Cyberbullying a big concern in Brevard's schools

Inappropriate, sexual slurs posted on her Facebook photos earlier this year left one eighth-grader in northern Brevard embarrassed and distracted. Coupled with bullying at school, the 14-year-old honors and Advanced Placement student began to withdraw. Her grades slipped.

“It really hurt her, badly. She was so devastated,” said her mother, who spoke to FLORIDA TODAY on condition of anonymity to prevent provoking her daughter’s bullies. “She couldn’t understand why somebody would do that.”

Cyberbullying, when students use the Internet or mobile devices to humiliate others, can wreak havoc on the lives of children and teens. Aggressors can make fun of their targets in front of countless others, and do so while hiding behind anonymous posts or messages.

Students don’t always characterize it as bullying — instead referring to it as drama or just a part of life. Yet its impact is very real: more than 9,800 students in Brevard Public Schools have let online conflicts with friends affect their school work, according to a recent anonymous survey of students in grades 3 to 12.

“I am concerned about students being bullied,” said Beth Thedy, Brevard’s assistant superintendent for student services. “I believe we all are.”

Lessons on cyber safety are taught in Brevard schools, but the survey’s findings indicate more is needed.

About 3,400 students in grades 3 to 12 said they have been bullied online sometimes or often. The survey defined online bullying as when someone uses a computer to make fun of, threaten or attack another person.
A staggering number of middle and high school students reported receiving at least one damaging message online, according to Brevard’s survey. About 46 percent of 24,200 secondary students said they’d received a hurtful text or email; a third noted that mean comments were posted about them online; and nearly one in seven said someone pretended to be them in order to be mean.

“We have some more training we need to do with students, parents and staff to continue to educate them about bullying,” Thedy said. “And what to do if they are being bullied.”

Survey results will be shared with individual schools to help officials determine how big a problem online bullying is for their students. Other information collected in the survey, which included questions about student learning and technology use, also will be used to help schools improve.

Cyberbullying tends to be repetitive, as opposed to a one-time instance that can sometimes be explained as a misunderstanding.

“It affects youth more on the emotional, psychological level,” said Sameer Hinduja, a professor at Florida Atlantic University and co-director of the Cyberbullying Research Center. “That’s what we’re more concerned about. Even as adults, we might deal with someone who is a jerk to us, but we won’t characterize it as bullying.”

Richard Ford, director of the Harris Institute for Assured Information at Florida Tech, said the best action parents can take is to be involved with their child’s online life — and to talk with them about what is and is not appropriate online behavior.

Others suggested parents work with companies to block or ban email addresses, phone numbers or messages from certain people. School leaders are another place to turn.

In Florida, which has one of the toughest anti-bullying laws in the nation, school districts are required to promptly investigate bullying allegations and dole out consequences.

“They think they can just go and say and do anything they want on the computer, and that’s not the case,” said the 14-year-old’s mother.