Striking back at bullying by texts, email

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Hundreds of Stockton children – their faces a sea of brown, black and white – sit quietly on the floor of their elementary school cafeteria, eyes fixed intently on the prosecutor speaking in impassioned tones about the evils of cyberbullying.

"Words hurt – they really matter," Tori Verber-Salazar, a deputy district attorney in San Joaquin County's gang and homicide unit, tells students at McKinley Elementary School.

"The most important thing you can do is take a stand and say, 'Enough is enough.' "

As Verber-Salazar speaks, the young people in her audience are mostly silent, clearly uncomfortable about sharing their experiences in front of a large crowd of fellow students. They show they are absorbing her words, though, when she asks if they know of someone who has been cyberbullied: Scores of students quickly raise their hands. When she presses for details, one Hispanic student says a boy taunted him with a racial slur, and he didn't like it.

For four years, Verber-Salazar, along with a colleague, Supervising Deputy District Attorney Mike Mulvihill, has been engaged in a personal mission to deliver this message, reaching thousands of children in schools where authorities have seen cyberbullying increase as more and more young people have cellphones, computers and Facebook or MySpace pages.

In very stark terms, Verber-Salazar and Mulvihill describe how laws make the prosecution of cyberbullying possible, and they warn that in the most terrible cases, vulnerable victims who have been hounded relentlessly may kill themselves.

The prosecutors' presentation reflects a growing move by school administrators and adolescence experts to put a spotlight on cyberbullying – defined as the use of electronic devices such as cellphones or computers to bully a victim.

This intensified campaign deserves considerable praise, given the startling magnitude of the problem and its scarring effects on young victims in a society increasingly wedded to instantaneous electronic communication.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention succinctly states the problem: "Youths can use electronic media to embarrass, harass or threaten their peers. Increasing numbers of adolescents are becoming victims of this new form of violence – electronic aggression. Research suggests 9 percent to 35 percent of young people report being victims of this type of violence."
Another indication of the breadth of the problem comes from Sameer Hinduja, a cyberbullying expert who told me his research has found almost one-quarter of children who are 17 or younger report that they have been victimized online, and another 17 percent admit to bullying someone online.

Upon learning these statistics, I was taken aback.

These numbers told me that because I had grown up as a child in a world devoid of cellphones and computers and because my two sons had grown up before cellphones became so pervasive, I did not understand the potential dangers of the all-enveloping electronic world in which children navigate today: It is a realm where, in the worst case scenario, a victim can be dogged by cruel emails or texts by any number of bullies participating in this electronic pummeling of a single target.

Thinking back to my childhood, I know – as we all do – that a piece of this problem is in no way new: Early on, I saw that young people had the capacity to be unspeakably cruel and to move in a pack against those perceived as easy targets.

Once, I experienced being a target in a minor way that stung terribly.

One summer at Girl Scout camp, two girls named Caroline and Skippy followed me – a gawky, insecure 12-year-old – imitating my slouching posture and laughing at me. I still recall how helpless and alone I felt. To this day, I can see their faces in more detail than I can summon up the faces of people I met a month ago.

So when news accounts in recent years first started mentioning "cyberbullying," I viewed it initially as a trendy word that simply provided new packaging for behavior emanating from the dark side of human nature.

Curious about society's response to cyberbullying, I dug deeper and found government agencies, anti-bullying groups, educators and parents tackling the problem and offering advice to cyberbullying victims and their families.

The National Crime Prevention Council's tips emphasize common themes:

• Do not respond to cyberbullying messages.

• Block communication with cyberbullies.

• Keep the messages and report cyberbullying to a trusted adult.

• Refuse to pass along cyberbullying messages about others.

• Stand up and tell friends to stop cyberbullying.

• Encourage your school to conduct cyberbullying prevention education.
As government agencies have recognized cyberbullying's caustic effects, the media has zeroed in on the arena as well. In 2011, the documentary "Bully" looked at the suicides of two boys and at the tormenting of several other young people who managed to survive persecution by their tormentors.

Television and newspapers also have publicized some suicides, linking them to cyberbullying. One was the 2010 suicide of Phoebe Prince, who moved from Ireland to Massachusetts and was harassed online and in person at her high school.

In the prosecutors' presentation at the Stockton elementary school, Verber-Salazar mentioned Prince's case and told her audience of fifth- through eighth-graders that she wondered how those who tormented Prince could live with themselves.

Another suicide that garnered worldwide attention occurred last year. The victim, a 15-year-old Canadian named Amanda Todd, posted a nine-minute YouTube video in which she recounted the unending bullying she was enduring on the Internet and in person. The video is haunting because Amanda never speaks. She uses flash cards with big letters to tell her story. The video ends with her plea: "I have nobody. I need somebody. My name is Amanda Todd." On Oct. 10, 2012, a little more than a month after she posted the video, she hanged herself. Since then, her video has been viewed millions of times.

In the wake of such horrific cases, some experts note that finding the whys of a young person's suicide is not an easy analytic process. That is a cautionary note I value.

"The media likes to portray a direct link between cyberbullying and suicide," cyberbullying expert Hinduja, an associate professor at Florida Atlantic University and a co-director of the Cyberbullying Research Center, told me. "But as we study it, in pretty much all these cases, these teenagers have had various other problems. Some have been dealing with psychosomatic illness. Some have been clinically depressed or have been on psychotropic medication. The bullying is the proverbial straw that breaks the camel's back."

In mulling this over, I find one piece of this pernicious world particularly worrisome: It is the way cyberbullying can be waged so relentlessly and at the same time be so unseen by adults who might be able to support the victims.

Verber-Salazar put it this way to me: "When I was a kid, if the phone rang at home, everyone knew it. Today you can text someone hateful messages thousands of times a day and no one – unless the parents look for it – can know it's going on. You can get others to gang up and pile on the abuse. So the victim feels isolated, helpless. Sometimes I think the kids don't realize what they are doing is wrong, primarily because as parents we don't have this conversation with them."

In weighing the cyberbullying experts' advice, I find one thought especially helpful. Emily Bazelon, author of a new book about bullying titled "Sticks and Stones," notes that adults are always urging children to stand up for others being bullied. "It's what many of us want to see
from our children," Bazelon wrote recently. "Except that it's not easy. … Stepping into the middle of a conflict to confront an aggressor is usually asking a lot."

She quotes the sage advice of anti-bullying expert Stan Davis, who says children can help a victim after the fact by "asking if they're OK or sending a sympathetic text."

Hearing all this, I can only hope that this enhanced focus on cyberbullying will help children, parents and educators find the strength to shape "enough-is-enough" campaigns.

Because we can be certain, can't we, of this: The bullies won't be crawling back in their caves any time soon.

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