridgewater State University, Dr. Englander found that 75 percent reported that during a typical high school day they had used their cellphones for voice communication 30 percent of the time or less, preferring to use them for texting, sending photos and videos, and surfing the Internet.

This is not a “phone,” Dr. Englander told the parents who looked, collectively, shellshocked. What you’ve given your child “is a mobile computer.”

If their children get caught in a crisis, she said, parents should preserve the evidence, by taking a screenshot of the offending material.

A mother timidly raised her hand. “How do I make a screenshot?”

The Bully Next Door

Throughout the fall, the Facebook profile set up in D.C.’s name taunted students: “At least I don’t take pics of myself in the mirror like a homosexual midget,” wrote “D.C.” Also, “you smell weird.” And “ur such a petaphile.” At school, students would belligerently ask D.C. why he was picking fights on Facebook. He would eat lunch alone, and skipped some school, insisting that he was ill.

“I would always ask him, ‘Are you having a good day?’ ” Marie said. “So he stopped talking to me about anything at school. He was afraid I would make more trouble for him. But the real victim was being ostracized more than the kids who were being bullied on his Facebook page.”

She would call Inspector Brunault weekly. Last fall, the detective had to subpoena Facebook for the address of the computer linked to the forged profile. Then he had to subpoena Comcast, the Internet service provider, for the home address of the computer’s owner.

Facebook has since made it simpler to report malicious activity. Although Facebook declined to make its head of security available for an interview, a spokesman replied by e-mail that if Facebook determines that a report of an impostor profile is legitimate, “We will provide a limited amount of data that helps the person take steps to repair his or her identity.”

Finally, in January, Inspector Brunault told Marie he was getting close. He visited the home address supplied by Comcast. When he left, he had two more names and addresses.

A few weeks later, he called Marie.

Just before dinner, Marie broke the news to D.C. Two culprits were 14; one was 13. After learning the first two names, D.C. said: “Those guys have never liked me. I don’t know why.”

But the third boy had been a friend since preschool. His father was a sports coach of D.C.’s.

D.C. was silent. Then he teared up.

Finally, he said, “Do you mean to tell me, Mom, that they hate me so much that they would take

the time to do this?”

Inspector Brunault asked the boys why they had done it. That summer, they replied, they had been reading Facebook profiles of people’s dogs, which they found hilarious. They decided to make up a profile. They picked D.C. “because he was a loner and a follower.”

Although the police did not release the boys’ names because they are juveniles, word seeped through town. In the middle of the night, Marie received anonymous calls. “They told me my son should just suck it up,” she recalled. “They said he would be a mama’s boy. They would rant and then they would hang up.”

Contacting the Other Parent

After Marie learned the identities of her son’s cyberbullies, she did not call their parents. She was so incensed that she communicated only through official go-betweens, like the police and prosecutors.

But some parents prefer to resolve the issue privately, by contacting the bully’s family. Psychologists do not recommend that approach with schoolyard bullying, because it can devolve into conflicting narratives. With cyberbullying, a parent’s proof of baldly searing digital exchanges can reframe that difficult conversation.

Parents who present the other parents with a printout of their child’s most repugnant moments should be prepared for minimization, even denial.

Maj. Glenn Woodson’s daughter, Sierra, has a shortened leg because of a congenital condition. One night, when she was in sixth grade, she received a text message showing a stick figure of her lying prostrate, eyes crossed out, another girl holding a bloody blade over the body. It had been sent by three girls in Sierra’s grade.

Major Woodson, who lives on an Army base in Monterey, Calif., contacted the military police. They had a stern sit-down with the families of the three girls. Teachers held a workshop on cyberbullying. Two families apologized to the Woodsons.

Finally, the mother of the third girl, the instigator, called. “ ‘It isn’t her fault,’ she said to my wife,” Major Woodson said. “The mom said: ‘I think this is way overblown. My daughter is being punished and she’s not the only one who did it.’ ”

The mother did not apologize.

What may be offensive in one household may be just a shoulder shrug in another.

In the San Francisco Bay Area, Christine, who, like many parents interviewed for this article asked that her last name not be used to protect her child's identity, selected a school for her daughter largely because it eschewed technology. But when her daughter was in sixth grade, a classmate e-mailed her links to pornography sites.

Christine called the boy's mother. "I asked her to get her son to stop," Christine said. "She apologized, and her son wrote us a letter of apology. "

But the boy's father disagreed. "He refused to put limits on the kid," said Christine, who works in marketing. " 'Oh, no, he needs total freedom and he can use his best judgment.' "

When well-intentioned observers intervene, they can find themselves scorned.

Jill Brown, a Westfield, N.J., mother who lectures on cyberbullying through her company, [Generation Text](#), saw something online that disturbed her: a Facebook group sniping at a young girl titled "I Stalk (name deleted) And Her Junior Boyfriend." The group had some 500 "friends."

The mother of a group founder was a friend of Ms. Brown's.

Ms. Brown suggested her friend look at the site. She asked her not to let her daughter know who blew the whistle. Her friend was polite but distant.

