Introduction to Cyberbullying — Avatars and Identity

Overview

With the layering of identity through the use of nicknames and avatars, as well as a sense of anonymity, it is easy for young people to sometimes forget that real people – with real feelings – are at the heart of online conversations. In this lesson, students are provided with opportunities to explore this concept and discuss the importance of using empathy and common sense when talking to others online.

Learning Outcomes

Students will demonstrate:

- understanding of how online communication differs from face-to-face conversation
- awareness of how the distinct attributes of online communication may contribute to inappropriate or bullying behaviour
- recognition of cyberbullying behaviour
- understanding of the crucial role played by bystanders, including themselves, in fuelling or stopping bullying behaviour – online and offline
- awareness of the impact of cyberbullying on targeted individuals
- knowledge of appropriate action to take when cyberbullying occurs
- awareness of rules for “good Netizenship”

Preparation and Materials

- Read the Cyberbullying Backgrounder
- Read the A Word About (N)ethics backgrounder
- Distribute to parents or caregivers (via e-mail or hand delivery by students) the Parents’ Guide to Cyberbullying backgrounder
- Provide art supplies for the avatar mask activity
- Prepare the Noah & Saskia screen capture overhead
- Print out the It’s a Dog’s Life story
**Procedure**

**Activity One: Online Avatars**

This lesson begins with a mask-making exercise. Depending on the availability of supplies and time permitted, you may have students make their masks out of plaster of Paris, papier mâché or construction paper. (If you want students to make more complicated masks, do a Web search for “how to make a plaster mask” or “how to make a papier mâché mask,” which will bring up many excellent Web sites with step-by-step instructions.)

**Class Discussion**

Begin the class by writing the word “AVATAR” on the board.

Ask students:

- Does anyone know the meaning of this word? *(In online environments, an avatar is a virtual digital image that represents a person – an online identity. The term comes from a Sanskrit word meaning an incarnation in human form; however, online avatars can be anything from symbols to animals.)*
- Do any of you use avatars when you are communicating online? *(Many students will have used avatars on social networking sites like Neopets or Club Penguin.)*
- What kinds of avatars do you use?

**Mask Making**

Tell students, “Today we are going to make masks to represent your online identity. Think about online avatars that you use, or invent one that you would like to use.”

Have students make their masks. Once their masks have been created, have them think of a name for their avatar. Ask them to write down the avatar’s likes, dislikes and personality traits.

**Role-Playing**

Wearing their masks, have students mingle and introduce themselves to one another in character as their avatar. Once they have done this, instruct students to return to their seats and initiate the following discussion:

- Let’s talk about your avatar. Is its personality similar or different to yours?
- How did you feel when you were going around the room as your avatar? Did you behave differently than you would have if you had just been going around the room as yourself?
- For those of you who have used avatars on the Internet, is your avatar like you or different?
- What kinds of things does your avatar do that are like you?
- What kinds of things does it do that are different?

Explain that avatars are lots of fun, but they can also complicate online relationships because of the “identity layers” they add.
Place the Noah & Saskia overhead onto the projector.

Tell students that this is the Web site for a popular Australian kids’ show called Noah & Saskia. It’s about two people who have never met in real life, but who have developed a friendship online. The real Noah and Saskia are on either side of this picture.

Ask whether anyone can explain who the other people are. (*The avatars directly beside Noah and Saskia are the ones they use when they’re online. The girl and boy in the middle represent what Noah thinks Saskia looks like and what Saskia thinks Noah looks like, based on their avatars.*)

Present the following information to the class:

- When we talk about identity layers, there are a number of elements at work: there are the online identities that we choose for ourselves, and then there is the way that others imagine us, based on the names or avatars we use. But the one thing we can never forget is that real people are at the heart of all these identities.

- Online identities can be lots of fun: you can be anything or anyone you want to be, you can have super powers, and you can express who you really are inside in ways that you might not be able to in the real world. But sometimes, wearing an online “mask” can make kids behave in ways that they wouldn’t in person.

Read the following quote to students:

*[With] the Internet, you can really get away with a lot more because I don't think a lot of people would have enough confidence to walk up to someone and be like, “I hate you, you're ugly.” But over the Internet you don't really see their face and they don't see yours and you don't have to look in their eyes and see they're hurt.*

- This is a quote from a 10-year-old boy. Ask students whether they agree or disagree with what he is saying.

