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(A⁶¹ new breed of bully: The online friend

As school-aged children increasingly use technology to communicate with peers, instances of cyberbullying are also on the rise. A St. Peters woman was recently charged with felony harassment after allegedly posting a girl's picture and personal information in a sexually suggestive section of Craigslist.

More instances of cyberbullying are being reported, but the majority of cases do not receive media attention. According to the National Schools Boards Association, more than 13 million children have been the victims of online bullying in their lifetime.

Cyberbullying occurs when a minor is harassed, threatened or humiliated by another minor using interactive or digital technologies, according to StopCyberbullying.org. Missouri's new harassment law, which took effect last year, classifies cyberbullying as a misdemeanor. When an adult is the instigator, it is considered cyberstalking or harassment,

a felony. At least 13 states have passed similar laws.

"Media has become a part of everyday life," said Kurt Bruemmer, director of operations at Socket, a Missouri phone and Internet provider. He is also a father of pre-teen and teenage boys. "My kids log on after school for homework, e-mail and to keep up with their friends on Facebook and MySpace. If they are attacked at home, the bully has infiltrated a safe place."

Cyberbullying can happen via cell phones, blogs and social networks. Victims may be targeted with rumors, lies, death threats and altered photos.

Identifying a cyberbullying victim is not as easy as instances of in-school bullying. Parents should keep an eye out for reluctance to use a cell phone or the Internet. Other warning signs are depression, mood swings, quickly closing Internet browser windows or an unwillingness to talk about online activities. If these warning signs are surfacing, it is

important for parents to open the communication channels with the child.

It is also important for parents to be alert of any bullying their own children might be instigating. Warning signs include a child who is excited by conflict, shows intolerance to others or derives satisfaction from others' pain or fears. Cyberbullies may also manage multiple online accounts and refuse to talk about what they are doing online.

Cyberbullying can cause psychological harm—including depression—and can lead to violence.

"Cyberbullying can be potentially more harmful to children than actual schoolyard bullying," Bruemmer added. "Children may not always know where threats are coming from and constantly look over their shoulders in fear. A child's self-esteem can be damaged by a person hiding behind the anonymous mask of the Internet."

Fortunately, by keep-





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ing a close eye on teens and the Internet, many instances of cyberbullying can be prevented or handled properly. If dealing with a cyberbully, do not respond or retaliate. Many bullies will back down if they do not receive a reaction. While ignoring the cyberbullies, be sure to save all evidence. Take screen shots of instant messages, save Web sites or download pictures. This will be useful if it is necessary to go to the authorities. If the bullying persists, file a complaint with the network (Facebook, MySpace, MSN Messaging, etc.). Cyberbullying is typically a violation of terms of use, and the provider can take action or even delete the account.

Parents should realize that children may not feel comfortable sharing what happens online, fearing that Internet privileges might be restricted or removed. If parents and guardians take a proactive approach with open discussions, it will become easier to talk about if the child is ever bullied online.

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