Preface

Though I know life has its challenges, it seems this new generation is faced with a whole new challenge brought about via cyberbullying and related technology-based assaults.

—Mother of a 14-year-old victim of cyberbullying from Hawaii

For the past several years we have been studying how adolescents use and misuse computers and the Internet. Often, when someone asks us about our research and we mention the term cyberbullying, they usually chuckle and wonder aloud, “How can someone be cyberbullied?” We have heard this comment with such frequency that we decided to write a book to inform others about what cyberbullying is and why it merits recognition and response. After a few minutes discussing issues relating to cyberbullying with those who are willing to listen, most begin to realize clearly the unique challenges that this novel form of adolescent aggression presents. Our hope is that many more individuals will listen and understand after reading this book.

PURPOSE OF THE BOOK

The purpose of this book is to bring you up to speed about the kinds of hurtful behaviors youth are experiencing online and to equip you with the knowledge and resources necessary to do something about them. Many adults still lack basic knowledge when it comes to computers, the Internet, cell phones, and other electronic devices. This book will help usher you into the 21st century by describing the technology that youth are using, and in some cases misusing, every single day. The point is not to scare you into pulling the plug and abandoning all technology but to educate and empower you to take certain proactive steps to protect youth and prevent and respond to inappropriate behaviors that involve technology.
While this book is primarily concerned with cyberbullying among students, it is important to note that we also touch on what should be done in situations where students employ technology to harass educators. In fact, many of the lessons learned about how a school can and should respond to cyberbullying come from several cases where students were disciplined for cyberharassing staff (Chapter 5 covers these issues in depth). Given the similarities, the methods discussed in this book for the identification and prevention of, and response to, cyberbullying among adolescent peers can also be applied to incidents of staff harassment.

APPROACH

Rather than acting solely on what is heard in the popular media concerning a new phenomenon, educators, parents, and others concerned about youth need to examine the problem of cyberbullying responsibly to learn how best to address it. The alarmist headlines in the national news may grab our attention, but they do little to inform or teach us about the actual scope, prevalence, frequency, causes, and consequences of electronic aggression among teenagers. Research does.

Much of the information reported throughout this book stems from our own original research conducted over the last several years. Most recently, we gathered and analyzed data from a random sample of approximately 2,000 middle school students in one of the largest school districts in the United States. In great detail, we asked these youth about their experiences with traditional and cyberbullying as well as a number of other related factors (e.g., computer proficiency, stressful life events, self-esteem, and suicidal ideation). We wanted to systematically and scientifically illuminate the problem of cyberbullying to better inform those who work most closely with youth.

Moreover, these data are supplemented by information collected from thousands of youth who have corresponded with us over the years. We wanted them to tell us about their cyberbullying experiences in their own words. We found out that many of the targets of cyberbullying were scared to talk about online bullying with their parents because they didn’t want to be blamed and/or lose their computer privileges. We learned that some incidents lasted for years and that youth felt helpless and didn’t know where to go for help. Adolescents in our research had a great deal to say about cyberbullying and wanted their voices to be heard. We wrote this book in part for that purpose: to tell their stories. And, as you will see, these stories are rich, colorful, eye-opening, and even heartrending as they provide a very personal, vulnerable perspective.

The chapters that follow also include accounts from adults who are at the forefront of Internet-based behavior issues. We have spoken to teachers, school administrators, counselors, law enforcement officers,
parents, and many other youth-serving adults who have been grappling with the complications that arise from cyberbullying incidents. Most of these folks simply improvised and did their best, because not much was known about how to handle these unique cases properly. Since there are so many "gray areas" in terms of responding to cyberbullying, their interpretations and actions are important to consider because they contribute toward building a body of knowledge over time that can consistently provide meaningful guidance. It is hoped that the "best practices" we have collected and now share in this book can capably inform the actions of those in the trenches so that their prevention and response strategies have utility and value.

THE IMPORTANT ROLE OF EDUCATORS

When considering our audience, we decided specifically to target educators with this information, since they are on the front lines in dealing with many forms of adolescent aggression. In many cases, youth are spending more direct time each day with their teachers than they are with their parents. As a result, school personnel may notice when something isn’t quite right by picking up on subtle cues. Teachers, school counselors, administrators, and others who work with adolescents on a daily basis also tend to be more proactive in informing themselves about issues facing youth today. Finally, we believe they can also serve as the conduit through which this important information reaches the parents of their students, as well as others in the community who need to learn about cyberbullying.

