Bystanders in Cyberbullying

"Bystanders" are people who witness actions. In cyberbullying cases they may receive a copy of the cyberbullying message, be asked to vote for the "ugliest girl in school," view a cyberbullying attack on someone's Facebook, be a friend of the victim or cyberbullying or hear about an upcoming cyberattack.

Sometimes bystanders are active, such as when they forward a mean message, or pass along the url of a YouTube harassing video about someone. Sometimes they are passive, such as when they know about the cyberbullying, might have stumbled on a harassing profile or have received a copy of the message without forwarding it on.

When cyberbullying is involved, Parry Aftab calls active bystanders "Facilitators." Most large cyberbullying campaigns won't get very far without the assistance of Facilitators. They are used as the grease to speed up the wheels of the cyberbullying campaign – to drive attention to what's going on and to keep it going. Without Facilitators, most cyberbullying campaigns fall flat. It's like hosting a big party when no one comes. Mean girls rely on Facilitators to help them do their dirty work. Sextbullying couldn't happen without them.

They do more than merely observe the cyberbullying. They instigate further abuse and create the buzz that every good digital campaign needs. They pass along the messages, embarrassing photos and promote others to join in. They may pretend they aren't involved, but their activities are essential to spreading the abuse online. Facilitators can do this intentionally or be manipulated by the abuser into believing that the victim is in the wrong and serves whatever is happening to them, another example of "cyberbullying-by-proxy. (Read about "Dupes" below.)

The more active they are, the bigger part of the problem they become. They become the vehicle for the cyberbullying when they gladly pass along mean messages written by the original cyberbully. Sometimes the Facilitators become cyberbullies themselves. When their actions are more than just "spreading the news" and they become more active by voting for the "ugliest girl" in the mean quiz or for escalating the cyberbullying by adding additional inflammatory facts or rumors they have gone from Facilitator to active cyberbully.

Dealing with Facilitators requires someone to "step in or step up." Like throwing water on two fighting dogs to get them to "cool down," someone needs to throw some cold water on the Facilitators' actions. This can be a third party ("stepping in") to try and get people to stop the mob behavior or gain perspective. Or it can be someone "stepping up" from the group of Facilitators or passive bystanders to convince everyone to stop.

Most teens are afraid to get involved, fearing that they might become the next victim. This is especially the case when offline bullies, power hungry cyberbullies or mean girl cyberbullies are involved. Using the dog fight

example, stepping into the middle of a wild dog fight will risk a serious bite or the dogs turning on you. If you step into a cyberbullying situation without being prepared, you can get hurt just as easily. (Read the article "Step In or Step Up! How to help stop cyberbullying." It can be found on StopCyberbullying.org or in the StopCyberbullying Toolkit, in the Resources section.)

Passive bystanders need to recognize when they should do or say something. They have to be taught to identify cyberbullying when they see it, and when to report cyberbullying to the school, parents, the website or to the police. (This applies even more to digital dating abuse.) They need to know how to report abuses on the sites they frequent and understand the report abuse process.

Often teens are unwilling to report cyberbullying when they encounter it with themselves or with others. They have a cultural reluctance to tell adults about anything, fearing it makes them look immature or that they could be seen as tattling. They also worry that if they are wrong and it wasn't really cyberbullying (perhaps just an inside joke) they might get into trouble for making a false report. They worry that the person they are reporting might be told who reported them (they aren't) and worry about retaliation. (You can learn more about this in Step In and Step Up!) What they need to worry about more is the hurt someone is experiencing that they may be able to help stop.

Friends, whether they are best friends or just classmates, neighbors or someone you've known since 2nd grade, have a higher obligation than mere bystanders. They know and should care about you. They are supposed to be supportive and stand by you when you need it. Yet, often friend- bystanders try to avoid getting involved, fearing that the cyberbully will turn on them or that they will somehow get into trouble. So, they often opt to do nothing. They sit by and watch someone they care about get hurt.

Friends don't always have to report the cyberbullying. They may decide, after talking with their friend who is being targeted, that reporting it is not the best way to handle that case of cyberbullying. The best thing they can do is stand by and be supportive of their friend. They need to understand *how* to be supportive of someone they care about too. (Ask the person what they would like you to do or not do. It's a good place to start!)

Whatever they decide to do, they have to do something. Martin Luther King, Jr. once said "In the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends." Don't be remembered for your silence.

There are two significant additional types of digital bystanders – 1. strangers who witness the cyberbullying online and know neither the victim nor the cyberbully and 2. "cybermobs," "flamers" or "trolls" and "dupes."

Cyberbullying usually occurs among people who know each other offline. They are armed with secrets, often with passwords (or can guess them easily) and have a stake in the harassment. They may have been harassed by the victim previously, or believe that the victim "deserves it." They may be angry, vindictive or jealous. They are often seeking an audience of people who know both them and the victim. And they typically try and fuel the cyberbullying fire by getting others to join in.

But because of the nature of online social communities with 1 billion+ users, it isinevitable that strangers will witness cyberbullying that is posted online or send in viral messages. For example, sexting-related harassment can result in tens of thousands of strangers viewing the nude photo. As a young teen once explained, "In the

beginning it's a shocking picture of someone you know. You have a stake in protecting her or sharing it with others because of who she is. But as it continues to move outside of your school and community, it eventually just becomes a picture of some naked girl."

Those who receive or view that picture "of some naked girl" are strangers witnessing sextbullying. They can report it, ignore it, delete it or pass it on. And their choice can make a significant difference in the duration and scope of the sextbullying. And, to the victim trying to contain the harassment, it can make all the difference in the world. Empowering bystanders to report what they see is crucial.

The definitions of the different terms are set forth below and on the "Cyberbullying Terms" glossary provided at StopCyberbullying.org and in the StopCyberbullying Toolkit, in the Resources section.

"Cybermobs," "Flamers," and "Trolls":

"Cybermobs" don't know or care who the victim is, feeding on the vulnerability of the victim. There may be strategic positioning of the digital abuse to make the victim appear to be the bad guy. These often involve cyberbullying-by-proxy staging when someone manipulates others into doing their dirty work for them, causing those third parties to believe their actions are righteous and that they are seeking justice. The victim is re-victimized as the focus of their mean comments and vicious attacks. The only way, generally, to stop a cybermob is to wait it out. The best way to address it is to prevent it from happening in the first place or stopping it very early in its evolution before it takes on a life of its own.

"Flamers" and **"flaming":** nasty comments, insults and rude communications posted online for various purposes, including anyone holding opposing opinions or doing things they don't approve. "Flamers" tend to act alone in their attacks and are highly opinionated, attacking anyone with other opinions or if they find them offensive in any way.

"Trolls": are people who like to stir up trouble online and see what happens. A juicy rumor campaign can "feed the trolls," allowing them to act out and giving them the attention they crave, especially in virtual worlds and interactive games.

"Dupes": are people who engage in harassment or cyberbullying activities after being convinced that they are doing the right thing, giving someone something they deserve or believe that the person they are targeting started it by harassing them first. The person is being manipulated by the real cyberbully into falling for this. It's a cyberbullying-by-proxy campaign designed to get others to do their dirty work and the dupes fall for it.