By the next day, "The girl had defriended me on Facebook," Ms. Brown said. "I texted her mother seven times. She ignored me."

Three weeks later, the friend stopped by Ms. Brown's house for a trunk show. When Ms. Brown asked what had happened to the Facebook group, the woman airily dismissed it as an adolescent joke.

Parent-to-parent confrontations can also backfire against the child.

In a small Western resort town, Gerrie's daughter, Michaela, 14, received an obscene, threatening text from a boy who was the star of her ski team. He accused Michaela of having told his girlfriend that he was secretly dating someone else and vowed to ruin Michaela's life.

Michaela stared at the cellphone, tears rolling down her face. She had not informed on him.

Gerrie's husband called the boy's mother. After seeing the corrosive text, the mother took away her son's cellphone for a week.

The boy made good on his threat. He spread a false rumor that his mother wouldn't allow him to race, and that Michaela's snitching was to blame. The news erupted on Facebook.

Ski team members ostracized Michaela. She rode the lifts by herself. Before team practices, she would quake and vomit.

“I did what I thought was right to help my daughter,” said Gerrie, an art teacher, “and I only ended up making it worse. But when your kid gets a text like that, what are you supposed to do?”

Dr. Sabella, the former president of the American School Counselor Association, says that parents should meet in public places, like the library or a guidance counselor’s office, rather than addressing the conflict by e-mail. And the reporting parents should be willing to acknowledge that their child may have played a role in the dispute. To ease tension, suggests Dr. Englander, an expert on aggression reduction, offer the cyberbully’s parent a face-saving explanation.

Her model script?

“I need to show you what your son typed to my daughter online. He may have meant it as a joke. But my daughter was really devastated. A lot of kids type things online that they would never dream of saying in person. And it can all be easily misinterpreted.”

When that conversation is handled deftly, parents can achieve a reasonable outcome. The 14-year-old daughter of Rolin, a Nashville musician, began a relationship with a boy in her church group. But soon his texts and Facebook comments turned sexually graphic and coercive. When she backed away, he tried to isolate her. At a church retreat, he surreptitiously sent texts from her phone to three of her friends, all boys, saying she didn’t want to see them again.

She had no idea what he had done: he had deleted the [text messages](#).

Those texts stunned her friends. Rolin pieced together what happened and blocked the boy’s number on his daughter’s phone. The boy simply borrowed his friends’ phones. Rolin called the boy’s parents, who agreed to sit down with both teenagers. “It would have been easier to send an e-mail,” Rolin said. “And yes, it was sure awkward to be talking to this 14-year-old kid in front of his parents about what he wrote to my daughter. But we had the proof.

“My goal wasn’t to polish my shotgun. It’s not about a show of force but a show of presence. I said, ‘If you want to be friends with her, you can’t text her and you can’t use another boy’s phone.’ ”

The boy’s father said Rolin had been easier on his son than the father would have been, had the roles been reversed.

Eventually, the relationship cooled on its own. “But I still have his number blocked on her phone,” Rolin said.

When the Bully Is Your Child

After the police arrested the boys who usurped D.C.'s identity, the parents wrote Marie awkward apology letters. Only one mother phoned, in tears.

No matter how parents see their children, learning of the cruelties they may perpetrate is jarring and can feel like an indictment of their child-rearing.

One afternoon two years ago, Judy, a recent widow in Palm Beach County, Fla., who had been finishing her college degree, helping a professor research cyberbullying, and working in an office, got a call from the middle school.

“Your daughter is involved in a cyberbullying incident,” the assistant principal said. “Come down immediately.”

Her daughter and two others had made a [MySpace](#) page about another middle-schooler, saying she was a “whore,” with a finger pointing to her private parts. The young teenagers printed out copies and flung them at students.

Judy rushed to school. Her daughter, a sweet, straight-A student, was waiting in the guidance counselor's office, her arms crossed defiantly.

“I said to her, ‘This is a human being,’ ” Judy recalled. “ ‘This girl will be destroyed for the rest of her life!’ And my daughter just said: ‘I don't care. It's all true.’ And I bawled while she just sat there.”

The school suspended Judy's daughter for three days.

“I did not call the target, I'm ashamed to say,” Judy recalled. “I didn't know how to get hold of her. The school wouldn't give me her name, and my daughter wouldn't talk to me.”

Once Judy got over her shock, she said, “I had to accept that my daughter had really done this and it was so ugly.”

Judy took away her daughter's computer, television and cellphone for months. She tried talking with her. Nothing. There were weeks of screaming and slammed doors.

Meanwhile, the girl's grades dropped. She was caught with [marijuana](#). Judy realized that her daughter had long been bottling up many family stressors: illness and death, financial worries, her mother's exhausting schedule. In reaction, the girl had been misbehaving, including doing the very thing her mother found so abhorrent: cyberbullying.

In time, as Judy took long walks with her daughter, the girl began to resemble the child Judy thought she had known.

