Cyberbullying.

Dear Parents

I was about 15 when my parents decided I should see a psychologist. They could see I was not happy and could get nothing out of me and so handed me over to a professional. I lied to him as well. There was no way I was going to tell any adult about all the horrid things I was having to endure at the hands of some of the senior boys (and a few of my peers) at the rather tough boys' boarding school I attended. I was very aware that saying something was only going to make things worse for me and so I just ducked and dived as best I could to avoid being the target of their vindictive behaviour. There was lots about school I enjoyed, and most of my memories from the six years are happy, but for a couple of years these rather cruel boys did make most days a trial – especially in the dining hall and dormitory. Most of the bullying was verbal but they were not above trying waterboarding, burning, finger crushing and other acts of violent entertainment. Army training was a breeze in comparison – the instructors were almost gentlemen!

Bullying continues in all schools but on the whole young people in good schools in South Africa tend to be more circumspect about what they say and do. This is mainly (I think) as a result of the changes in the country which now has a bill of rights which affects how we view ourselves and others. In addition, parents and teachers take less of a back seat and young people know that adults do not turn a blind eye as readily. Certainly around this school bullying is less of a problem than it was even though it still affects the lives of some boys.

Unfortunately, to counter these gains to a degree we have seen a rise of over the last few years is what has been termed "cyberbullying". A definition of which could be: *The use of information and communication technologies to support deliberate, repeated, and hostile behaviour by an individual or group, that is intended to harm other.* Cyberbullying has been something of a setback in attempts to reduce the amount of bullying. It has taken it out of the school grounds and into cyberspace.

Bullying using technology is a problem in a number of additional ways (compared to "ordinary" bullying) including

1.   There is no respite. In days gone by you could go home to get away from the bully. Now he/she is just a few clicks away – and young people do not seem to be able to resist the temptation to look and see what is being said about them or to them.

2.   It has opened up bullying to a greater range of boys and girls (and adults, I am told). They neither have to be big nor quick with the tongue. They just need an online computer (or cellphone), a bit of savvy and a mean streak.

3.   It has become easier to bully with anonymity. Emails, fake or hate facebook sites and cellphone messages can be used to hurt without much chance of being discovered.

4.   Circulation of hurtful comments, pictures or video can happen incredibly quickly and so be more damaging socially.

No statistics are available for South Africa but a large survey completed in the US last year found that about 20% of young people between 10 and 18 believed they had been cyberbullied in their lifetime and about 7,5% in the 30 days prior to the survey. Girls saw themselves as victims of cyberbulying more than boys and a figure of about 5% would probably be more accurate for boys. In a school our size that would translate to

about 35 boys. We have no way of knowing the extent of the problem here but we have had to deal with some bullying and foolishness around interactions in cyberspace and it appears to be on the increase – which is not surprising because the increase in "cyber" interactions has been massive over the past three years.

Facebook has become the social networking site of choice for most Bishops boys. It gives many of them many hours of entertainment and, of course, much of what happens is innocent and fun (although I fear it interferes with homework more than it should).

I spoke to the staff about cyberbullying this week and I think they found it helpful both as tutors and as parents. Certainly, I found it useful preparing for it. Already some discussions have happened in tutor groups and others will discuss the issue this week and early next term.

I think it is a helpful thing if as parents we take time to encourage our sons to be sensible and careful in what they post and support in cyberspace. We should do this more than once – even if we get the frustrated "You've told me already!" response. As our sons get older it becomes more inappropriate to check on their interactions online. Indeed, you are likely to be quite shocked and disappointed by the language and thinking happening in these interactions – and there is next to nothing you can do about it except encourage your son to live by the values of your family and/or the school.

If you find that your son seems to spend a lot of time on his computer (and online) and comes away from it upset or stressed, then you probably do need to be concerned. If your son is also resistant about going to school this would also be a pointer. The survey I mentioned earlier found that about 50% of boys who thought they had been cyberbullied said they were "scared" as a result. Interestingly, only 25% of girls felt scared. No reasons were put forward but one may be that boys threaten violence.

I do not believe there is any crisis with regard to cyber abuse at the moment but I do think we would be wise parents if we engage with our sons and encourage them to be circumspect and careful – and "Do unto others as you would have them do to you."

Parenting has never been simple but I do think we have more to worry about than our parents and their parents!

I hope you enjoy the holidays with your sons.

Yours sincerely

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