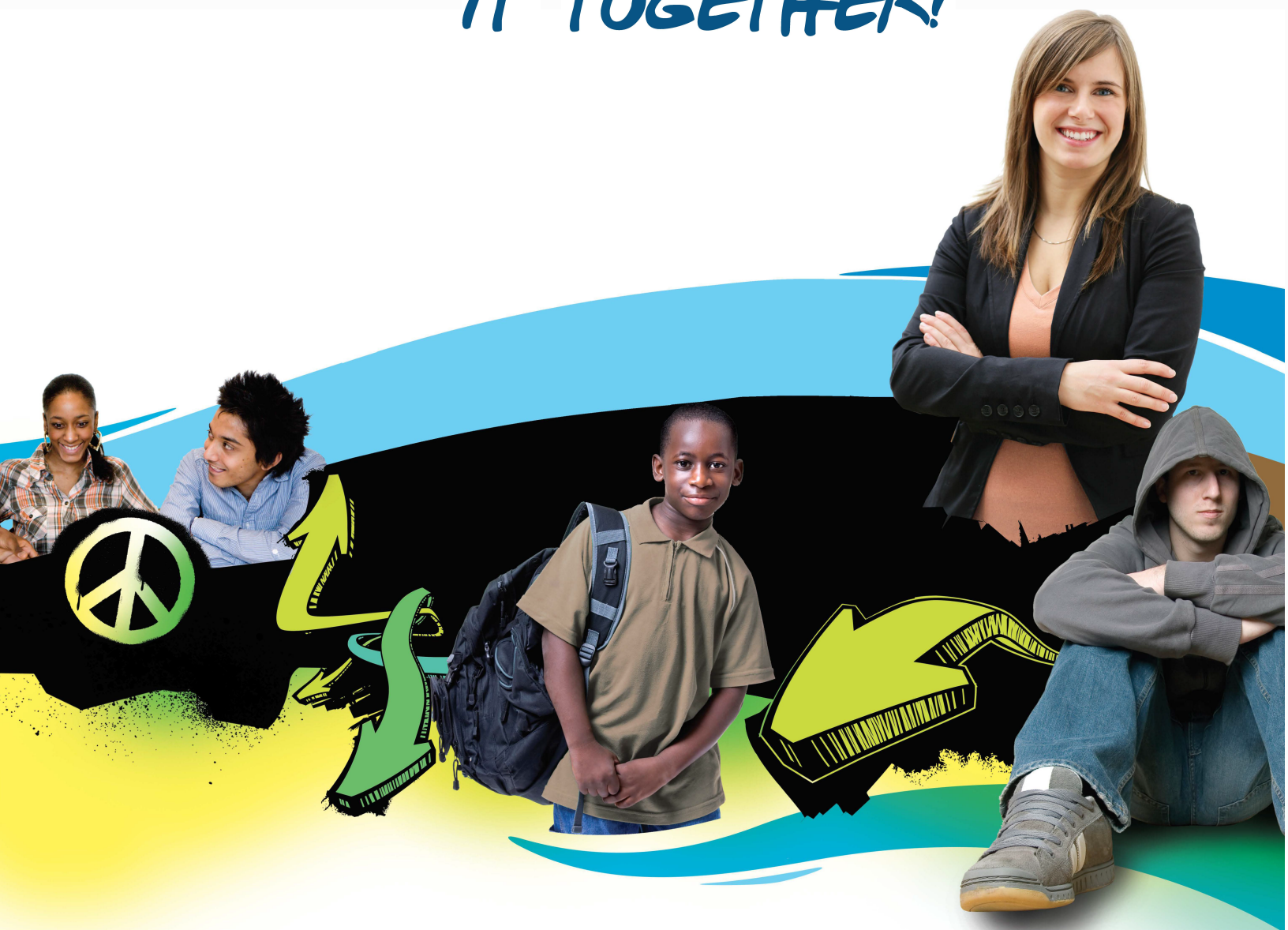




ONLINE VIOLENCE : LET'S WORK ON IT TOGETHER!



