New Apps Aim to Deter, Stop Bullying

By Mary Ann Azevedo in Technology

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Technology Allows Schools to Give Students a Way to Anonymously Report Bullying or Harassment

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Despite nationwide efforts to address bullying in schools, parents still have major concerns about their children's school environments. Bullying ranks among the top worries of parents of children and teens today. While every state has passed some sort of law or policy regarding bullying, it continues to take place in various forms from elementary to high school.

In response, a growing number of tech startups are dedicated to the prevention and reporting of bullying via mobile apps. More and more schools are investing in mobile technology with the goal of making their campuses safer.

While virtual assaults may not be physical, they are no less damaging. One-fourth of teenagers report they have experienced repeated bullying via their cell phone or on the Internet while over half of young people report being cyberbullied, according to NoBullying.com. Over half (55 percent) of all teens who use social media have witnessed outright bullying via that medium.

John Barker, president of New York-based advertising agency Barker DZP, was so intrigued by the concept he invested in one such company: Stop!t, which promotes an app that lets students anonymously report bullying.

Since its August 2014 launch, Stop!t has been adopted by nearly 100 schools in 16 states, and is being deployed in Canada. Earlier this year, the New Jersey startup raised $2.6 million from private investors. Schools purchase a license to the mobile technology that can range from 75 cents to $3 per year depending on the length of the agreement. With the app, students can shoot video, screen shots, take pictures and anonymously send them to school administrators and/or parents.

"Technology created this problem (of cyberbullying)," says Barker, "and technology can solve it."

An increasing number of students have access to a mobile device. The most recent Cisco VNI Global Mobile Data Traffic Forecast estimates there will be 5.2 billion global mobile users, up from 4.3 billion in 2014.

APPS SERVE AS POWERFUL DETERRANT

While the anti-bully apps are aimed at giving students a way to report bullying, the real magic of anti-bullying apps is in their ability to deter, according to Barker.

"Our goal is that ultimately is no one needs to use this app," he says.

Stop!t founder Todd Schobel agrees.

"Kids are more conscious when Stop!t comes into a school," he said. "They think twice before posting. Schools we're in are reporting a 60%-plus reduction in issues from last year to this year because kids are thinking twice."

Greg Bender, founder of K-12 Anonymous Alerts, believes his startup's app – which has been launched in 1500 schools across the United States over the past two years – is addressing more than just bullying.

"We're also helping kids with depression, drug and alcohol abuse and weapons on campus, he says, "so we're addressing counseling issues in addition to security issues."

Bender believes so strongly in the mission of the White Plains, New York-based startup that he has personally funded its growth since inception. With Anonymous Alerts, which is patent pending in the U.S. and Canada, all reports are – as the name suggests – anonymous and sent directly to school officials. Students have the option to reveal their identity during the process to have a person-to-person discussion. A two-way text message between the student and school official can be accessed within the app so that students can have a private, encrypted conversation. Students also have the option to add a photo or screenshot to the incident report.

"This gives kids an early warning system so we can avert tragedy before it happens," Bender says. "And it gives schools a way – through a back-end system – to be able to gauge what's happening where and adjust policies in terms of how to react to things as well."

It also gives students an anonymous way to report bullying they may witness without being deemed a "tattletale," he says.

Both companies see applications in other environments such as the workplace, higher ed and the military.

"As a brand marketer and business development executive, I'm looking for the brand potential of a new technology that will resonate with consumers and change their lives." Barker says. "This is one of them."

Mary Ann Azevedo is an award-winning journalist based in Austin, Texas. She has covered business and technology issues for Silicon Valley/San Jose Business Journal, the San Francisco Business Times and the Houston Business Journal. Used with the permission of http://thenetwork.cisco.com/.