**You are not Alone!**

 *“”Ugly” and “Pathetic” turns to “Drink bleach and die!”. Messages left on my wall by my best friend, a stranger, my best friend and a stranger. Before long, there’s a page set up in my honour : ‘Keekee must die’. It’s a public page on which hundreds of people have posted reasons for me to kill myself, some even offering graphic tips and methods. I don’t even know these people. Why does everyone hate me? How can I face school tomorrow? Nobody is going to want to be friends with me anymore! I feel so alone!”*

Cyberbullying is a real threat with real consequences. It breaks people down to their most vulnerable and takes advantage of their insecurities. It’s cruel and it’s relentless, and it doesn’t stop when you close your door. It follows you in and wraps itself around you like a dirty, grimy coat, squeezing out your self-esteem and leaving you feeling alone and isolated.

We love the internet and all that it offers. It’s this great big society where we can all come together and explore, chat, play games. Within this triangle of activity lies a wonderful, creative and opportune space where we can experience, experiment and learn. However, like most things, there is a flip-side: a dark, seedy underbelly. This dark side of the internet reflects human nature at its worst and cyberbullying represents one aspect of this.

Cyberbullying has been a hot topic for a while, getting a lot of media attention around the world but, I fear, we may still be underestimating its effect and hold over people. Some countries are reporting an increase in the number of incidents of cyberbullying, especially in schools, but these are only reported statistics that do not even begin to reflect the true extent of this pandemic spreading across the internet.

Children are harming themselves, some even feeling compelled to commit suicide due to the constant mental and psychological abuse and strain associated with cyberbullying. It is an ongoing form of abuse with no respite. It follows our children into school and, unlike bullying in previous decades, it can also follow our children into our homes and into our children’s bedrooms.

Ryan, Erin, Amanda. Ciara, Jessica, Anthony. Joshua, Hannah and Daniel. These are all real children, belonging to real families. These are all children who will never know what it’s like to get married, will never feel the arms of their children wrapped warmly around their necks or fall so deeply in love it takes their breath away! These children are just a few of the victims claimed by cyberbullying, children who felt like they had no other option but to take their own lives!

We cannot blame the technology though, and we cannot lay all the blame at the doors of the social media sites used to carry out the abuse. Cyberbullying is about regularly subjecting a child or young person to humiliation and torment, threat or harassment using current digital technologies, including the Internet and/or mobile phones. The stark reality is that cyberbullying is not so much about the technology; it’s about human nature and human attitudes. Yes, it’s perpetrated through social sites and texting; but the modes and methods of bullying are only limited by the imagination of the children involved and the technologies they have access to. They say things they would never say face-to-face, they push the boundaries of what is socially acceptable in a social environment and they often rely on the anonymity afforded them as they sit behind their computer screens and hurl abuse at anyone who is unfortunate enough to come across them.

Although cyberbullies often subject children and young people to fear, mental abuse and bullying, these same children are often reluctant to report cyberbullying and may not even tell their parents it’s happening to them because they are afraid of having their mobile phones and other digital devices taken off them. They become trapped between the fear of the torment, on the one hand, and the fear of the repercussions, on the other.

Our children are naturally curious, naturally sociable and naturally innocent. They want to know what is out there and experience the digital world for themselves. They want to be friends with everyone, because that is part of what being a teenager is all about, and we want to encourage that. But we also need to empower them with the tools to deal with this digital world in all its facets, both good and bad. Children will be better equipped to take control of a situation if they know what to do when confronted with harsh, unacceptable online behaviour; what to do if they feel threatened, how to block and report cyberbullies and that it’s ok to ‘unfriend’ people. We need to let them know that they must seek help: speak to a parent, a teacher, a trusted adult; make them aware of online support structures like The Cybersmile Foundation.

There is no definite way of preventing or stamping out cyberbullying, but education and communication can go a long way towards cleansing the cyberworld of this scourge. We need to teach children to respect others and that silence, when others are being hurt, is not acceptable. Children must also understand that there are consequences to their actions and, although these consequences may be temporary, there is the very real possibility of them being permanent!

As parents we have a dual duty: we must protect our children from cyberbullying but we also have a duty of care to ensure that our own children are not the transgressors of cyberbullying. Just as we teach our children how to behave and conduct themselves in the real world so too should we extend this to include the cyber world. The parenting basics are the same…it’s just the tools that are slightly different.