Even though the vast majority of cyberbullying behaviors take place off school grounds, they very often make their way back into the school. In fact, many adolescent problems these days either begin at school and progress online or are initiated online and continue at school. Like it or not, educators will frequently have to deal with repercussions of disagreements or problems that began or escalated a great distance from the schoolhouse doors. Thankfully, you will see that there are many things educators can and should do with respect to the online behaviors of their students—even if most of those online actions and interactions occur outside of the confines of the school.

IMPORTANT FEATURES OF THE BOOK

This book includes a number of special features that will help you identify, prevent, and respond to cyberbullying incidents. In addition to incorporating personal voices and viewpoints from youth affected by or involved in cyberbullying incidents, as well as educators and parents on the front lines dealing with online aggression, the book also contains several
valuable in-text features to help reinforce the key concepts, including the following:

- Dozens of breakout boxes highlighting hundreds of important strategies to deal with cyberbullying
- Review of the latest research in this emerging area
- Illustrations that help to illuminate what cyberbullying looks like
- Summary of important legal rulings
- Warning signs to help identify cyberbullies and their targets
- Strategies for safe and responsible social networking
- Questions for reflection after each chapter
- Chapter summaries
- Index

Along with the special features in the text, the book also includes a number of tools in the Resources section that can assist you in understanding and addressing cyberbullying. These resources can be reproduced and distributed to other educators, parents, and students to help inform and educate your community about cyberbullying. They include the following:

- Glossary
- Recommendations for Further Information
- Cyberbullying Scenarios for Discussion
- Internet Use Contract
- Family Cell Phone Use Contract
- Cyberbullying Assessment Instrument
- Cyberbullying Report Card for Schools
- Cyberbullying Crossword Puzzle and Word Find
- Supplemental Staff Development Questions

ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

This book has been organized in such a way that will allow for easy retrieval of important information, depending on the issues you currently face. We do not expect you to remember everything you read, so we structured the book to serve as a handy reference or resource for you. While there is some necessary overlap between chapters, each part is largely distinct in its examination of a particular topic relating to cyberbullying and online harassment.

Chapter 1 introduces the problem of cyberbullying with an illustrative story that highlights the harm that can result from the misuse of computers and other technology. It continues by exploring how the intersection of teens, technology, and traditional bullying has birthed the problem.
Chapter 2 discusses in detail what cyberbullying is and how you can identify it. Here, a number of real-life examples are described to highlight the nature of online harassment. While the particular tactics and techniques employed by adolescents are always evolving, this chapter will provide the basic information necessary to recognize most (if not all) cyberbullying behaviors in a variety of settings.

Chapter 3 summarizes our research and that of others who have systematically studied the problem. The findings from this research can help depict the scope and gravity of online harassment and be used to inform policy and programming as we move forward. Also, we are often asked, “Why exactly do kids bully other kids online?” While there is no simple answer to this question, a number of developmental, behavioral, psychological, and sociological explanations can help us understand the possible causes of this type of harassment.

In Chapter 4, the popular phenomenon of online social networking is explored with particular focus on MySpace. A number of youth related to us cyberbullying experiences carried out using MySpace or other similar online environments, and these are presented as hard-hitting illustrations of the problem. This chapter also covers the positive aspects and potential risks inherent in Web-based interactive communities and describes some of our recent research in this area.

Chapter 5 presents a comprehensive discussion of the legal issues confronting school administrators who are attempting to define the parameters of their role in responding to cyberbullying incidents. School officials are in a difficult position because they don’t want to overstep their legal authority in disciplining student behavior that occurs off campus. We argue that they can (and should) intervene in specific situations—in incidents that ultimately impact students or the learning environment at school. We review a number of court cases that support this argument and detail the essential components of a well-developed and structured cyberbullying policy for school districts.

Chapter 6 provides a number of practical recommendations for preventing cyberbullying and online harassment. Specific emphasis is placed on early education and guidance from school personnel, as appropriate online habits must be instilled and reinforced before youth are extensively using the technology. Furthermore, we discuss how a coordinated effort by teachers, administrative staff, counselors, law enforcement, parents, and other stakeholders is necessary to encourage positive and productive Internet use among adolescents.

Finally, Chapter 7 explores constructive ways in which to respond to cyberbullying. When appropriate, educators must step up quickly to identify and then discipline harmful behaviors in cyberspace by their students. We argue that informal response strategies will prove most useful for the majority of cyberbullying behaviors but also discuss when formal disciplinary action must be pursued. It is once again essential that educators,
parents, and others in the community present a unified front against all forms of online aggression. Adolescents must learn that bullying in any form, wherever and whenever perpetrated, will not be tolerated.

...bullying will never be eliminated unless teachers and children become partners in this crusade against cruelty.

—SuEllen Fried and Paula Fried

Bullies and Victims (1996, p. 107)