ONLINE ACTIVITY, Offline Trouble

Bullying and violence often begin in the virtual world and on social media before entering schools

By Jeff Bean

Cyberbullying and school violence have reached epidemic proportions in our country. People can engage in intellectual debates on the causes of these problems and their solutions, but there can be no doubt that the digital world in which our kids now live has produced harmful effects.

Having been a School Resource Officer (SRO) in a junior high school, I've seen it with my own eyes. It is not the same school setting we had a generation ago. Today's youth are more likely to communicate using electronics than they are to talk face-to-face. And they are having a harder time maintaining communication through conflict, because they either don't need to or don't know how.

Kids seem to go from "zero to fight" these days. Something can start between two classmates on social media, get fueled by other kids who see it online, and eventually culminate in a confrontation at school. The counselor's office is a revolving door during the school day, and a majority of the problems center on social media.

Schools have also seen a rise in online threats. Thankfully, many of these threats never evolve into real violence, but they are a strain on the community nonetheless. Kids have trouble managing their behavior online, and parents need help understanding the digital world in which their children live. Law enforcement is playing catch-up, too, creating new laws to cope with these problems.

School is the place where all of this comes to a head. School faculty and administrators want to focus on lesson plans and educate youths, but they often spend way too much time putting out fires created on social media. Schools need to be better equipped to handle these issues. We all do—and that's why we all must work together!

Young and Online

As an SRO and former D.A.R.E. instructor, I interacted with students as young as second grade through eighth grade. Over time, I saw the online and digital world change kids' interactions. It used to be a little more than half our junior high kids had their own smartphones; today, most every student that age has a phone. And mobile use keeps skewing younger: 2017 Nielsen data indicates that 45 percent of kids ages 8–12 have smartphones.

Kids feel isolated or left out if they don't have access to social media; the average age to sign up for one's own account is 12.6, according to Common Sense Media. When I started to see how important social media is to our kids and how dangerous it can be, I knew they needed help. I gave junior high students anonymous surveys, asking them detailed questions about their online activity. I later included elementary
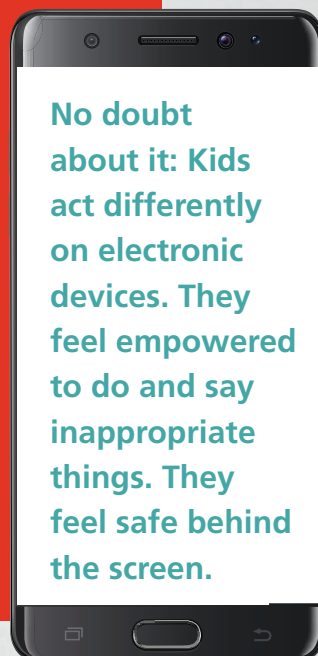
ARMING TEACHERS ISN'T THE ANSWER, PARENTS SAY

The annual PDK Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools reveals that in the aftermath of recent high-profile school shootings in Parkland, Florida, and Santa Fe, Texas, one-third (34 percent) of parents fear for their child's physical safety while at school, up from just 12 percent in 2013. Only 27 percent of K–12 parents expressed "strong confidence" that their school could deter such an attack.

Most parents don't think that arming teachers is the answer, however. Two-thirds (67 percent) prefer that their children's teachers are not armed, and 63 percent oppose allowing staff and teachers to carry guns altogether. Only if teachers are given rigorous training does parents' disapproval drop to 50 percent. Other findings from the PDK Poll include:

- 26 percent of respondents say their children would be safer with armed staff or teachers in schools, while 36 percent say students would be less safe.
- 28 percent of parents were "extremely/very confident" in their school's security, while 41 percent were "somewhat" confident, and 31 percent were "not so/not at all confident."
- 80 percent of parents approve of armed police officers or guards, 76 percent support mental health screening, and 74 percent approve of placing metal detectors at school entrances.

For more information, visit *pdkpoll.org/results.*

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students in the surveys, too, when I saw them becoming active on social media.

I did research, attended trainings, and even created my own accounts on social media to monitor the kids in my community. This really opened my eyes to how difficult the digital realm can be for children. There's a huge amount of negativity there that can be stressful and overwhelming. No doubt about it: Kids act differently on electronic devices. They feel empowered to do and say inappropriate things. They feel safe behind the screen.