**ACTION PLAN TO PREVENT AND DEAL WITH
VIOLENCE IN THE SCHOOLS
2008-2011**

Reference Tool

ONLINE VIOLENCE: LET'S WORK ON IT TOGETHER!

Information and communications technologies are evolving rapidly. They offer many advantages and are increasingly present in young people's everyday lives. However, they are also a source of concern for parents and partners in the education community, since young people today are more exposed to visual violence, cyberaddiction, fraud, identity theft, phishing and various forms of online violence, including cyberbullying. A thin line separates private and public spaces, and the virtual and real worlds. This violence affects young people's social relationships, and often has repercussions at school. Virtual violence must be dealt with in order to protect young people and the atmosphere within the school. Because of the possible effects on young people's mental health and well-being, the problem deserves special consideration. The Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport has developed this reference tool on violence in cyberspace in keeping with Measure 1.1.3, set out in the Action Plan to Prevent and Deal with Violence in the Schools.

WHAT IS ONLINE VIOLENCE?

The defining feature of online violence is that it occurs through the medium of information and communications technologies. It includes both the violence found in electronic media and video games, and the online violence experienced via cell phones (texting, downloads, etc.) and computers (e-mails, instant messaging, downloads, Web sites, etc.).

Violence in electronic media and video games

The effects of electronic media and video games on behaviour can be studied from various points of view, and there is no consensus in the research findings. However, it is generally agreed that over-exposure to scenes of violence may affect a child's development and behaviour,¹ given that

- a child's brain develops best when the child's behaviour results in a response from the environment, and especially the people in it
- the significance of the response for the child increases if it matches the child's level of awareness
- a response adapted to the child involves several different senses, including touch

Some stimuli, such as facial expressions of fear, alertness, anger or lack of interest are a source of tension and stress for a young child, like loud noises and incomprehensible events. A child left alone in front of a screen does not receive the responses and support needed to understand or express what he or she feels about the violent situations depicted. The child needs to have support from a trusted adult.²

¹ Mary G. Burke, "The influence of television and visual electronic media on brain development," *The Brown University Child and Adolescent Behavior Letter* 19, no. 7 (July 2003), 1-7.

² Ibid.

Children who spend a lot of time in front of a television or other visual electronic media instead of interacting socially or engaging in other activities may have various developmental problems connected with self-regulation and their social, physical and cognitive skills. Since some children are more vulnerable than others, they are more likely to develop an addiction to visual media or to display violent behaviour. It has been observed that these effects are reversible if the children spend less time in front of a screen.

Video games are another source of concern. The topic has been studied recently, and the findings are generally reassuring. Except for subjects presenting pre-existing violent social and psychological behaviour, which is amplified by an addiction to violent video games, the researchers Nachez and Schmoll conclude that video games, including online games, are not dangerous.³ They may even have positive effects, such as access to new modes of socialization. However, these studies do not cover the games known as persistent world⁴ games.

Supervision and control by an adult, as well as attentive observation of a child's reactions and support during exposure to scenes of violence, are necessary in order to prevent violence.

Online violence

Online violence is easy to perpetrate and can be especially harmful.

- It may take several forms: bullying, threats, insults, name-calling, rumour-mongering, targeting,⁵ identity theft, harassment, discrimination, denigration, defamation, online stalking, exclusion, the sending of harmful messages or photos via a cell phone or pager, flaming,⁶ happyslapping,⁷ incitement to disclose personal information or information about other people, etc.
- It may be anonymous: the perpetrator may hide his or her identity or pretend to be someone else.
- It may be instantaneous: the perpetrator may react spontaneously, without taking the time to think or reconsider.
- It may occur anywhere and at any time: cyberspace is everywhere all the time, making it difficult and even impossible to be safe from violence.
- It may involve several people, allowing words and images to be shared instantly and limitlessly, with irreversible effects.
- It may result in a lack of accountability: the perpetrator may deny the facts and refuse to take responsibility for his or her acts; if an action cannot be proved, the fear of reprisals is reduced.
- It can be impersonal and may promote a lack of empathy: the perpetrator, facing a screen and unable to see the impact of his or her actions on the victim, is freer than if he or she were face to face with the victim.
- It may take place in secret and elude supervision by parents, teachers and other responsible adults.

