

Results of online bullying deadly

By JANE SIMS

Joshua Melo's life was tragically short, but his legacy is one of awareness and prevention.

It's been almost four years since the Strathroy-area teen hanged himself after he'd been bullied at school and online.

Joshua, 15, was a victim of cyberbullying -- a word that wasn't part of the lexicon when he died, but a problem now recognized as a disturbing trend.

The bullying left school grounds and entered Melo's home through hurtful online postings by his peers.

After his death, the Thames Valley District school board increased its efforts to prevent another such tragedy.

"Joshua's death was tragic, but it did bring an awareness all across the board," says his father, John, who pushed for changes at the board level.

But in the four years since the tragedy, technology has advanced rapidly, challenging traditional strategies to tackle the issue.

"Because of the fast-paced life that we live in, it's easy to overlook how our kids are doing," John Melo says.

The problem isn't going away. A recent University of Toronto study surveyed 2,000 Toronto students. It found:

- One in five said they'd been bullied online.
- One in three said they'd bullied someone else online.

Peter Jaffe, a London anti-violence expert and Thames school board trustee, says the board was "doing good things" before the tragedy, "but Josh was a wake-up call that you couldn't rest on your laurels. You had to double your efforts."

He compares the evolution of cyberbullying to the fight to stop global warming.

"We understand there is a serious problem and more people are talking about it than ever before," he says. "But the population of people using the technology and misusing it is also increasing."

A decade ago, he says, bullying was considered a schoolyard phenomena.

"But now, with cyber-bullying, it's 24/7 in terms of what happens around the clock, in terms of kids developing websites or harassing and annoying other kids -- threats, gossip," he says.

"I think technology has made this a lot more complex and it's much harder for adults to keep up."

Kids can gossip on websites, send instant messages through cellphones and post private pictures left online.

Often, they lack the foresight to understand the implications of their actions, Jaffe says.

But there are encouraging signs.

The Thames board adopted far-reaching guidelines, including to encourage anonymous reporting of bullying by students, after surveying kids following Joshua's death.

"The vast majority won't tell an adult in authority because they're worried it's going to get worse if they tell, or they'll be labelled as

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squealers," Jaffe says.

"It really meant adults had to redouble their efforts to have their finger on the pulse and really let kids know they should talk to them and also let peers know if they find out things. They are the first line of defence."

Jaffe says his own children recently brought home from school a "contract" he signed with them about their rights and responsibilities online.

And he's teaching a safe-schools course to students at teachers' college.

The board also has anti-violence speakers who talk to young kids about bullying.

Puppeteer Yvette Locke of St. Thomas visits 75 to 100 schools a year. One of her characters is Erb the Alien, who isn't part of the popular clique and learns how to stop rumours being passed.

Locke says she's surprised how much younger kids know about the Internet. "They will tell the puppet things they will never tell me."

Bruce Langford, a former teacher from the London area, has been talking about cyber-bullying since 2003. He presents himself as a deejay, takes "calls" from students and offers songs about safety.

He reminds them not to say "mean things" in messages. "We talk about always leaving the conversation if you see online put-downs," he says.

Hip-hop artist Saidat of St. Thomas works on self-confidence and self-esteem issues with a message that "one person can make a difference . . . (that) together we can change the world."

She says she encourages kids to not be bystanders and to develop a strategy to stop any bullying they see.

But the main line of defence comes back to the homefront.

The University of Toronto study showed cyber-bullying often happens in a child's peer group, says social work professor Faye Mishna, who led the research.

"Typical (computer) blocking and monitoring is not going to block them out because they're people within their social world," she says.

"Like traditional bullying, it means you have to deal with it in their peer group, in the school, in the family. You need to have everyone involved because it's not just a problem with just one person."

The Canadian Teachers' Federation has urged the federal government to put cyberbullying in the Criminal Code.

But Mishna sees the issue more "as a public health problem" that requires a multi-tiered approach.

Parents need to keep open communication with their kids, she says. They need to know where they go on the Internet and what's going on in school.

Parents also need to watch for signs their kids are being targeted, and to recognize electronic communication is "their world" and that rules and consequences can't be punitive.

"Taking away the computer is really the worst thing," she says.

Adults need to know how the Web works.

"You have to be plugged in, because they'll know you're not -- and then you have no credibility," Mishna says.

John Melo agrees parents need to tackle the problem head-on.

"We have to keep on it," he says. "It's easy to forget what happened."

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Peter Jaffe, London anti-violence expert and school board trustee

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Faye Mishna, University of Toronto cyberbullying researcher

SAFETY TIPS

FOR KIDS

Never meet an online friend alone.

Don't accept gifts from people you meet online.

Don't accept phone calls from online friends.

Report anything suspicious or uncomfortable.

Don't post pictures of yourself online. They might be used without your knowledge.

Don't put a webcam in an area that gives away personal information about you or your family.

Don't download anything sent by an online friend.

FOR PARENTS

Be aware of who your children are talking to online.

Remind kids how hard it is to know if an online friend is telling the truth.

Discourage kids from posting photographs.

Encourage kids to keep their passwords private.

Ensure security precautions are taken on social networking sites to limit access to personal pages.

Check your child's "buddies" list. You should know their online friends as you would their school chums.

Encourage your child to come to you if they find something online that makes them uncomfortable.

Consider installing safety programs.

USEFUL WEBSITES

www.bewebaware.ca: A comprehensive site examining all aspects of Internet safety.

www.cyber-safety.com: The website of Rob Nickel, a former OPP officer recognized as an expert in Internet safety.

www.cyberbullying.ca: An excellent Canadian site operated by Alberta teacher Bill Belsey, full of tips and ideas to keep kids safe.

www.cybercops.net: Offers first-person accounts of online dangers.

www.media-awareness.ca: A media and information resource for youth, it includes two reports on Internet use.