When her daughter's grades improved, Judy bought her a puppy. "A lot of people will disagree with me," Judy said, "but I thought, this is a way for her to be responsible for something other than herself, something that would be dependent on her for all its needs."

The girl doted on the puppy. One day, Judy asked: " 'Would you want anyone to be mean to your dog? Throw rocks at Foxy?' "

Her daughter recoiled. Judy continued: " 'How do you think other parents feel when something mean happens to their children?' Then she broke down crying. That's when I think she finally understood what she had done."

Supervisor or Spy?

Should teenagers have the same expectation of privacy from parents in their online accounts that an earlier generation had with their little red diaries and keys?

Software programs that speak to parental fears are manifold. Parents can block Web sites, getting alerts when the child searches for them. They can also monitor cellphones: a program called Mobile Spy promises to let parents see all text messages, track G.P.S. locations and record phone activity without the child knowing.

Parents who never believed they would resort to such tactics find themselves doing so.

Christine, the Bay Area mother whose daughter was sent links to pornography, struggled with how to supervise her daughter online. The challenge was compounded because students in the girl's grade were playing sexualized Truth or Dare games. Her daughter had a leading role.

Christine cut off her daughter's Internet access for months, mandating that she write schoolwork by hand. Over time, the girl earned back computer privileges. Christine also moved her to a parochial school. Then her daughter went on Facebook.

"We didn't know much about Facebook," said Christine, "but we set up serious monitoring." One program limited computer time; another blocked certain sites. Christine even had her daughter's Facebook password, so she could read the girl's private messages.

That was how Christine discovered 82 exchanges between her daughter, a freshman, and a popular senior boy at the school. Her daughter offered him oral sex if he promised not to tell friends. The boy wrote back, "Would it be O.K. if I tell friends but not the ones at school?"

Christine's daughter now sees a therapist. Christine herself uses a keystroke logger, software that records everything her two daughters write and see on their home computer. "It's uncomfortable," Christine said. "But my older daughter has demonstrated less than zero common sense. The level of trust between us is much lower than I'd like it to be. But I also think she was relieved that we caught her."

"My younger daughter calls me a stalker. She says we mistrust her because of what her sister did. That's true. But my eyes are open, and I won't go back."

[Studies](#) show that children tend to side with Christine's younger daughter. Last April in an omnibus review of studies addressing youth, privacy and reputation, a [report](#) by the Berkman Center for Internet and Society at Harvard noted that parents who checked their children's online communications were seen as "controlling, invasive and 'clueless.'" Young people, one study noted, had a notion of an online public viewership "that excludes the family."

Conversely, studies show that more parents are heading in Christine's direction. A recent [study](#) of teenagers and phones by the [Pew Research Center](#) Internet and American Life Project said that parents regard their children's phones as a "parenting tool." About two-thirds said they checked the content of their children's phones (whether teenagers pre-emptively delete texts is a different matter). Two-thirds of the parents said they took away phones as punishment. Almost half said they used phones to check on their child's whereabouts.

Anne Collier, editor of [NetFamilyNews.org](#), a parenting and technology news blog, noted that stealth monitoring may be warranted in rare cases, when a parent suspects a child is at serious risk, such as being contacted by an unknown adult.

But generally, she said, spying can have terrible repercussions:

"If you're monitoring your child secretly," Ms. Collier said, "what do you say to the kid when you find something untoward? Then the conversation turns into 'you invaded my privacy,' which is not what you intended to talk about."

Experts do not agree on guidelines about monitoring. But most concur on one principle:

"There is no one technology that will keep your kids safe," said Dr. [Larry D. Rosen](#), a psychology professor at [California State University](#), Dominguez Hills, who writes about raising a tech savvy generation. "The kids are smart enough to get around any technology you might use."

Dr. Englander installed keystroke logger software on her family computer. She uses it less as a monitoring device than as a means to teach her sons about digital safety. The Post-it on the family's computer reads: "Don't Forget That Mom Sees Everything You Do Online." She does not,

in fact, check frequently. She just wants her boys to think before they hit the “send” button, so they understand that there is no privacy online, from her, or anyone.

Last spring, the Essex County, Mass., district attorney’s office sent the three boys who forged D.C.’s Facebook identity to a juvenile diversion program for first-time nonviolent offenders.

If the boys adhere to conditions for a year, they will not be prosecuted. According to a spokesman, those conditions include: a five-page paper on cyberbullying; letters of apology to D.C. and everyone they insulted in his name on Facebook; attending two Internet safety presentations; community service; no access to the Internet except to complete schoolwork. Their computers must be in a public family space, not the bedroom.

Marie, who reports that D.C. has a new circle of friends and good grades, is reasonably satisfied with the sentencing conditions.

But compliance is another matter. She believes that at least one boy is already back on Facebook.

Overburdened school administrators and, increasingly, police officers who unravel juvenile cybercrimes, say it is almost impossible for them to monitor regulations imposed on teenagers.

As with the boys who impersonated D.C. online, a district attorney’s spokeswoman said, “That monitoring is up to the parents.”