3 Michel Nachez and Patrick Schmoll, "Violence et sociabilité dans les jeux vidéo en ligne," *Sociétés* 82 (April 2003).

4 Michel Nachez and Patrick Schmoll explain that these games are played online and are never over. The game continues even when the player logs off. When the player logs on again, the characters are still there as before. As a result, the players live continuously alongside each other within the game, even when offline, since their characters and bases continue to develop and may be attacked during their absence. The boundary between game and reality becomes more porous and less defined (*Sociétés* 82, April 2003).

5 The Media Awareness Network defines targeting as: "singling someone out and inviting others to attack or make fun of her or him."

6 The [Commission de l'éthique de la science et de la technologie](#) defines flaming as: "sending an incendiary message to another user participating in a forum or a mailing list, in order to express disapproval."

7 Laurent Bègue defines happyslapping as: "filming a group assault on a person using a cell phone, and then broadcasting the film of the attack in order to humiliate the person." "Dans l'enfer du cyberharcèlement," *Cerveau et psycho* 33 (May-June 2009).

Recent studies have generally looked at cyberbullying and the problems outlined above, without distinguishing between the various forms of violence. A survey of cyberbullying⁸ by Kids Help Phone shows that, in general, young people:

- appear unaware that cyberspace is a public rather than private space, and that the flow of information may be hard to control
- do not understand that putting something online is making it public
- do not understand the implications of circulating information on sites that are open to all, making the information difficult to control
- do not take cyberbullying seriously; they focus on dealing with the actions, and not with the emotional issues that can be caused by these types of behaviours
- wonder whether it is relevant or useful to report cyberbullying; as one victim states, “Most kids won’t tell people because they are afraid that it will get worse and more then half the time it does!”

Under Canadian law, “it is a crime to communicate repeatedly with a person if the communication causes the person to fear for his or her safety or the safety of others. [...] Existing law currently includes hate propaganda, obscenity, criminal harassment, defamatory libel and communicating threats.”⁹ The Criminal Code also provides penalties for false messages, indecent telephone calls and harassing telephone calls. “A cyberbully may also be violating the Canadian Human Rights Act if he or she spreads hate or discrimination based on race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, age, sex, sexual orientation, marital status, family status or disability.”¹⁰

Perpetrators of online violence

Although boys are more likely to commit a physical assault, girls are more likely to act aggressively in cyberspace. In addition, some young people who are not bullies in real life take advantage of the anonymity provided by virtual reality to become perpetrators. Research in this field shows that most online bullies know their victims¹¹ and that cyberbullying often occurs between friends.¹² The survey by Kids Help Phone¹³ shows that 34% of students in Canada have been bullied and 27% of these were bullied over the Internet. According to the same survey, 44% of the respondents reported having bullied someone online at least once.¹⁴

8 Kids Help Phone, *Cyber-bullying: Our Kids' New Reality*, A Kids Help Phone Research Study of Kids Online (2007).

9 Canadian Teachers' Federation, [Addressing Cyberconduct](#), A Brief to the Department of Justice Canada (2008), 2.

10 Cyberbullying Backgrounder, Media Awareness Network.

11 Ibid.

12 Faye Mishna, Judith Wiener and Debra Pepler, [Some of my Best Friends – Experiences of Bullying within Friendships](#), *School Psychology International* 28 (2008), 549.

13 Kids Help Phone, *Cyber-bullying: Our Kids' New Reality*, A Kids Help Phone Research Study of Kids Online (2007).

14 Kids Help Phone, *Cyber-bullying: Our Kids' New Reality*, A Kids Help Phone Research Study of Kids Online (2007), 5.

Young perpetrators of online violence may:

- lack empathy
- feel a need to affirm their superiority and power
- benefit from the increased status of being a “negative” leader
- believe that their behaviour enhances their reputation and will be tolerated
- believe that their target is isolated and has little support from peers
- become victims themselves
- develop emotional, social and psychiatric problems that can continue into adulthood
- need help to manage interpersonal conflict, express themselves and communicate
- develop better strategies and learn more suitable behaviour if the situation involving violence is settled quickly

