

Catholic teens see online bullying as much more than just a prank

ORLANDO, Fla. – Erin Persinger is a good student at Bishop Verot High School in Fort Myers who enjoys volunteering in her community, hanging out with friends and participating in sports.

She has also had her share of fights on the social networking site Facebook, defending friends against people who were bullying them online.

“Cyberbullying is real,” she said. “There are people who don’t care what they say ... because they are hiding behind a computer screen.”

Persinger, who is about to begin her junior year, sat down recently with the Florida Catholic newspaper and several other teens who volunteer for the Catholic HEART Workcamp in Orlando to talk about the realities of bullying and cyberbullying, and how it has affected their own lives.

According to the National Crime Prevention Council, cyberbullying is similar to other types of bullying, except it takes place online and through text messages sent to cell phones. In some cases, attacks on Facebook or MySpace have escalated to real-world violence.

In Florida, Rachel Wade, a 20-year-old from Clearwater, was convicted of second-degree murder July 23 in the 2009 stabbing death of Sarah Ludemann, an 18-year-old rival for a boyfriend. The two women had begun attacking each other through online posts.

Persinger said she is constantly amazed at what people will text or type on instant messages or on MySpace or Facebook boards that she knows she wouldn’t hear come out of that person’s mouth.

“And the messages are there for so many people to see,” she said. “So you can’t ignore it, you can’t stop it, and sometimes you can’t delete it. It won’t just go away.”

Rachael Chesnover, a sophomore from Fort Myers High School, said it is intimidating that with a single click of a mouse, a lewd comment or vicious rumor can be spread to an entire community of people.

“Communicating with one another is different now,” she said. “I can control what I say and what I post, but I can’t control everyone else.”

Margie Aguilar, director of technological instruction for the Diocese of Orlando, believes cyberbullying is a very real and very important topic that needs to be in the forefront of both educators’ and parents’ minds.

While parents say that their children might not have had permission to create social network or e-mail accounts, it is easy for children to go behind parents’ backs to create the accounts themselves because accounts can be accessed anywhere, including libraries, friends’ houses, or anywhere with a wireless Internet connection and access to a laptop.

“Social networking is a reality of today’s culture,” Aguilar said. “Parents need to know what their children are doing online and who they are friends with online. And they need to let the children know that they want to know where they are going online and they are going to check where they are going online.”

In her own home, Aguilar, the mother of three children, created e-mail accounts for her two oldest children (a teen and a preteen) and created a Facebook account for her oldest, with security settings for all three accounts.

While parents might be intimidated by creating an account, she said, it is important to do that for the children, instead of letting them do it for themselves. There are help menus to assist parents, and Aguilar encourages parents to research online before creating an account.

“My kids know that I check their stuff and if I see something inappropriate, I will disable the account,” she said.

Aguilar said it is not all doom and gloom when talking about social networking sites. In fact, she said, they can be great tools for teens as long as appropriate permissions and security measures are put in place and parents are monitoring what is

happening online.

While some people might say social networking sites, Twitter, text messages and instant messaging are damaging children's and teens' abilities to interact face to face, Aguilar disagrees. In schools, she has noticed that social networking might connect students who would have never known one another otherwise.

"There are eighth-graders saying hello and talking to fifth-graders at school because they are friends with one another on Facebook. Normally, these kids might not even say hello to each other in the hallway," Aguilar said.

"Children are expanding their opportunities of friendship to a more global society. It is amazing to see children and teens relating to children and teens in other countries," she added. "Of course we can always find bad things, but we need to look at the positive and not the negative."