R U Safe?

Who better to teach young adolescents about online dangers than other adolescents?

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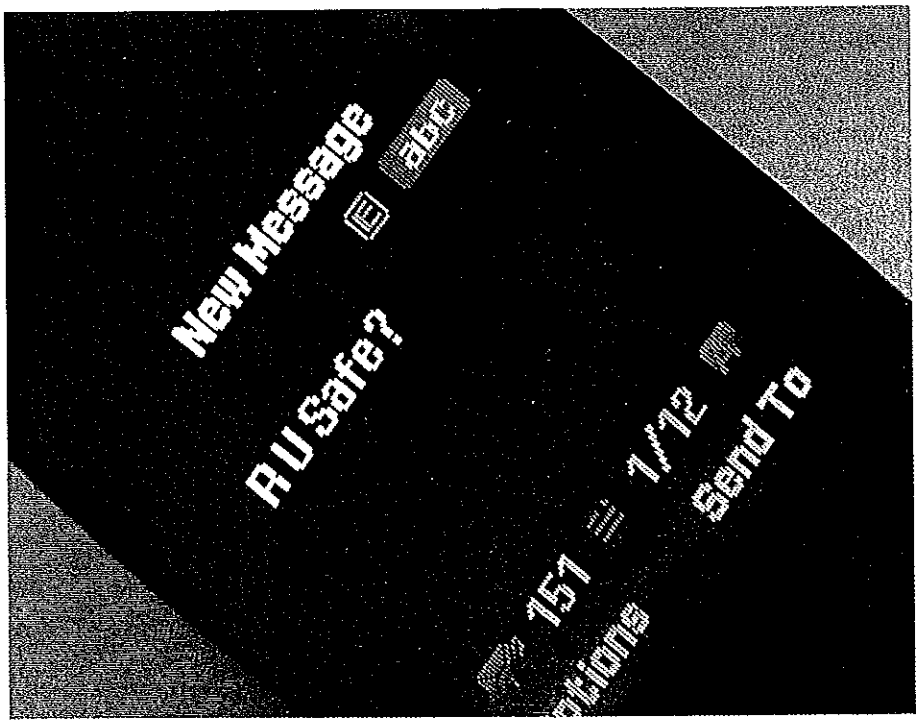

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The 6th graders were unanimously grateful for learning about this issue in the safety of the classroom.

It's not just on the bus or during recess anymore. Bullying can happen the minute our students wake up, can creep in during class time, and can continue after the school day ends—and then follow them home, right into their bedrooms.

My generation was safe from the pressures of peer judgment and abuse once we arrived home from school (the class bully would never actually call your house back then). But cyberspace has no boundaries, and students today have only their wits to protect them from teasing, harassment, and threats that can reach them online anytime.

What I call *cyberabuse* is rampant at school, adding to the old-fashioned face-to-face taunting and power plays that take place among students. (I use the term *cyber* rather than *Internet* to include all mobile communication devices.) Such abuse even goes on as we teach. I once confiscated cell phones from two students who were texting each other during another teacher's class. They showed me the conversation, which was full of insults and vulgar language.

According to a series of studies conducted by the *Journal of Adolescent Health*, more than 80 percent of adolescents own at least one form of new media technology, which they use to communicate with one another, present information about themselves, and share new media creations. The studies examined the relationships among bullying, harassment, and aggression among youth and how these issues translated to electronic media. According to one of these studies (Kowalski & Limber, 2007), which surveyed almost 4,000 middle school students, 11 percent had been electronically bullied at least once in the two months preceding the questionnaire, and 7 percent admitted to being both a bully and a victim. Another study (Williams & Guerra, 2007) showed that electronic bullying peaks in middle school and is inflicted most often through instant messaging, although bullying occurs frequently through text messaging, e-mails, chat rooms, and content on Web sites.

The *Journal of Adolescent Health* research revealed that some state education departments—in Florida, South Carolina, Utah, Oregon, and Washington—have created policies to combat

online harassment. (David-Ferdon & Hertz, 2007). But many of the authors agreed that stopping adolescents' use of electronic media in school or installing blocking and filtering software does not adequately address this pervasive problem.

Ideally, we should convince all students to abstain from bullying, and we certainly must try to do so. But it is equally crucial to arm students with the tools they need to protect themselves from bullying, particularly now that bullies take advantage of far-reaching online tools. As a middle school teacher, I've found that a powerful way to arm students against cyberbullying is to have them research some aspect of this phenomenon and then teach others what they have learned—or directly experienced—as they navigate the online world.

Getting Students Talking. . .

