



# HEADLINES

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## Bully for you!

In 2005, I ran a national conference in Canada on the topic of “Cyber-bullying”. We had excellent guest speakers, a panel of experts, and a parade of educators and parents speaking about the problem and how it was being addressed. It was an emergent problem, and we were going to face it head-on. Six and a half years later, we are no closer to getting a handle on cyber bullying. In fact, it has become a far more sophisticated and ingrained practice than it was then.

What are the key characteristics of cyber bullying? Basically it is the use of electronic communication technologies to support deliberate, repeated and hostile behavior by an individual or group that is intended to harm others. Unlike traditional bullying, victims don’t ever feel safe because they can be bullied in their cars, their homes and even in their own bedrooms. Early cyber bullying centered around texting and emails. Unlike the passing of notes in class by an earlier generation, an email or text can reach a wide-ranging audience and the victim might not even realize that she or he is being maligned or gossiped about until the rumour is repeated so often and shared by so many people that it becomes “fact” and it becomes impossible to dislodge.

So why has cyber bullying become so insidious and pervasive in the second decade of the twenty-first century? The basic reason is that the main perpetrators are no longer children, but rather their adult role models. Many adults have become masters at cyber bullying (although they might not perceive it as such). They use selective sharing of emails and the unbridled use of social media sites in order to cement their views of the world, and particular individuals in the collective minds of their “friends”. I have a Facebook “friend” who likes to not so subtly brag about his social calendar. If he is invited out with a friend or to a relatively exclusive party—he very deliberately makes all of the arrangements on his “wall” rather than by personal email. What should be a one to one correspondence (what time do you want to meet? what can I bring? what are you wearing?) becomes a public proclamation of his perceived popularity and enviable social life. If the event is more impromptu with no opportunity for pre-publicity, then you can be sure that we will all hear about it the next day. (“Hey Ralph, didn’t we have a great time last night! etc.)

It’s immature, and mildly entertaining from 2000 kilometers away, but you can be sure that there

are specific individuals left out of his self-proclaimed in-group that are being specifically targeted and quietly bullied. And while it says more about the fragile self-esteem of the bully than about anything else, that doesn’t make it any easier on the intended victims.

In the public education system in North America, fewer than 5% of teachers and administrators communicate with parents by email (this compares with 95% of independent school educators). The reason is simple. Any exchange by email is open to misinterpretation and abuse. Both teachers and parents can be guilty of sharing comments and insights that were meant to be kept confidential. Words that might be spoken in haste, and retracted later, are preserved, white hot, in the body of an email. To be clear, it is not necessarily bullying behavior to lose your temper in an email exchange, however, if one party decides to selectively use the other’s comments out of context to slander or belittle them with a wider audience, you have the makings of a cyber disaster.

I have been bullied in this way as, I am sure, have many other people. Moreover, the insurmountable challenge of cyber bullying especially through social media, is that once this Pandora’s box has been opened, the ripple effect is impossible to predict. What might be intended as a very pointed and narrow audience spirals out of control and even the bully may be remorseful (often too late) about the impact of her or his actions.

So, given our own weaknesses in this area, how are we to effectively encourage our kids to take a higher road? Part of the answer is access (no cell phones or pda’s at school; monitoring of Facebook and email accounts by parents at home including having your children access their computer only in “public” areas of the house; etc.) External controls help, but the real answer is to instill internal controls, self-policing, and a solid values-based understanding of the potential negative impact of their actions. Recently the news has been full of politicians whose careers (and often marriages) have been ruined by the reckless use of social media. It may be that the media themselves will provide us with the apocryphal stories to bring us collectively to our senses. But in the meantime, this is a war that will be won by families at the dinner table, and not on the internet.



### COMING EVENTS

**50/50 Tuition Raffle**  
October 7th

**3-6 Playground Campaign**  
Sept. 27-Oct. 21st

**The Journey**  
October 13th

**Lavender Orders Due**  
October 14th

**3-11 Conferences**  
Begin October 17th

**Fall Term Break**  
October 24th-28th

**MYP Conferences**  
November 7th/8th