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Can This Smartphone App Stop Cyberbullying?

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For all the attention that has been paid to cyberbullying in recent years, no one has come up with a good solution to it. The world of text messages and social media is, to a great extent, unpoliced, giving cyberbullies a feeling of impunity. Right now, only one in ten cyberbullying victims informs an adult.

Tech companies seem equally at a loss as to how to protect young users. In November, for example, Instagram took seven days to respond to a middle school girl's report that she was being targeted by graphic and sexually violent messages on the photo-sharing app. Earlier this year, Amanda Hess chronicled Twitter's lackluster online abuse guidelines and unsatisfactory response to online harassment.

"The [social networking] industry has not done nearly enough to address this issue," says Jim Steyer, founder of Common Sense media. Which is part of what makes interesting STOPit, an app that facilitates reporting by empowering students to take screenshots of malicious online behavior and send it to a set of customized trusted adults. STOPit, which was unveiled to schools last fall, attempts to remove several of the traditional hurdles to reporting cyberbullying by allowing kids to remain anonymous; alert local law enforcement to older online predators; and access to 24/7 helplines.

Right now, many apps exist that let parents monitor their kids' social media involvement, but reporting apps are hard to find. (There's "Find Help" on Facebook, as well as apps under development like BullyBlocker.) With just one review on iTunes' app store, STOPit hasn't exactly caught fire. It's currently facing a crucial test, however, in a New Jersey school district. The Kenilworth school district will introduce and demonstrate STOPit through a number of assemblies for different grade levels. "It's a pretty big thing to be using in a guinea pig fashion," Dr. Scott Taylor, the superintendent of New Jersey's Kenilworth school district, told me. He said the school district turned to the app after a series of speakers proved less than effective.

Though students will not have to download the app, Taylor said schools are planning to send information on the app home to parents and likely will put together a local cable program discussing the app. "[Cyberbullying] is consuming my high school administrators," he said. "We want to find every way we can to prevent it, and make kids feel comfortable referring problems to us … Who knows how many kids are not even referring things to us?"

Over 40 percent of teenagers with Internet access have reported being bullied online, and 95 percent of media-using teens say they have witnessed it. Witnesses don't report for fear of retaliation and being branded as a snitch. Victims don't report because they feel ashamed and powerless. When you take into account cyberbullying's miserable reporting statistics, giving kids the ability to report bullies' actions on the technology with which they feel most comfortable (and from which they can send reports from covertly) seems a worthy experiment. "The number one tool/instrument used in cyberbullying are smartphones," said Todd Schobel, who created STOPit. "So give them that exact smartphone that they're comfortable with, and let the kids make the difference. "

Some educators are skeptical of the ability of STOPit and similar apps to decrease the prevalence of cyberbullying. "STOPit is good—it facilitates [reporting] and makes it easier," said Elizabeth Englander, author of Bullying and Cyberbullying: What Every Educator Needs To Know. "But I would wonder, how many kids are going to want to get on an app and designate an administrator? … Many children go through school feeling that these problems are never going to happen to them."

When I brought up this concern with Taylor, he said Kenilworth's administrators were

planning to stress the anonymity piece of the app, comparing it to the boxes school principals used to have outside their offices where students could anonymously drop written reports of peers' wrongdoing. "Those generally worked," he said. "Not only is it the next version of that, it's a more efficient version of doing that."

It's past time to try new strategies to combat the complicated phenomenon of cyberbullying. Apps like STOPit and projects like Viraj Puri's live index of bullying in the United States are the beginning of pinpointing bullying and introducing accountability into a previously unmonitored system. Fighting technology with technology could prove to be the best way to deter this pervasive, destructive behavior.

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