Beyond the Screen

The students I taught knew I maintained fake accounts to monitor them, but that didn't slow down their bad behavior online. I began incorporating what I was witnessing online into the classroom. We talked about digital citizenship, and I let them know that my door was always open if anyone had questions or needed help. They took me up on it often, coming in to express concerns about cyberbullying, sexting, and other issues. They were concerned about friends who were making poor decisions online, and they wanted me to help.

The accounts I set up allowed me to see these issues myself instead of relying on the words of students. The fake accounts were easy enough to manage; I used a cartoon character as my avatar and said I was a teenager who lived in a neighboring town. I sent out a handful of friend requests and immediately began getting inundated with friend requests of my own. *Students were "friending" a made-up account!* They were not at all concerned about their safety online, but instead more worried about popularity.

I never interacted with the kids on social media; I only monitored what they were doing. I was able to see inappropriate posts and talk with students about it the next day at school. It helped educate kids about protecting their online identities and got them to think before they hit the "send" button. I would take concerns to the schools when necessary, sharing information with counselors and principals. This allowed the faculty to offer assistance and intervention for a student who might be "flying under the radar" with antisocial

behavior. I made phone calls to parents, letting them know I had concerns about their child's online activity.

One situation involved almost a dozen boys at the junior high. It started one night with some negativity on social media. In less than two hours, participants made almost 200 comments, culminating in threats to fight at school the next day. I called the assistant principal, and we met the buses in the morning to take these students aside. Two of the boys had already gotten into a minor physical altercation on a bus, but things likely could have been much worse had we not intervened.

Another incident involved a female student who came to me to report receiving an inappropriate picture from a male classmate. With the student's help, a school counselor and I were able to find the picture and verify its origin. We were able to help the victim immediately and take action against the student who sent the photo. Both kids got the assistance they needed, and the school and I worked with their families moving forward. The information didn't make the news, limiting the possibility of making what was already a bad situation worse.

Safe and Secure
Our kids don't feel safe at school anymore. Politicians are scrambling to create laws and find funding for school security. Administrators are struggling with budgets to implement better safety measures. Law enforcement is finding itself being reactive versus proactive. I can't offer any new funding for these efforts, but I can offer some ideas that work for each group.

Parents: Principals can offer parents advice on how to better communicate with their kids about online activity and other sensitive topics.

- Set the ground rules for your kids' use of technology early, and *enforce those rules!* Limit screen time on television, computers, tablets, and phones. Research the technology before allowing kids to use it.
- Open lines of communication at a young age, and keep them open. Kids need to know they can talk to their parents about serious topics.
- Trust your kids until they give you a reason not to. Hold them accountable for mistakes, but also praise them for good behavior and actions.
- Monitor their online activity, but don't spy. Be upfront about your expectations.

- Be their parent, not their friend.

Law Enforcement: Principals should partner with law enforcement agencies familiar with school settings and working with children to ensure safety.

- Train officers on technology, working with juveniles, and dealing with mental health issues.
- Share information with other agencies, forge reciprocal reporting agreements with schools, and keep parents informed about what their kids are doing outside the home.
- Engage the community by getting out of the patrol car and saying hello, particularly to kids. The interaction is crucial to developing positive relationships.
- Demonstrate that school safety is a priority by working hand-in-hand with schools on safety initiatives. Get more SROs into the schools.

Schools: Principals, teachers, and staff can promote policies to improve online interactions among children, as well as head off bullying and violence.

- Incorporate a digital citizenship curriculum. Teach kids the importance of online safety at a young age.
- Update policies for students' online behavior. Enforce the rules on a case-by-case basis; zero tolerance is not the right approach.
- Train appropriate faculty on social media apps, and give them access to these apps at school. Designate staff to monitor student activity.
- Develop and maintain good relationships with parents. Trust goes a long way toward working together.
- Ask law enforcement to share the burden. Having SROs and good working relationships with them is essential to school safety.

We live in scary times, but you can't allow yourself to feel helpless. There are steps you can take right now to improve safety at your school. By working together, listening to our children, and simply doing our part, we can all do a better job of keeping our kids safe. **P**

Jeff Bean is a 20-year veteran of a suburban Chicago police department and serves as SRO at a junior high school.

PARENTAL BUY-IN

According to Safe and Sound Schools, a majority of parents (54 percent) feels that school safety and security deserves priority for additional school funding, ahead of academics (32 percent).