

## Parents must say 'no' to stop cyberbullying

By Lauren Long  
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Three years ago, Channel 10 asked employment attorney Brian Lamoureux to participate in an interview about Facebook.



He went on to develop an expertise on social media and cyberbullying as an outgrowth of his work as an employment attorney. Along the way he became a social-media expert interviewed on television, radio and in newspapers, speaking at elementary schools and colleges.

“Cyberbullying is a broad term that transfers conventional bullying from schoolyard taunts and moves it online onto Facebook or Twitter,” said Lamoureux, a partner at Pannone Lopes Devereaux & West.

Lamoureux spoke last week at the E.T. Wyman Elementary School in Warwick at a session hosted by the Parent Teachers Association.

“I wanted to have a dialog with parents about things they should consider about social media. I have the knowledge for a conversation with folks who need help, and I’m happy to share that,” said Lamoureux, a Warwick native who lives in West Warwick. He is the father of an 8-year-old son.

Lamoureux views the problems he sees with his employment clients as the same struggles parents have with their kids and cyberbullying.

“There is not much of a difference between sexual harassment in the workplace and cyberbullying on social media among children. It all involves the same concepts like lack of respect and poor judgment,” he said.

Cyberbullying is when a child or teenager is tormented, threatened, harassed, humiliated, embarrassed or targeted by another child or teenager using the Internet or mobile phones, according to Stop Cyberbullying.com.

“Rather than me going up to you on the schoolyard and insulting you, I’m now posting that remark or putting a picture of you on my Facebook page. It moves the old, classic schoolyard taunting to online,” he said.

A generational shift has taken place, and parents need to catch up to protect their children. Parents must communicate with their children to establish ground rules about what they do online.

Suggested rules for children to follow include: Don’t post their physical location: a safety issue. Don’t say bad things about people. Speak up if you see someone being bullied.

“When you take it out of social media world, all these rules make sense. It’s almost as if we put blinders on and do not apply these rules to online behavior,” said Lamoureux.

Often parents don’t know that their child is a victim of cyberbullying because there is no obvious sign that someone is being bullied on Facebook, whereas the typical schoolyard bullying that resulted in knee scrapes quickly had parents calling the school principal.

Yet parents aren’t really engaged with kids about their online lives, according to Lamoureux.

“Years ago, parents could look at a bloody nose and figure out what happened. Unless parents are watching their child’s Facebook account or communicating with kids at dinner, they don’t know what’s happening with their kid’s online life,” he said.

There are several warning signs parents can look for to determine if their child is a victim of cyberbullying, such as a child who loses interest in online activities, becomes withdrawn or asks questions about deleting a Facebook or Twitter account.

Cyberbullying messages and images can be posted anonymously and distributed quickly to a wide audience on Facebook. Deleting harassing messages, texts and pictures is difficult once they have been posted or sent, according to [stopbullying.gov](http://stopbullying.gov).

“Kids are very vulnerable because we’ve given them devices and autonomy too soon and too young. I’m starting to see kids under 10 years old running into Facebook cyberbullying because they have a device that Mom and Dad want them to have for emergencies. I don’t begrudge parents who think their kids need a phone. But in my view as a parent, it is dangerous for kids under 10 to have a device like a smart phone,” said Lamoureux. “It’s the proverbial toothpaste out of the tube. Facebook keeps everything put on it. It doesn’t disappear. It is permanent.”

Parents should go to their child’s school if they think their child is being bullied online during school hours.

“Parents should treat it no differently than if their child is pushed down and hurt at recess,” Lamoureux said.

“Schools are in the best position to intervene, so if you see something online that you think is a problem, bring it to the school’s attention.”

Ted Larson, president of the Wyman PTA, and school

Principal Ron Celio believes the time was right to invite Lamoureux to advise parents on tools to prevent digital problems for their young children.

“Parents should go to the school if the cyberbullying is happening during school hours,” said Larson.

Wyman teacher and librarian Marsha Richardson has been teaching children the importance of Internet safety for three years.

Richardson uses an electronic program called I-Safe, designed for elementary school students, which is available to all Warwick elementary school librarians to instruct students on topics like cyberbullying and how to report it.

“I regularly send notices home to parents on what I am teaching to keep parents informed about the safety tips,” said Richardson.

“Being the parent of two children myself, I am concerned about safety,” said Larson.

Larson is the father of a 10-year-old daughter who attends Wyman and a 14-year-old son who is a freshman at Hendricken High School. He believes Internet safety must be addressed early in elementary school.

“I have taken steps to limit their access to texting and the Internet by employing parental controls on the computer. Yet I cannot monitor them 100 percent of the time,” said Larson.

Lamoureux admits that although saying “No” is a difficult message for parents to hear, they must take responsibility in the digital age.

“I would let my kid have a smart phone only by the time he’s driving. I would prefer him to use Facebook only in my living room until he moves out. That would be my perfect world,” he said.

Lamoureux has published articles on social media law in the Providence Business News. He can be heard monthly on 790AM with Patricia Raskin discussing social media and business.

He has spoken on social media ethics at Rhode Island College, Providence College and Salve Regina University.

In June he will speak on social media and the law before the Rhode Island Bar Association conference.