Combating Online Bullying

Key Points

Bullying has long been a problem; taking it online has opened the door to 24-hour hurt.

Microsoft promotes efforts to combat online bullying by creating technology tools, enforcing policies against abuse in its online services, providing education and guidance, and establishing partnerships with others.

Governments play a vital role in helping to combat harassment and threats online through laws that are thoughtfully written, balancing safety and freedom of speech.

Just like bullying in person, online bullying (also known as cyberbullying) is repeated behavior intended to tease, demean, or harass someone less powerful. Young people can bully using any type of internet-connected device through text and instant messaging, games, or social media such as Facebook and Snapchat. Bullying online opens the door to 24-hour hurt, which can be amplified by anonymity and the potential for broadcast to a wide audience.

There are many reasons why young people mistreat others, whether to gain approval or be perceived as funny, retaliate for having been bullied themselves, or lash out because they too are in distress. It isn't always intentional—what starts as an argument may escalate. Often, young people may not even recognize their behavior as bullying, referring to it instead as drama.

Because young people practically grow up online, it's no surprise that bullying has moved to the internet. Estimates of the prevalence of online bullying vary. However, in 2020, a Microsoft study of more than 12,500 teens and adults from 25 countries found that 12 percent of those interviewed had experienced cyberbullying.

Youth who experience online bullying—whether as a bully, a target, or a bystander—can suffer damaging mental health consequences. According to the Cyberbullying Research Center, "research reveals a link between online bullying and low self-esteem, family and academic problems, school violence, and delinquent behavior."

Two challenges make stopping online bullying difficult. First, many do not regard it as a serious form of aggression. And second, cyberbullying incidents can slip through the cracks. The Cyberbullying Research Center reports that, "Parents often say that they don't have the technical skills to keep up with their kids' online behavior; teachers are afraid to intervene in behaviors that often occur away from school; and law enforcement is hesitant to get involved unless there is clear evidence of a crime or a significant threat to someone's physical safety."

To address online bullying, everyone—youth, parents, educators and counselors, law enforcement, technology companies, and the internet community at large—must together create an environment where young people feel comfortable talking with adults about this problem, safe enough as bystanders to get involved, and confident that meaningful steps will be taken to resolve it.

Microsoft Approach

The Microsoft approach to combating child safety issues on the internet includes developing technology, providing education and guidance, establishing internal policies, and partnering with others.

Creating Technology Tools

Microsoft provides technology tools that can be tailored to each child. Parents can monitor their children's web activity and block unwanted contact using Family Safety on Windows 10 and Windows 8. For young gamers, parents can use Online Safety settings for Xbox Live to specify what activities children can participate in, who they can communicate with, and who can see their profile.

Providing Education and Guidance

Microsoft provides educational materials for teachers and parents to instruct young people how to stand up to online bullying, what to do if a child is involved in it, and how to promote a culture of digital civility, which research shows to be a potent way to help stop bullying.

Establishing Internal Policies and Practices

Through its Code of Conduct, Microsoft enforces policies against abuse and harassment on its online servces and moderates content and interactions to address any abuse, illegal activity, or inappropriate material. Customers who misuse Microsoft services are subject to account termination; serious incidents may be reported to law enforcement.

Partnering with Others

Microsoft works with governments, industry groups, and others to help address online bullying through global efforts like **The Power of Zero,** international **Safer Internet Day** and our own campaign for digital civility.

Policy Considerations

Balance anti-harassment legislation with free speech rights

Governments play a vital role in helping to combat online harassment and threats through laws that are thoughtfully written to balance safety and freedom of speech.

Encourage Industry Collaboration

Microsoft supports legislation that releases access providers from liability for obscene material or abusive behavior if they have made a good-faith effort to screen their services or provided screening devices for parents. Examples include Section 230 of the US Communications Decency Act and the European Union Directive 2000/31/EC.

Promote Comprehensive Online Safety Education in Schools

Government support for anti-bullying education, as part of a comprehensive online safety curriculum for elementary and secondary school students, can provide a foundation for addressing the problem of online bullying. One example of such support is a U.S. law mandating that anti-bullying measures be taught in any school that receives E-Rate funding from the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). (The E-Rate program gives schools and libraries discounts for telecommunications and internet access).