During my first year teaching media literacy at the Pierre Van Cortlandt Middle School in Croton-on-Hudson, New York, I developed a unit on social networking sites and cyberbullying. For the culminating project, 8th grade students wrote and performed skits portraying a cyberbullying incident, including the motivation for the incident, the consequences, and any resolution the players came to. "Can we curse?" students asked, amazed that I wanted them to show the real deal. My response: Make it realistic.

On the day students presented their skits to their classmates, I called in some reserves: the school psychologist, guidance counselor, student assistance counselor, and our school's drug abuse resistance education officer (a member of our local law enforcement department). The skits raised important issues that captured every student's interest: body

The Student Guide to Stamping Out Cyberabuse

The 150 8th grade students at Pierre Van Cortlandt Middle School collaboratively wrote these definitions of aggressive communication practices in cyberspace, as well as tips for handling each one.

Flaming. When someone insults someone else, usually by e-mail, instant message, or text message. To prevent flaming, do not respond, save the messages so you can show a trusted adult, and don't worry if the message is from someone you don't know or recognize; there are ways to track the person down.

Phishing. An attempt to get your personal information by pretending to be a site you are familiar with or trust. Always be sure you know where your e-mails come from. Don't give information over the Internet to sites that don't look valid.

Cyberbullying. A child bullying another child on the Internet. Bullying involves repeated put-downs, insults, and threats, with the emphasis on *repeated.* If you get bullied, tell an adult that you trust. To avoid this situation, do NOT talk to people on the Internet whom you don't know.

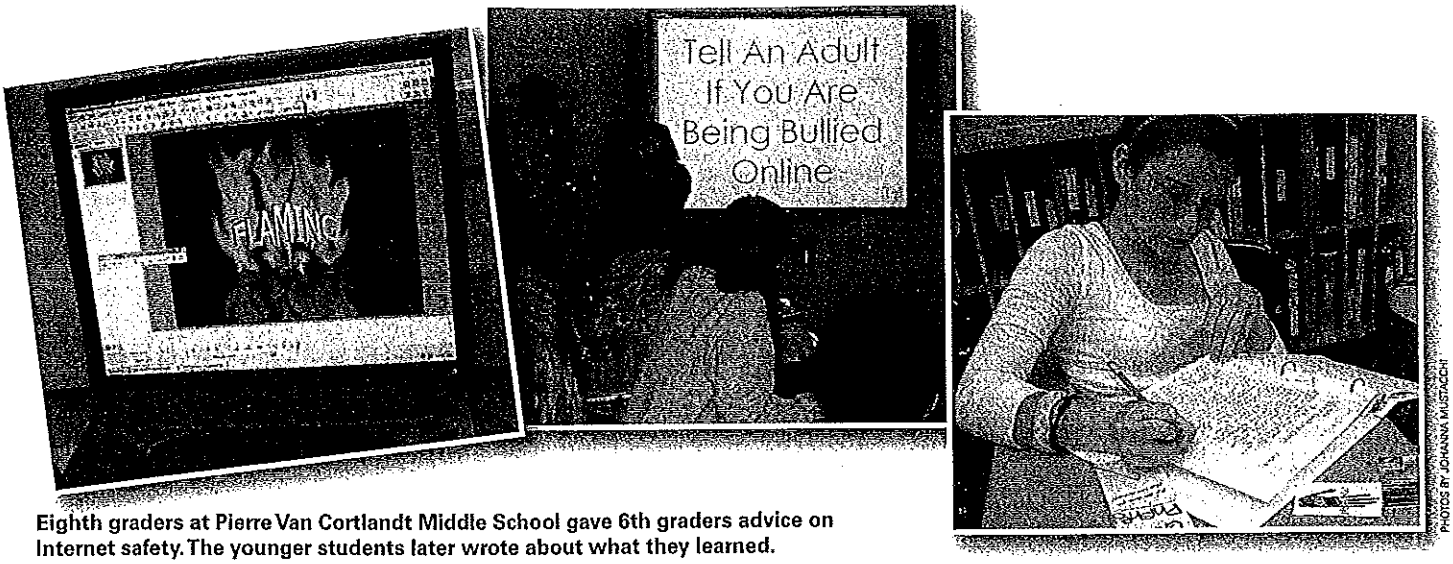
Cyberharassment. Harassment through the Internet that involves an adult. An adult can harass a child, a child can harass an adult, and an adult can harass another adult.

Cyberbullying or harassment by proxy. (1) When cyberbullies get someone else (or several people) to do their dirty work, or (2) When a bully intentionally provokes a victim to lash back to get the victim in trouble. If this happens to you, don't lash back. Contact your Internet service provider, talk to an adult, or talk to your friends about it.

