The new cyber war
In 1999, Canada became the first country in the world to provide Internet access to all of its schools. The move brought students the benefits of unlimited online educational resources and opened up a new world of communication, through email, websites, web cams and chat rooms. But with it came an unexpected threat: cyber bullying.

Faye Mishna, an associate professor in the Faculty of Social Work (FSW) and the Margaret and Wallace McCain Family Chair in Child and Family, has set out to explore this little-understood problem.

Research in the United States and the United Kingdom shows that 20 to 25 per cent of kids have experienced some form of online abuse, but Mishna predicts the problem is growing. “There is a whole explosion of different forms of abuse on the Internet, from sexual solicitation and stalking – adults to kids – to peer-to-peer harassment and bullying,” says Mishna. “I think the problem is just going to get bigger and bigger.”

Mishna plans to address both aspects of the problem and has partnered with colleague Robert McFadden on a comprehensive research program, funded by Bell Canada. One piece of that puzzle is a study on peer-to-peer bullying, which involves a survey, preceded by focus groups, to gather information about the cyber bullying experiences of kids aged 10 to 17 at schools in the Toronto District School Board and the Toronto Board of Jewish Education.

The team, which also includes former FSW Dean Jim Barber, faculty member Tahany Gadalla and research coordinator Joanne Daciuk, plans to survey parents, teachers and administrators as well to get their take on the issue.

Cyber bullying, says Mishna, can be just as damaging as the face-to-face variety – or more so. “The anonymity of online communication means that people might feel free to do things they would never do in the real world.”

The research program has already attracted support from the Toronto Police Service and Kids Help Phone.

“Kids Help Phone launched its ‘Ask a Counsellor’ website in 2004, and they’re struggling to respond to the volume of postings,” says Mishna. “So we’re looking at ways the Faculty of Social Work can become involved and, at the same time, use the information to further our research.”

Mishna hopes the work will offer a greater understanding of the problem and provide solutions. The team is developing a website to communicate research results and, ultimately, provide strategic advice and policy direction for intervention and prevention. “School policies for dealing with non-physical forms of bullying are harder to implement, so there’s a danger that it’ll get lost.”

— Althea Blackburn-Evans
- See more at: http://www.research.utoronto.ca/edge/edgenet/winter2006/the-new-cyber-war/#sthash.XhznX3N8.dpuf