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Socket Tech Talk: Cyberbullying - fighting a new breed of bully

Missouri Senate Bill 614 could mean harsher punishment for public school students using text messaging, social networks and other technology to harass and intimidate fellow students. Sen. Yvonne Wilson, D-Kansas City, a former schoolteacher and principal, sponsored the bill.

"The whole issue [of cyberbullying] has become important because of all the technology available to our young people," said Wilson.

According to the National Schools Boards Association, more than 13 million children have been the victims of online bullying in their lifetime. Cyberbullying occurs when a minor is harassed, threatened or humiliated by another minor using interactive or digital technologies, according to StopCyberbullying.org.

"This bill asks specifically that schools add cyberbullying to their disciplinary policies," said Wilson. "We need to pay more attention and look for signs of stress among our young people."

The bill is intended to prevent cyberbullying as well as provide an effective means of punishment. However, cyberbullying is not limited to schools, so parents have to be aware of the severity of this problem at home as well.

"My kids log on after school for homework, e-mail and to keep

up with their friends," said Kurt Bruemmer, director of operations at Socket, a Missouri phone and Internet provider, and a father of pre-teen and teenage boys. "If they are attacked at home, the bully has infiltrated a safe place."

Victims may be targeted with rumors, lies, threats and altered photos. Identifying a

cyberbullying victim is not as easy as instances of in-school bullying. Parents should keep an eye out for reluctance to use a cell phone or the Internet. Other warning signs are depression, mood swings, quickly closing Internet browser windows or an unwillingness to talk about online activities.

It is also important for parents to be alert of any bullying their own children might be instigating. Young people who are not necessarily physically violent may find it easier to initiate conflict online.

"As parents, we communicate with our kids as best we can," said Wilson. "Let [your children] know that you are there. Create a dialogue, and let them know you are aware of what is out there."

Fortunately, by keeping a close eye on teens and the Internet, many instances of cyber-bullying can be prevented or handled properly. If dealing with a cyberbully, do not respond or retaliate. Many bullies will back

down if they do not receive a reaction. While ignoring the cyberbullies, be sure to save all evidence. Take screen shots of instant messages, save Web sites or download pictures. This will be useful if it is necessary to go to the authorities. If the bullying persists, file a complaint with the bully's Internet provider or social network (Facebook, MySpace, MSN Messaging, etc.). Cyberbullying is typically a violation of terms of use, and the provider can take action or even deactivate the account.

"Besides reporting a problem, social networking sites like Facebook and MySpace have ways for blocking users," said

Bruemmer. "Chat applications like Skype also have blocking features to keep kids safe."

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