

Police, school boards team up to battle cyber-bullying

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Special to The IFP

Halton Regional Police are joining forces with local school boards to stamp out the emergence of cyber-bullying.

At a meeting held in late November, senior managers from Halton Police met with the directors of the Halton Catholic District School Board and the Halton District School Board to spread awareness of the potential problem before it becomes a more serious issue.

At the meeting the directors were shown disturbing videos— posted on the popular video sharing website YouTube— of young people being viciously bullied.

“There was an incident in Hamilton that was on YouTube and it showed some school girls who targeted another young girl from school and literally attacked her and were beating her quite severely,” said Sgt. Peter Payne, Halton Police Public Affairs Officer.

Bullying incidents such as this are taped with devices like videophones and then downloaded and shared online.

“It is an emerging trend and we would be remiss if we didn’t stay on top of this before it becomes a significant problem,” said Payne.

Also known as a fight club, this new type of cyber-bullying was a hot topic of discussion during the meeting.

“It’s an informal gathering of youth that participate in the abusing of more vulnerable youth for sport and enjoyment,” said Payne. “It’s an extreme form of bullying.”

While some of the fights shown online appear to be consensual, this did nothing to diminish the concern of the school board directors.

“In one of the videos we were watching, there’s a whole bunch of people surrounding these two youths who are hitting each other and kicking each other,” said Lou Piovesan, Director of the Halton Catholic District School Board.

Although unable to identify any Halton Catholic District School students in the videos it was brought to Piovesan’s attention that at least one consensual fight video was shot in Halton Region.

Halton District School Board Director Wayne Joudrie was also shocked by the videos he was shown by police.

“I was very concerned on a number of fronts. First of all for the safety of our students and secondly about the use of technology

as a vehicle for communicating the potential for a fight club to occur,” he said.

Whether consensual or not Payne says such acts can easily become a police matter.

“No one can consent to bodily harm. So if two people consent to a fight and one of them subsequently becomes injured in more than a minor way... then the individual that caused that injury would be liable for a charge of assault.”

Joudrie said another problem that was indicated to him by police is the victimless attitude youth take towards fight clubs.

“The kids in many cases saw this as not an illegal or dangerous event. They saw par-

ticipants in these fight clubs as being willing participants and therefore they really didn’t feel that anything wrong was happening,” he said.

Telling the school boards what to look for is the primary method Payne is using in hopes of stopping the trend before it becomes entrenched in Halton.

“When you see kids gathering for what might have been, in days gone by, a consensual fight situation, those sorts of things

now lead to the videotaping and the further degradation of those involved through the posting on an Internet site,” he said.

“That’s why it is that teaching staff need to be vigilant and when they see incidents starting to develop to intervene as

quickly as possible.”

Police are also approaching students about cyber-bullying and fight clubs.

“We have our school liaison officers speaking to students on the issues and making sure that they are aware that we are aware. That way they’re comfortable approaching us when they hear of incidents that may develop,” said Payne.

Piovesan said his school board is doing its part to raise awareness of and prevent cyber-bullying.

“We will be doing presentations to parents about this,” he said.

Piovesan says his school board is also

fighting cyber-bullying by stripping potential bullies of their tools.

“We don’t allow cell phones to be used in the schools. We don’t ban students from carrying them to school but they have to deactivate them,” he said.

Besides filming bullying incidents, Piovesan says, cyber-bullies also use cell phones to send harassing text messages making the suspension of their use in school paramount.

Video surveillance is another technique Piovesan’s school board is using to keep students safe.

“We started it as a pilot project in six schools in the fall and it seems to be a positive influence.”

The Halton District School Board has also made it a policy to ban cell phone use in its schools but, as Joudrie explains, ever changing technology presents new avenues for cyber-bullying.

“You could explicitly ban something like cell phones only to have students that are using a PDA, an MP3 or an iPod. With the convergence of technology an item does three or four things,” he said.

Like the Catholic school board, Joudrie is working with police to raise awareness of the problem recently inviting members of the police services to a principal’s meeting in order to familiarize the principals with the concept of cyber-bullying and fight clubs. This also gave the principals the opportunity to provide police with any information they may have had.

“We have two options,” said Joudrie. “We can ignore it and watch it grow or we can deal with it in a very public and expressed way. The approach we’ve chosen is to deal with it straight up.”

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