Several online bullies state that they themselves have been bullied or rejected by their peers or feel harassed, persecuted or diminished. Their behaviour can be compared to revenge, a search for pleasure or release. According to the survey by Kids Help Phone, young people who have been involved in cyberbullying give the following reasons for their actions:¹⁵

- there’s no supervision
- it can be anonymous
- it makes revenge easy
- it’s a way to maintain or increase popularity

Contrary to popular opinion, online violence is not necessarily confined to students with behavioural difficulties. A high proportion of students can act aggressively, especially in a group context. Like bullying, online violence has a major social component. It can feed off the interactions within a group, and the bullying has an impact on the victim’s social relations.

As is the case for classic bullying,¹⁶ other aspects, such as the child’s age, cognitive and social development, ability to understand the situation and issues, and capacity for empathy, must be considered in order to determine whether or not the situation involves violence, and to provide suitable support.

15 Kids Help Phone, *Cyber-bullying: Our Kids' New Reality*, A Kids Help Phone Research Study of Kids Online (2007).

16 See the [reference leaflet on bullying](#).

Victims of online violence

Nobody is immune to online violence. Even the most popular students, and adults, can be targeted. Although most acts of online violence are peer to peer, the cyberbullying of teachers and other education staff is a growing problem.

A survey of Canadian students aged 11 to 14 shows that 20% reported that they had been cyberbullied. Of this group, 68% reported that they were bullied by a friend or a student at their school or another school. In addition, 20% of the educators surveyed reported being threatened or harassed online.¹⁷ According to Shaheen Shariff, between 35% and 50% of young people have been, or know someone who has been, cyberbullied.¹⁸ The work of this author reveals that young people may have a genuine inability to discern the difference between joking and abuse in online discourse and do not know whether they have been cyberbullied.¹⁹ Girls were more likely than boys to have been affected by acts of online violence.²⁰

The effects of online violence are similar to those of other types of violence, including bullying. However, anonymity, or the fact that the perpetrator's identity is not known, may create an extra source of distress for the victims. The victims of online violence are often alone in front of their computer when the violence occurs, which may make them feel more isolated and change their understanding of the situation or their reaction to the event. They may develop persistent emotional, social and mental health problems. The victims may:

- feel vulnerable, guilty, excluded, powerless, betrayed or isolated
- feel anger, betrayal, fear and frustration, doubt or the need to take revenge
- feel a loss of privacy and a threat to their private life or reputation
- feel less self-confident and not very safe
- have social and relational difficulties
- have difficulty recognizing their perpetrator and defending themselves
- experience mood swings and appear sad, depressed, unhappy or withdrawn
- show signs of anxiety, loneliness, isolation or withdrawal, a loss of self-confidence or appetite, and sleeping disorders
- be emotional about schoolwork, leading to lower grades
- arrive late at school, miss school or drop out
- have suicidal thoughts or display violent behaviour
- lose their friends
- be more likely to carry a weapon to school

Witnesses of online violence

Witnesses play an important role with respect to violence in cyberspace. In general, roughly one-third of the students interviewed for various surveys have witnessed online violence. They reacted in various ways:²¹

17 Canadian Teachers' Federation, [Addressing Cyberconduct](#), A Brief to the Department of Justice Canada (2008).

18 Donna Nebenzahl, [Ruining Reputations with a Click of a Mouse](#), [McGill News, Alumni Magazine](#) (October 2008).

19 Bernie Froese-Germain, [Bullying Gets Digital Shot-in-the-Arm](#), Canadian Teachers' Federation, vol. 8 (2009).

20 Amanda Lenhart, [Cyberbullying and Online Teens](#), Pew/Internet & American life project (June 2007).

21 Cyberbullying Backgrounder, Media Awareness Network.

- 9% became involved in the bullying behaviour
- 32% watched but didn't participate
- 14% voiced their objection to the bully
- 21% tried to stop the bully
- 11% left the online environment
- 7% tried to befriend the bully
- 7% reported the bully to someone who could help

Witnesses to acts of online violence may:

- question their own role
- feel anger, shame, guilt or powerlessness
- fear becoming a target or becoming associated with the victim, the perpetrator or the bullying
- feel a loss of solidarity and confidence
- develop a fear of technology

Studies have noted that witnesses will tend to trivialize violence and that the quality of their relationships with others will suffer.²² In addition, some witnesses would like to help but fail to intervene because they are afraid of placing themselves in danger or because they fear reprisals from peers or strangers in the online environment.

