

Cyberbullying: A Very Real Consideration for sporting clubs.

The issue of cyber bullying and harassment is one that is becoming a significant threat to the safety and wellbeing of a whole generation of young people. Countries such as the USA and the UK have seen the need to address this issue for many years, whilst in Australia; it is seen as a relatively 'new' and 'emerging' phenomenon.

Members of *Gen Y*, often referred to as the 'net' or 'always on' generation are the first generation to experience a fully digital world. Technology use is not learned, but is intuitive. It is though they are born with an innate understanding of the applications and the ability to be connected no matter what is as important to them as food, water and air. Because of this, *Gen Y* is most likely to be exposed to the negative use of technology, examples of which are Cyber bullying, stalking, and the sending and receiving of explicit images, commonly known as 'sexting'.

Cyber bullying can be described as any harassment, insults and humiliation that occur through the electronic mediums such as email, mobile-phones, social networking sites, instant messaging programs, chat rooms and web-sites. It most often occurs between people known to each other and can be particularly hurtful. Whereas traditional school based bullying was confined within the school arena, cyber bullying has no such boundaries. Historically, once safely home, the victim was inaccessible. By virtue of technology however, the bully now has unlimited access to their victim. This puts the victim in a potential position of harm 24 hours a day, 7 days a week with no respite and it is the invasiveness of the technology that deprives children of their privacy. This alone has a significant psychological impact.

While Australian based research is scant, we do know from both overseas research and anecdotal experiences that females are represented in slightly greater numbers as both offender and victim. This would follow on from the premise that historically it is females who tended to engage in verbal bullying and males in physical bullying. Females are more likely to be involved in name calling and psychological bullying in real life so the move to the use of technology to facilitate this is an obvious outcome.

The perceived anonymity and disinhibition provided by the impersonal interface that is the internet gives many young people a sense of 'bravado' and 'dutch courage.' The fact that they are not able to see a reaction from their victim adds to their sense that what they are doing is acceptable and not causing harm. Another salient point is that very few of the young people who engage in online bullying and harassment are even aware that they may be breaking the law and are leaving themselves open to prosecution if a report is made to police.

Reports of this type of behaviour are increasing and as a young person's technological ability will far outweigh their cognitive development for many years, the wider community must take responsibility to assist and guide young people in relation to what is the acceptable use of technology. Failure to do so will result in a generation of young people with a skewed sense of reality, and will lead to an increase in both offending and victimisation of and by young people and the resultant negative impact on society.

Sporting organisations and clubs consist of a representational cross section of the general community and will not be immune from having to deal with these types of problems. Compounding the issues outlined previously, sporting organisations will also have to consider how they are going to address such issues as the coach/student relationship which will increasingly be conducted 'online'. How will clubs monitor these communications, the interactions between coach/student using a social networking site for example Facebook, the posting of photos and the use and misuse of technology by members generally which may have undesirable and possible damaging consequences for the sporting body. Whilst a coach may simply use technology for ease of communication, vulnerable and impressionable young people may misconstrue these messages, leaving the coach open to innuendo and accusation. Other key considerations include the issues of privacy, personal safety (physical and psychological) and reputation of club and brand.

It is therefore incumbent on each organisation and/or governing body to be aware of the issues surrounding the misuse of technology and ensure that by their codes of conduct, they send a very clear message to their communities that such behaviour will not be tolerated. The reporting process for the notification of these issues must be clear, concise and simple. Research has shown clearly that young people will not report online abuse for fear of 'getting into trouble' and losing their ability to remain connected. (being banned by parent etc) Clubs must undertake to treat complaints seriously and sympathetically, promptly and

confidentially and to investigate complaints impartially. Each club should also provide its members with advice on how to engage safely online. Taking a proactive approach to this or any possible damaging issue is always preferable, if not always possible to reacting after the event.

Cyberspace is not divided into 'age appropriate' areas. It is just one big world that everyone has equal access to. Do not think that young players cannot be involved in inappropriate and criminal online behaviours. The many and varied ways cyber bullies use to hurt others are limited only by their imaginations and their access to technology.

The common '*it's not my problem*' approach where everyone else apart from you should deal with the issue is unhelpful and alienating. Working in a cohesive and collaborative manner within the wider community will result in a superior outcome for all concerned. Cybersafety is problem that affects the whole community, and as such, solutions must come from a wide range of community groups and organisations.

The internet is a *public place*, not a *private space* and needs to be acknowledged as such. Postings and comments can be found years later, often with disastrous consequences and it does not matter what you call yourself online, you can be traced. Consider your digital footprint and think before you 'click'. Cybersafety is about understanding the nature of cyberspace and working to minimize risk, not removing it; you can't.

About the author:- Susan McLean is Australia's foremost expert in the area of cyber safety and young people and was a member of Victoria Police for 27years. Widely known as the 'cyber cop' she was the first Victoria Police Officer appointed to a position involving Cybersafety and young people. She has extensive international experience having studied in both the United States of America and the United Kingdom. She now runs her own consultancy in the area of cybersafety and cyber bullying education and prevention.

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