Online Grooming. When a predator builds an online relationship with a child by giving compliments or a "shoulder to lean on" or sending gifts until the child trusts the predator. Typical "grooming" lines include

- Where is the computer in the house?
- Are your parents around much?
- You can always talk to me.
- I'm always here for you.
- You don't deserve how they treat you.
- You have a great personality.
- You're beautiful. You should be a model.

To protect yourself from a groomer, (1) always know whom you are talking to online, (2) don't give out personal information, (3) don't post seductive or inappropriate pictures of yourself or others online, (4) never meet up in person with anyone you meet online, and (5) talk with your parents if you feel suspicious about something online.



Eighth graders at Pierre Van Cortlandt Middle School gave 6th graders advice on Internet safety. The younger students later wrote about what they learned.

image, "stealing" boyfriends and girlfriends, and threats of violence. They also raised anxious questions. My professional colleagues provided advice for students, and the police officer explained legal consequences and how extensively the police will get involved.

Many parents thanked the school for exposing their children to these issues as part of their education. And when school personnel saw how much students had to say—and ask—about online bullying, the seeds were sown for more comprehensive teaching about cybercitizenship. Principal Barbara Ulm had already received numerous requests for help from parents of students in 5th and 6th grades who had been targeted in cyberspace by other students. She asked me to develop a full-blown Internet safety curriculum for the school's 6th, 7th, and 8th graders.

. . . And Getting Them Teaching

When I began implementing this curriculum the next fall, I noticed how much the 8th graders knew and were eager to impart to one another—with almost desperate urgency. As if riding a roller-coaster, students relayed stories and advice to one another, hitting highs and lows at breakneck speed. They were experts in some aspects of online interaction and risks but complete novices in others. I realized that their knowledge and thirst to exchange information provided a rare opportunity. So I charged my 8th grade students with the job of teaching my 6th graders.

As any middle school teacher knows, there is a vast difference in development between a 6th grader and an 8th grader. The first is a child; the second a young adult. The first wants to emulate the second; 6th graders literally and figuratively look up to their older schoolmates. Most 8th graders realize this and feel a tangible sense of responsibility as role models. These are perfect conditions for motivating older students to present information on a public safety issue—and getting younger students to take it seriously.

One research study showed that electronic bullying peaks in middle school.

Eighth graders first learn *netiquette*—appropriate, courteous online behavior and communication. Students discuss their own definitions of appropriate online behavior. My 8th graders have identified a number of rules, including (1) If you wouldn't say it to the person's face, don't say it online; (2) Be careful with sarcasm—it can be misread; and (3) Be extra careful about what you say online because your audience can't hear tone or see facial expressions.

I then describe certain deviations from appropriate behavior and how to recognize these deviations and safeguard against becoming a victim or perpetrator. I divide 8th graders into groups and make each group responsible for researching one subtopic and creating an engaging 15-minute lesson to deliver to a 6th grade class.[1]

The first year we tried this, students wrote lessons on flaming, phishing, cyberbullying, cyberharassment, cyberbullying or harassment by proxy, and online grooming. They created a list of definitions of these terms followed by succinct advice for coping with each one, which they handed out to 6th graders (see "The Student Guide to Stamping Out Cyberabuse" on p. 79). Students created PowerPoint presentations, SmartBoard drawings, diagrams, and graphics. They incorporated into their presentations online media they found about cyberbullying, such as videos from TeacherTube.com and the group Netsmartz.org. (One powerful resource they found is a British-made public service announcement video available on YouTube called "Think U Know" that shows a young girl reporting a predatory online groomer.) They shared surveys, bookmarks, and a list of

Internet safety tips with their peers.

I also infused the unit with instruction in public speaking, and on the day of the presentations, I assessed each student on his or her presentation, including organization, content knowledge, mechanics, delivery, and the quality of visual aids.

As you might expect, every 8th grade student rose to the occasion, even the most traditionally reluctant participants. Their talks, materials, and activities kept the younger students fully engaged. They asked questions and got their peers to think and reflect, sometimes with creative tactics.

For example, one group burst into the classroom in a friendly manner. They handed out lollipops and asked 6th graders to fill out a questionnaire providing their e-mail passwords, addresses, phone numbers, and parents' and siblings' names, explaining that they needed this information for their presentation. The older students handily made their point about how online groomers befriend victims first to gain their trust.

