How to combat cyberbullying

By Karen Kucher

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In the fight against cyber bullying, some schools have held “lock it down” days where students en masse create new login passwords for their Facebook accounts and put pass codes on their personal cell phones to curtail access by others.

Others have organized special “delete days” where students agree to shut down accounts on social websites where abusive online behavior is occurring or host a “digital learning week” where speakers discuss cyber safety issues while vendors show off new software and hardware.

Those were among several practical tips offered Monday during a daylong conference on cyber bullying by Sameer Hinduja, an associate professor in criminology and criminal justice at Florida Atlantic University and co-director of the Cyberbullying Research Center.

Hinduja said such schoolwide events can improve a school’s climate and let students know that bullying peers isn’t something that will be tolerated.

This is the fourth year the Anti-Defamation League has sponsored the conference at the University of San Diego to draw attention to the problem of cyber bullying, when students use the Internet or cell phones to send hurtful messages or post them on social media sites. About 280 students, teachers and parents from three dozen middle and high schools attended the event, which also included a panel moderated by U.S. Attorney Laura Duffy on legal issues and challenges surrounding cyberbullying.

Conference organizers say the impact of cyber bullying is far reaching — victims and their families can be devastated while cyber bullies often remain anonymous and free to continue hateful behaviors. The goal of the gathering was to empower participants to effectively address the problem, with each school team completing an action plan to implement at their school site.

Participants said an important step is to educate students to become “cyber allies” who are on the lookout to help their peers. The conference’s theme was “standing up to cyber hate.”
The widespread use of smart phones and social media has made many of the early tools against cyberbullying ineffective, such as using filters on school or home computers to block software.

Hinduja said schools seeking to improve their campus climate can adopt curriculum to teach problem solving and conflict resolution, enact school honor codes and create “positive referrals” that highlight and reward students displaying good behavior.

“The goal is to continually remind them the school cares about them and wants them to be doing the right thing,” he said.

Hinduja said underscoring the importance of online privacy can be helpful when working with middle school and high school students, who often share passwords with their friends.

But volatile adolescent relationships can change quickly — with today’s best friend morphing into tomorrow’s enemy. A shared password can easily be used to log onto Facebook or Twitter accounts and cause havoc. Hosting a “lock it down” day can prevent such cyber bullying from occurring, he said.

Being the victim of bullying can leave scars that last a lifetime. “Sometimes middle school and high school is just about survival,” Hinduja said.

Hinduja said he clearly remembers bullying incidents from middle school, a time when he was introverted and self-conscious about his hairy legs and arms. One day he was challenged to a fight by a sixth grader named Josh and was beat up as classmates gathered to watch at the school’s flagpole.

Hinduja said that encounter could have been much worse if he were a teen today.

“Fast forward to 2013, and I say how might Josh have given me grief in this day and age? In the locker room in PE class, he could have taken his phone and taken a picture of me while I was changing and sent it around to the entire student body,” he said. “I was so self conscious, I wouldn’t have wanted to go back to school. It would have affected me.”