According to the Quebec English School Boards Association,²³ “despite the frequency and severity of bullying, many students often reject assertions that their online worlds are dangerous and urge adults to understand cyber-social networks in light of the positive impact it has on their lives. Teens report that the networks facilitate and extend their social interactions. Examples they cite include organizing events, connecting with likeminded peers, and exposure to others whom they would not normally meet.”

²² According to the [Commission de l'éthique de la science et de la technologie](#).

²³ Groupe de travail de l'ACSAQ, *Towards Empowerment, Respect and Accountability, Report and Recommendations on the Impact of the Internet and Related Technologies on English Public Schools in Quebec* (2008), 5.

PREVENTING AND DEALING WITH ONLINE VIOLENCE

To prevent and deal with violence, there is no single, easy and immediate solution that is both effective and long-lasting. Because the “code of silence” often applies in cases of online violence, as it does to bullying,²⁴ interventions by individuals must be replaced by interventions by the school team as a whole. It is important for the school to define a clear position, in a policy or other document, that reassures victims, witnesses and their families, and in some cases, perpetrators. Young people and adults alike must know that the school will take action if incidents occur. A well-prepared intervention will be swifter and more effective, because it is well known that the longer bullying lasts, the more likely witnesses are to join the ranks of the bullies.²⁵

To ensure effective interventions in response to online violence, the school strategy must have certain key features:

- Match the reality of the school

- Ensure that online violence is the problem, by drawing up a list of the types of violence reported.
- Base the process on democratically gathered data, giving the students and all members of staff an opportunity to contribute.
- Periodically update the report on the situation.
- Understand the guidelines and actions that apply to all students and staff members at the school, whether victims, witnesses or perpetrators.

- Ensure that everyone is involved

- Ensure that all players are involved in choosing goals and planning and implementing actions, and ensure that the conditions are favourable to teamwork.
- Involve students and parents in the search for solutions.
- Under the responsibility of the school principal, involve all the staff members in each step of the process.

- Target a shared understanding of the problem

- Provide a clear, concise definition of online violence.
- Ensure that everyone is able to recognize online violence and its effects on individuals and the living environment.

24 See the Reference [Leaflet on Bullying](#).

25 Cyberbullying Backgrounder, Media Awareness Network.

- Propose proactive actions that are both educational and coercive, and adapted to the students' level of development

- Offer staff members training sessions on information and communication technologies.
- Offer staff members support to ensure that they deal with new technologies effectively in their teaching.
- Set up activities or programs to develop the social skills connected directly with the prevention of violence, such as empathy, emotion management and conflict management.
- Promote a culture of responsibility, both in cyberspace and in the real world.
- Teach collective values.
- Teach students relevant ethical notions, and encourage positive online interactions such as:^{26, 27}

- awareness that cyberspace is a public area
- knowing who their friends are; refusing any request or invitation from an unknown address
- protecting their privacy and respecting the privacy of others: protecting personal data and information, not spreading rumours, not posting information or photos of another person without his or her permission, not giving another person access to one's MP3 player (iPod), cell phone, etc.
- respecting other people's virtual space: not going through their files or their computer, MP3 player, cell phone, etc.
- remaining true to themselves: not sending anonymous personal messages
- remaining true to their values, even in cyberspace: thinking before acting, writing only things that they would say to someone's face, not baiting other users or pitting them against each other

- Teach students who are targets or victims how to protect themselves or react if bullied in cyberspace:

- maintain a social network outside cyberspace
- refuse any request or invitation from an unknown address
- save or print out messages
- refuse to respond to a provocative or insulting message
- immediately leave a space or online activity where bullying has occurred
- block the perpetrator's address or instant messaging service
- trace messages with help from an Internet service provider
- report bullying by talking to a trusted adult, and to the police if physical threats are made

