

## **R U a bully?**

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BULLYING has always been the scourge of school-aged kids but there is growing concern with a new way bullies have found to ridicule or threaten their victims. And because the regrettable phenomenon of cyber-bullying is reportedly gaining traction on the Internet, intervention by authorities to raise awareness about its potentially harmful affects is a good first step.

Clarifying online harassment or even making it a criminal offense both work to draw attention to this new public health risk. With U.S. adolescents being bombarded daily with e-mail, instant messaging, text messaging, blog postings, and other electronic communications, the dangers posed by cyber-bullying cannot be underestimated.

While some kids - maybe most - can just shrug off hurtful online messages, others have more extreme reactions. Officials in a Missouri town made Internet harassment a misdemeanor after a 13-year-old girl, the subject of an intensely personal hoax online, committed suicide.

Lawmakers in Oregon, Washington, New Jersey, and other states have either introduced legislation or instituted programs designed to reduce electronic harassment through broader education and vigilance. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has also funded more published research on what it views as an increasing public health threat.

Some studies have found that as many as one in three U.S. children have been victimized in this manner. Others find the problem is less common, with one in 10 kids reporting such bullying. Yet even researchers who lean toward the lower estimate don't discount the scary signal it sends. "I wouldn't consider something that 10 percent of kids report as low," said Janis Wolak of the University of New Hampshire, who authored one study.

One online survey of 1,588 children ages 10 to 15 reported that 34 percent of respondents said they were the victim of online harassment at least once in the previous year and 8 percent said they were targeted monthly or more often.

But regardless of how many times it happens to how many kids, tormenting anyone with mean computer messages is wrong.

Just because bullies have discovered a different way to deliver their taunts doesn't mean they can operate with impunity. Zero tolerance should apply to any tough, whether online or in the schoolyard.