- He says that “…over the Internet you don’t really see their face and they don’t see yours.” Explain that this doesn’t mean that their feelings aren’t hurt – there is still a person at the other end of the screen. And sometimes the speed at which we send messages to people online means that we may not be thinking about the consequences of what we are saying.

“Think Before You Click” Self-Test

To teach students to quickly decide whether something they are about to do online is a good or a bad idea, ask each student to:

- Think of two people:
  - someone famous he or she admires for his or her courage, and
  - an adult in her or his life who is trusted and respected.

- Have students record these two names in a specific place in their agenda. Explain that as of today, these two people will be their “virtual conscience.” Every time they intend to do something online which they’re not sure is right, they will ask themselves: “What would these people think about this?”
Activity Two: It’s a Dog’s Life

Explain to the class that playing with identity is only one aspect of communicating online and that you will now look at another important element. Ask a student volunteer to read the story It’s a Dog’s Life to the class.

Deconstructing the Story

Engage in a class discussion based on the following, and record key ideas on the board.

- Imagine that you are Ray. Would you be scared if you received a message like the one sent by Orkad? Why? (Ray doesn’t know the identity of the person who is sending him the threat. Because of this, he doesn’t know whether this is serious or a joke.)

- Orkad does not feel that he is harming Ray. Why not? (Orkad is a dog, and dogs use their sense of smell to identify fear in humans. But on the Internet, the sense of smell doesn’t work – Orkad doesn’t realize this.)

- Think of what Katy could have told Orkad to convince him to stop sending this type of message over the Internet. (Katy is the bystander, a positive witness trying to prevent cyberbullying. Katy’s response must not be limited to “it’s wrong.” She must also explain to Orkad that although he cannot smell Ray’s fear, it might still exist. The Internet does not provide all the sensory information that Orkad uses in the physical world.)

- As human beings, are there signs that we cannot see when we communicate online, as opposed to speaking directly with someone in the physical world? (There is a loss of visual and auditory information on the Internet – we can’t read people’s expressions or hear their tone of voice.)

Draw the following table on the board:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ORKAD</th>
<th>KATY</th>
<th>RAY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Perpetrator)</td>
<td>(Bystander)</td>
<td>(Target)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Explain that when people threaten or harass others using the Internet or cell phones, they are engaging in “cyberbullying.” Like schoolyard bullying, there are usually three types of people involved: a perpetrator or perpetrators who are doing the bullying; a bystander or bystanders who see the bullying; and the person who is the target. In the story, Orkad is the perpetrator, Katy is the bystander and Ray is the target.

Discuss the following points with the class:

- In the story, Katy is a bystander watching Orkad send the message. In what other ways might people be bystanders to cyberbullying? (They may be receiving mean messages about or images of others through instant messaging, or they may be following a hurtful conversation thread in a chat area.)
If people ignore cyberbullying, is it likely to just go away? Why or why not?

**Key point:** Anyone can, at any given time, become a target – you are not responsible for this. But this situation must never be tolerated: you must react to bullying in a **proactive way** – one that will lead to a resolution. In other words, to resolve the cyberbullying situation, you need to address it, but not get involved in further exchanges with the bully, which may escalate the situation.

- What can bystanders do to stop cyberbullying? *(List suggestions in the “Katy” column in the table.)*
- What can targets do to stop cyberbullying? *(List suggestions under “Ray” in the table.)*
- Orkad thought he was being funny, but it is clear how his joke might be interpreted by Ray as a threat, because Ray doesn’t know who sent it. What rules about communicating online can you suggest here? *(List suggestions under “Orkad” in the table.)*

From this table, have students develop a “code of (N)ethics” or rules for online communication that will help everyone prevent cyberbullying.

**Closure: Responding to Bullying**

Generally, a four-step **STOP** process is recommended to actively deal with and stop bullying. Review the following with students:

- **STOP** immediately leave the online environment or activity where bullying is going on.
- **BLOCK** e-mails or instant messages received from bullies. NEVER RESPOND.
- **RECORD** all harassing messages and send them to your Internet provider (Yahoo, Hotmail, etc.). Most providers have policies about users harassing people on their server.
- **TALK** to a trusted adult about the cyberbullying; alert the police when bullying involves physical threats.
  - Who are the people you could talk to about cyberbullying?
  - Would the same process work for physical bullying?

**Extension Activity**

Have students design a poster to illustrate the four steps that are an appropriate response to cyberbullying: stop, block, record and talk. Encourage them to think of images they could develop to make these four steps easy to remember.