26 Cyberbullying Background, Media Awareness Network.

27 Kids Help Phone, Cyber-bullying: Our Kids' New Reality, A Kids Help Phone Research Study of Kids Online (2007).

- Teach witnesses how to react to an assault in cyberspace:
 - avoid places where problems may occur (chat rooms, online games, etc.)
 - ignore perpetrators and avoid contact
 - stand up to the perpetrator and speak out against online bullying
 - refuse to transfer or send an offending image, video or message on behalf of another person
 - save or print out messages
 - report incidents by talking to a trusted adult, and to the police if physical threats are made
- Give students access to a confidential, anonymous way to report incidents of online violence in which they are the victims or witnesses and that have repercussions in the school, such as:
 - a mailbox
 - an Internet address
 - the name and contact information of a responsible adult at the school
 - access to a Web site that offers solutions to situations of online violence, including reports about what other people have done in similar situations
- Establish a complaints process.
- Establish mechanisms for effective communication between:
 - stakeholders
 - the schools, the victim's family and the perpetrator's family
 - the school and the families of the witness or witnesses
- Offer guidance and support services
 - for students who are targets or victims of online violence
 - for students who are witnesses to online violence
 - for students who act as perpetrators in cyberspace
 - for parents who believe that their child is somehow involved in online violence
- Publicize online resources and assistance services in the community and at school.
- Establish ways to report all incidents involving violent conduct (physical, verbal, psychological, sexual, etc.) and record incidents in the personal assistance file of the students affected or involved.
- Establish clear rules for the use of information and communication technologies on school premises, identifying all types of devices (computers, cell phones, MP3 players, other).
- Take victims, witnesses and perpetrators into account in the school's rules of conduct and safety measures and, in particular, in the support services for suspended or expelled students.
- Specify ways to manage breaches of the rules of conduct and safety measures:
 - application of sanctions and compensatory measures
 - conditions for returning to school if the victim has missed school and the perpetrator has been suspended

- Provide support for parents:

- workshops on parenting practices connected to supervision, support and discipline
- workshops on basic knowledge about information and communication technologies, in connection with online violence
- information about ways to supervise their child's online activities
- information about the assistance services available
- information about ways to monitor their child's development

- Provide information about ways to consult professionals as appropriate.

- Offer training sessions for staff about the knowledge and skills needed to react effectively when an incident is reported or a complaint is filed.

Setting up a strategy of this kind takes time and a sustained effort. One major obstacle to the creation of an intervention strategy to combat violence is the feeling of urgency in many schools, which leads them to intervene in a reactive way rather than as part of a proactive, planned approach. It is important to realize that a repressive system and an attitude of blame and hostility on the part of the authorities can generate bad feeling, strengthen group ties, increase the desire to bully, label victims and encourage perpetrators to develop more subtle strategies that will be even more difficult to detect, making intervention more complex.

Last, the development of information and communication technologies cannot be reversed. However, neither teenagers nor the basic realities of adolescence have changed. Not everything young people do on the Web is unhealthy and dangerous: "Instead, let's remember that it's worth finding out what they are doing on the Internet, because it's interesting in itself and we have everything to gain from taking a closer look."²⁸

FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT ONLINE VIOLENCE

- Québec, Commission de l'éthique de la science et de la technologie. Position Statement: Cyber Bullying—An Ethical Examination Made by Young People, 2008 [online] <http://www.ethique.gouv.qc.ca/en/assets/documents/CEST-Jeunesse/CEST-J-2009-cyber/Cyberintimidation-avis-EN.pdf>
- MediaSmarts <http://mediasmarts.ca/digital-media-literacy/digital-issues/cyberbullying>

RESOURCES

- [Kids Help Phone](#)
- [Tel-jeunes](#)
- [Cybertip.ca - Canada's national tipline for reporting the sexual exploitation of children](#)

28 Serge Tisseron, "Chatroom, une nouvelle culture adolescente," *Cerveau et psycho* 40 (July-August 2010).