In suburban Minnesota, a young boy creates a webpage about a female junior high classmate, calling her names, spreading rumors about her sexuality, and sharing information about her location until she no longer wants to attend school. In Missouri, a teenage girl commits suicide after a fake Internet "friend" (created by her neighbor) sends negative Internet messages to her. In Florida, several teenage girls record and post video to the Internet of their beating of another girl, allegedly in response to comments she had posted about them online. In Maine, a sixth grader is bullied through a high volume of email and text messages, affecting her mental health and grades, until she was forced to repeat the sixth grade and move to another school.

Cyberbullying on the Rise.

These and other stories from across the country illustrate that online bullying, also known as "cyberbullying," is on the rise in America, often with extremely harmful consequences to the youth involved. Statistically, one in three teens report that they have been victims or participants in cyberbullying. In a survey of college freshmen, 31 percent reported having been bullied harassed, or stalked online while in high school. The problem does not just affect high school, or even junior high students, however. The age of students using the Internet, social networking websites, and other electronic communication technology has gotten younger and younger. An Internet safety group polling fourth through eighth graders nationally found that 42 percent had been bullied online, 38 percent had been threatened online, and over half said they had not told their parents about mean messages they had received. In total, an estimated 13 million children ages 6 to 17 have been victims of cyber-bullying, according to the group "Fight Crime: Invest in Kids." What is the impact of this phenomenon? The National Education Association estimates that more than 160,000 children stay home from school every day because of intimidation. In addition to negatively affecting school and extracurricular participation and performance, cyberbullying has been associated with cases of depression, suicide, assault and other forms of violence.

What is Cyberbullying?

School bullies who once harassed other kids in the cafeteria today use online technology to spread fear and intimidation. Individuals may defame, harass, bully or otherwise harm others using electronic communications such as instant messaging, email, camera phones, web pages, and blogs (Internet journals), etc. Cyberbullying may range from insults to a person's character or appearance, web pages devoted to rating the popularity, weight, or attractiveness of a given person, or outright threats of violence. In the past, those who engaged in harassment or defamation did so in person, by mail, or over the telephone, which limited the scope of the offense. Today, it is cheap and easy to create a fake Internet profile to defame or harass another person, including on social networking websites. In other cases, perpetrators may steal passwords or screen names in order to impersonate others through email communication, or create websites dedicated to defaming others. Email and instant messaging have made it cheap and easy to quickly distribute messages to hundreds or thousands of people under the veil of anonymity. Child safety researchers note that a victim of cyberbullying may receive as many as one thousand electronic messages per day! Such high volumes of cyberbully communication may make a victim feel like the world is against them, even though it may only be one person or a very small group responsible for all the messages. In addition to the ease of sending large volumes of electronic communication, creating new and multiple screen names or pseudonyms to send messages under is also relatively easy, exacerbating the perception that the bully represents a large group opinion.

While in the past victims of bullying could at the very least escape a playground bully at the end of the school day by returning home, today the high volume of children using the Internet and social networking websites means

that messages of intimidation, isolation, and threatening behavior may follow the child into his or her room at home. Experts estimate that each day, 92 percent of teenagers use social media. The increase in electronic communication by children is significant. For example, a survey of parents of children under 18 found that 38 percent of children with Facebook accounts are under 12 years old. While students are increasingly using the Internet for studying and social activity, there is a lot that parents, schools and communities can do to prevent and respond to cyberbullying.

What Can We Do About Cyberbullying?

Minnesota law requires each school district in Minnesota to put policies in place to address the growing problem of cyberbullying. The intent of the law, in part, is to raise awareness about an issue that can negatively affect school safety and performance, but whose importance may be misunderstood or overlooked by many adults who did not grow up in an Internet era and many children who may not yet understand the impact of bullying behavior. Parents, children, schools and communities can work together to prevent cyberbullying by talking about healthy standards and boundaries regarding Internet use, privacy, violence, and social interaction. Although some adults may be intimidated by a new generation that at times may seem to know more about technology than they do, it is important to engage children on who they are communicating with electronically, and what they are communicating about. Parents, children and communities may consider the following tips in addressing cyberbullying and online harassment:

1. **Talk with children about online communication.** Many children who are harassed or bullied online may be reluctant to tell their parents or another adult out of fear of losing their Internet privileges or fear of further humiliation. Set clear standards of ethical conduct and what is acceptable behavior. Maintain an open dialogue with children about the websites that they visit, the individuals they communicate with, and the topics of communication.

2. **Report misconduct immediately.** Contact school and law enforcement authorities at the first signs of harassment and bullying. Do not wait for the problem to go away by itself. Although children may seem more technology-savvy than older generations in some cases, do not be intimidated into inaction. Due to the nature of electronic communication, timely reporting can be important to the ability of law enforcement or school authorities to take effective action.

3. **Set a policy on chat rooms, blogs, and social networking sites.** Such sites can also be associated with hurtful communication such as the spread of rumors, the rating of attractiveness or popularity, or the alienation of a given person. Remember that anything communicated on such Internet sites can become public information, and may be accessed by unintended recipients, or even online predators. Set clear expectations about what conduct is appropriate and what is inappropriate.

4. **Do not assume that you know who you are communicating with online.** Due to the ease of impersonation through electronic communication, both children and adults can be led to believe they are communicating with someone other than who they think they are talking to. Be careful of the information that you choose to share on the Internet. Never disclose personal information such as passwords, PIN numbers, or other private identity information. You may access the Attorney General's website at *www.ag.state.mn.us* to download additional information on Internet safety.

5. **Don't respond to cyberbullies.** Responding to harassing communication online can elevate the level of engagement with the bully and lead to heightened harassment. Report harassment and other misconduct to the appropriate authorities.

For more information contact the Minnesota Attorney General's Office.