The Internet is Killing Our Children

The days of layering up on dodge ball day and forging in-class love letters are over. WAKE UP. A rough day for our kids does not mean getting pushed in the mud at recess or being forced to surrender their lunch money. Instead their rough days are plagued with large-scale deception, mass rumors and life-threatening humiliation caused by cyberbullying. The bullies have moved from the playground to the Internet and they are more dangerous than ever before.

**Cyberbullying** is defined as “the bullying that takes place using electronic technology. Electronic technology includes devices and equipment such as cell phones, computers, and tablets as well as communication tools including social media sites, text messages, chat and websites.” Whether you know it or not, your child lives in this digital world. However, the way a teenager would probably view the definition is quite different: “when a child, preteen or teen is tormented, threatened, harassed, humiliated, embarrassed or otherwise targeted by another child, preteen or teen using the Internet, interactive and digital technologies or mobile phones.”

As if worrying about the way they look at school in the morning isn’t enough, our kids have to worry about the way they look and act online. Children between the ages of 12-17 spend an average of six hours per day on their cell phones and computers not related to their schoolwork. The terrifying reality is that anyone with a computer or cell phone can manipulate your child’s digital identity. This isn’t new news! Hint: the pen is mightier than the sword. Only now, the wifi is mightier than the wedgie and the consequences are deadly.

Last year, the state of California announced that its teen suicide rate had risen from 481 in 2014 to over 600 in 2015. Suicide is the third leading cause of death in adolescents and YOU are the one who needs to put an end to it. How can you protect your child from something that you don’t see coming? PSA: Talk to your children.

A 2015 study by the American Academy of Pediatricians says that kids appreciate straight talk about such issues as violence, depression and personal safety but they only want general information in a group setting such as an assembly. The same study shows that parents are uncomfortable talking about bullying even though they know it’s important.

The events that terrorized your childhood do not begin to compare to the threats our children are facing today. These bullies will not whisper insults in your child’s ear in the lunch line and these predators will not wait in front of the school in a white van with candy. They will text, comment, post, humiliate, expose, degrade and pressure your children from the comfort and safety of their homes, making your child doubt their very existence and lose every ounce of self-confidence you have built up for them since their first birthdays. The cyberbully victim is not going to declare, “I am a cyberbully victim.” Instead victims assume no one can understand them or help them and resort to self-harm or even suicide. It is up to parents and educators to remind each cyberbully victim that help and understanding are available if they feel victimized by a cyberbully. It’s time to start the conversation. A leading parent magazine conducted a two-year ongoing email poll in which the majority of parents “don’t think that their teens have been bullied.” However, only 21% report that they have actually asked their children if they have ever been bullied.

A member of the San Francisco Public Education Board with a 20-year-old daughter and 15-year-old boy-girl twins, I have seen the way cyberbullying has already changed the landscape of elementary, middle and high schools. Five years ago, my oldest daughter was astonished when her best friend was “dumped over text” and occasionally reported spam texts from strangers with links to pornographic viruses. Today, my 15-year-olds come home every day talking about vicious comments, hacked Instagram accounts and kids skipping school because of social media harassment. In a 2014 national survey, a whopping 85% of middle-school aged children (11-14) remarked that they didn’t know people could bully them on the Internet. By 2015, that number had reduced to 55%, meaning cyberbullying awareness has increased among this age group.

The rise of technology has created a new network of communication that makes it possible them to communicate with each other 24/7 and impossible for us to monitor their interactions. We now need to protect them from a worldwide pool of potential bullies who may never even show their faces. Authors of a special report just distributed (September 2016) to school administrators in 166 school districts throughout the state found these alarming statistics:

* The California Association of Police Officers believes one in four kids have been bullied by another kid.
* Cyber bullying now eclipses physical or verbal bullying in most California school districts.
* School counselors reported that roughly 60% of their student sessions now include bullying issues.

In another 2015 study, 98% of middle school teachers say they know at least one student who has been cyber bullied in the past two years. Because our middle school kids are just beginning to understand technology, we need to teach them to use it responsibly and safely. These pivotal years are the perfect time to educate your children.

The threat is real and we need to stay ahead of the cyberbullying curve. Imagine if your school bully had access to the entire city in a matter of minutes. Imagine if, instead of finding out your nemesis had forged a love note from your crush, you found out that the person you had built an online relationship with over the course of months was actually a middle-aged sex offender. Our children are fragile and they are desperate for help. Welcome to the 21st century, it’s time to reevaluate what it takes to keep our kids safe.