Ultimately, the poster they produce could be put up in a high traffic area of the school.
Noah & Saskia Screen Capture

http://www.abc.net.au/rollercoaster/noahandsaskia/
It’s a Dog’s Life

There once was a dog named Orkad. His master, Ray, took pretty good care of him; he walked him every day, but not for very long because Ray liked to spend his time playing Internet games. His favourite was a game where the player must look after a dog; there was an image of a dog on the screen and the player had to feed it, furnish its room and buy it toys to keep it entertained.

For hours on end, Orkad would watch Ray play this game, all the while waiting to be walked. Those were the times when he felt really lonely and dreamed about having someone to communicate with … oh, of course, there was always Katy—the neighbour’s cat—but they really didn’t have much in common.

There was something else that drove Orkad crazy: his kibble. He hated the kibble Ray bought for him. Obviously, he couldn’t tell Ray how he felt because he was a dog and everyone knows dogs can’t talk … and Orkad was no exception. But strange as it may seem, there was something he did know how to do: he could operate a computer. Watching Ray hit the keyboard day in, day out, Orkad had learned a thing or two.

One day, Ray left for school without turning off his computer. Orkad was home alone and bored out of his mind. He jumped up on the office chair and after only a moment’s hesitation, typed out the word “dog” in the little window at the top of the screen. His heart beating like a drum, he clicked on the first link.

It was a discussion group where people talked about their problems with their dogs and gave each other advice. That was exactly what Orkad was looking for because he knew all about dog problems. He was just about to respond to a message when he heard Katy meowing mockingly at the window.

“What are you trying to do, Orkad? You’re a dog, and the Internet is for humans!”

“You’re right, Katy … but on the Internet, no one knows I’m a dog!”

From that day on, Orkad’s life was transformed: he could communicate and help people resolve problems with their dogs, and everyone respected his advice. He was secretly hoping that Ray would one day join the discussion group to seek advice because then Orkad would be able to explain to him how he could improve his dog’s life. But that day never came.

It was time for summer vacation and Ray left for camp, leaving Orkad with Ray’s parents. Orkad was disappointed that his master hadn’t joined the discussion group and, out of frustration, he decided to write a message directly to Ray. Of course, his message was anonymous … he didn’t want to blow his cover!

The message read: “You’re trying to poison your dog with this gross kibble. If you keep it up, I’ll come after you!”

Orkad was just about to hit the “Send” button when he heard a shocked meow at the window. It was Katy again:

“Orkad!! Don’t you send that message to Ray! You’re making threats. He’ll be absolutely terrified!”

“Come on! It’s just a joke to get him to understand that I don’t like my kibble,” said Orkad, hitting “Send.” “In fact, check it out. I’m sure Ray must have already received the message. Can you smell fear anywhere?” he asked, running his nose all over the screen and keyboard. “I know Ray’s odour when he’s afraid; I would recognize it anywhere, and I’m not smelling any fear here.” (Sniff! Sniff!)
A Word About (N)ethics

In the course of the activities in this lesson, students will develop rules of online conduct. These rules can be grouped under a term such as “(N)ethics” or “Golden Rules.” They share the goal of avoiding, dealing with and speaking out against cyberbullying.

Here is a relatively complete list that can be adapted to suit the students’ age level:

1. Respect the private lives of other people online; don’t spread rumours, don’t share information about or photos of someone without getting his or her permission.
2. Respect other people’s virtual space: don’t go into someone else’s files or computer.
3. In the online world, just like the offline world, never try to exclude other people.
4. Don’t try to turn people against one another; making someone else be a bully is no different from being a bully yourself.
5. Follow the same values in the virtual world as in the physical world: never write to anyone something you wouldn’t be willing to say face-to-face. If you feel an urge to write something angry, sleep on it.

If you witness cyberbullying:

6. Refuse to do it if someone asks you to pass on an insulting or embarrassing message, photo or video.
7. Take action against the perpetrator: react when your friends get involved in cyberbullying, and speak up every time you witness online harassment. Most young people are more sensitive to criticism from their peers than from their parents.

If you are a target of cyberbullying:

8. **Stop**: immediately leave the online environment or activity where the bullying is happening (chat room, newsgroup, game, IM, etc.)
9. **Block** all e-mails or instant messages from the perpetrator, and never reply.
10. **Record** all harassing messages and forward them to your Internet Service Provider. Most ISPs have policies against harassing messages
11. **Talk**: tell a trusted adult, such as a parent or teacher.