

Online Interpersonal Violence: What's Happening, and What's Helping

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Human beings are incredibly inventive tool users: give some of us a pen, and we might become the next Shakespeare or Michelangelo. However, some of us will start scrawling obscene messages on bathroom walls. The Internet is a tool like any other. As we learn to use it, we are beginning to understand its amazing potential for good—to inform, to enlighten and to connect us to our global community. Unfortunately, we also see all of the violent and abusive behaviors humans are capable of, transferred via the Internet and wireless technology into our homes.

Cyberviolence has been recognized as a problem almost as long as there has been an Internet. As the uses of the Internet have become increasingly sophisticated, so have its misuses. Players of an online text-based multi-user game in the 1990's experienced terrifyingly real sexual assault in [a series of public attacks](#). More recently, some predators have used their [avatars](#) (player-characters) in the virtual world of Second Life to sexually harass and assault others.

As online social networks like MySpace and FaceBook have grown in popularity, incidents of harassment have increased. Perhaps the most well-known and tragic occurrence was Megan Meier's suicide in 2006 after a classmate's mother created a fake profile, posed as Megan's online boyfriend, and sent her a message with what may have been the last thing anyone ever said to her: "You are a bad person and everybody hates you... The world would be a better place without you."

In addition to blatant [cyberbullying](#), Internet thugs have learned how to use easily available information to harass people online. One method is to create fake online profiles of other individuals in which they post bizarre and defamatory information. After replying to [trolls](#) who were encouraging some of his MySpace friends to commit suicide, [one man](#) found a profile that claimed he enjoyed sex with his cats (complete with real pictures of his cats, lifted from the web).

Real-world stalkers and abusers have found that the Internet, cell phones, and other methods of electronic communication are incredibly useful to track and harass their victims. Cell phones can even be transformed into virtual GPS units, allowing a stalker to track their victim in real time. The virtual nature of this stalking does not make it any less dangerous, and threats should be recorded and reported. Law enforcement officers are being trained to address the dangers of cyberstalking and other misuses of technology. The National Center for Victims of Crime lists many [ways in which technology can be used for stalking](#), as well as suggestions for dealing with it.

How risky is the Internet for young people?

While young people need protection from bullying and harassment on social network sites, most of the behavior actually occurs in instant messages, through emails, and texting.¹ Erroneously focusing attention and resources on concerns about online sexual abuse by older adults may actually fail to protect young people from the more common and harmful social bullying by peers.² Sexual predation certainly occurs online, but the [Youth Internet Safety Survey \(2004\)](#) found that most young people do not receive unwanted sexual messages while using the Internet. Of those that do, only 4% find the messages disturbing. Just as in the real world, the majority of young people cope quite well with unwanted sexual attention, and use avoidance techniques to minimize its impact.

What can be done to stop online harassment and misuse of technology?

As tempting as it is to respond to mean messages, that is probably the least helpful reaction. Most email programs allow users to either block emails from certain addresses or to set up a filter to move emails to a “junk” folder (which can be set up to automatically delete them.) These methods can protect the victim from ever seeing—and being upset by—the messages. More [helpful suggestions](#) are available at the Connect Safely website.

Most social networking sites have pages designed to help people navigate safely on their sites and report abuse. [MySpace’s page](#) has videos that can help prevent problems as well as suggestions for handling the most common ones. Facebook has a list of Frequently Asked Questions and tips on its [safety page](#). Second Life has a code of [community standards](#) that users are expected to adhere to, and which are enforced by the online community itself through [procedures for reporting abuse and grieving](#) (harassment that interferes with a user’s ability to enjoy a virtual world).

If the abuse becomes more serious, or if threats are made, young people are encouraged to keep records, including copies of emails, screenshots of webpages with disturbing messages, and phone texts. (See the [Connect Safely website](#) for more tips.) Some forms of online harassment are prohibited under [Arizona law](#). [International forums](#), including the United Nations, have taken up the challenge of protecting vulnerable people while preserving freedom of speech and association.

Conclusion

The Internet may be the greatest experiment in democracy ever conducted. Abuses will certainly continue, but as the frontier community of the Internet becomes more civilized, we are learning how to protect cyberspace just as we look out for each other in our neighborhoods. Whether in virtual worlds or the real world, we all have rights and responsibilities. What we teach our children about setting boundaries, and giving and expecting respect will serve them well as they explore and experience all of their worlds.

¹ [Ybarra and Mitchell, 121 \(2\): e350. \(2008\).](#)

² Wolak, J., Finkelhor, D., Mitchell, K. J., & Ybarra, M. L. (2008). Online "predators" and their victims: Myths, realities, and implications for prevention and treatment. *American Psychologist*, 63, 111-128.