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Cops aim to zap cyber-bullies

OPP try to halt student 'cruelty rings' on Web and promote Kids Help Phone

By [TOM GODFREY](#), SUN MEDIA

The OPP are trying to stop a chilling new Internet bullying trend called "cruelty rings" -- websites students create to prey on weaker students without parents knowing.

The force is also trying to ban "Top 10" polls on websites set up by students that compare and poke fun at the top five or 10 ugliest or fattest girls in the class. The link is circulated so others in the school or region can vote and comment anonymously on the girls, who are then sent a copy of the final results.

"We're only seeing the tip of the iceberg," Sgt. Robyn MacEachern told a National Bullying Awareness Week panel yesterday.

"This is happening underground because students don't want their parents or teachers to know."

MacEachern said students would rather suffer abuse than risk losing their electronic toys and having an investigation launched.

"It can be traumatic to be on one of these polls," she said. "These kids are reading this at home and there's no place for them to escape."

MacEachern said bullying can lead to suicide and violence. She cites last week's death of Megan Meier, a 13-year-old American girl who suffered from depression and attention deficit disorder, and who corresponded with an online friend named Josh for more than a month before he abruptly quit, telling her he had heard she was cruel.

The next day, Megan committed suicide. Her family learned that Josh never existed and was created by members of a neighbourhood family that included a former friend of Megan's.

"Bullying can lead to violence that escalates," MacEachern told the conference at Enoch Turner Schoolhouse on Trinity St.

The event was to help raise awareness of the Kids Help Phone that last year helped teens in 663 Ontario communities 780,000 times on the phone and Internet.

Kids Help Phone counsellor Maria Montanaro said victims of cyber-bullying need ongoing help. "The victims of this bullying suffer from emotional and physical turmoil," Montanaro said. "They need help."

Dr. Faye Mishna of the University of Toronto said children are being cyber-bullied at a younger age.

"Some kids are getting bullied in Grades 1 and 2 but won't say anything," Mishna said. "They would rather be abused than have their technology taken away."

Ontario Education Minister Kathleen Wynne said bullying is a big concern for her government. "Making our schools safer is our No. 1 priority," Wynne said yesterday.

Kids Help Phone president Tom McAllister said anti-bullying videos are being circulated to schools across the province. The phone service offers a 24/7 anonymous phone, Web counselling and referrals. Call 1-800-668-6868.



OPP Sgt. Robyn MacEachern addresses Web bullying trends among students at a National Bullying Awareness Week conference yesterday. (Mark O'Neill, Sun Media)