The "teachers" alerted their students to how seemingly innocuous messages can be precursors to harassment and abuse. In addition to showing realistic examples of bullying and aggressive communiqués, they also informed their younger counterparts about protective tools, like procedures that block certain messages or senders, privacy settings, and logistics for reporting incidents to an Internet service provider. In a clever twist, one group included in their PowerPoint presentation the kinds of questions a groomer might send, leaving the victim's answers blank. They asked 6th graders to write how they would respond to the messages.

Some 8th graders later told me they had been very nervous during their presentations, but it wasn't evident at the time. Students displayed a mature understanding of the seriousness of their responsibility. As Dylan noted in his final reflection,

> Presenting to the 6th graders helped me realize how easily kids will give out their information for a small prize. . . . It's important to always educate kids on Internet safety.

Emily reflected:

> I found it really interesting to hear the 6th graders' responses to our questions and to see their faces as they slowly realized the truth with some parts of the Internet. I was glad to see that they took this seriously, and not as a joke....We wanted to scare them, and we did just that. We wanted to show them that this does happen to people all over, and it could very easily happen to them if they are not careful.

8th Graders' Top Ten Internet Safety Tips

1. Don't give out personal information.
2. Don't talk to anybody you don't know.
3. Use a secure password.
4. Don't give your password to anybody.
5. Be careful about what you post online.
6. Don't put pictures of yourself online.
7. Tell someone if you get cyberbullied.
8. Be honest.
9. Don't click on pop-ups.
10. Only go to sites you know are safe.

6th Graders Reflect and Respond

Following the 8th graders' cybersafety lessons, I asked my 6th grade students to write an article about the experience for our upcoming class newspaper. This fit in well with my 6th grade media literacy curriculum that year, which focused on print media. It was a perfect opportunity to teach "angle" in journalistic writing. I encouraged students to come at the experience from any vantage point that felt relevant to them and to experiment with different types of articles. They had ample material to draw from because they all took notes during the presentations and received handouts from the 8th grade "teachers."

Students rose to the challenge of choosing varied angles and formats: straight news about the fact that students were teaching students, reviews of the lessons and the 8th graders' teaching skills, an Internet safety advice column, editorials on different subtopics, and informational features on how to protect yourself from online dangers. The pieces they created—such as this excerpt from Rita's article "Staying Safe Online"—show that they took in what their older peers imparted to them:

> The most serious of the online dangers is grooming. Grooming usually happens over instant messaging and e-mail. The 8th graders taught the 6th graders that grooming is when someone tries to create an emotional relationship with another person who is usually younger than them. The reason grooming is so dangerous is because the "groomer" potentially wants to meet the victim in person and abuse or kidnap them.

Another 6th grade student, Sean, wrote,

> With the computer age booming, PCs everywhere are catching fire. But it's not because of unsafe wiring; it's the work of one of the most basic forms of cyberbullying: flaming. Flaming is like an emotional bacteria—small, short sentences, sometimes casual, sometimes accidental—that make feelings of anger or depression (sometimes both) spread all through the victim's body.

The 6th graders were unanimously grateful for learning about this issue in the safety of the classroom, where all their questions and concerns could be aired. One student wrote, "I am now so much safer and more aware of the Internet and all the dangers. They pop out at me."

Another acknowledged the positive effect of being taught by the 8th grade students using digital media:

> With all the PowerPoints [on] Internet safety from the 8th graders, I learned more than I normally would. The pictures and everything really got my attention.

Arming Students to Help One Another

As difficult as it may be for us to accept, our students are potentially threatened with bullying and even predation any time they are online or communicating electronically. In a commentary connected to the *Journal of Adolescent Health*'s study, Maria Worthen (2007) writes that educators owe their students education in media literacy—including training that makes them aware of the dangers of cybercommunication.

We must help our students acquire the new literacy skills of recognizing and avoiding aggression in cyberspace. But because this territory is probably more alien to teachers than to students, increasingly students will find *themselves* acting as peer counselors for their friends or fellow students encountering this kind of abuse. We must guide students in how to inform and arm one another. My experience turning 8th graders into peer teachers shows that adolescents are not just up to this task—they will relish it. This new 2.0 world will belong to today's youth. It's our job to help them shape and protect it with courage and wisdom. EL

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EL *online*

For more on cyberabuse, see "Cyberbullying A Legal Review" by Katheleen Conn online in the March 2009 *EL* at www.ascd.org/el.

[1]Many Internet safety organizations offer lesson plans, videos, role-playing games, advice, and even school visits. These include Netsmartz Teens (www.netsmartz.org/netteens.htm), SafeTeens.com (www.safeteens.com), Teen Angels (www.teenangels.org), and Web Wise Kids (www.webwisekids.org).

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