

Threats Online

Student Guide to Cyberthreats

WHAT ARE CYBERTHREATS?

Cyberthreats are either threats or “distressing material”—statements that make it sound like the writer is emotionally upset and may be considering harming someone else, harming himself or herself, or committing suicide.

Jeff wrote in his blog: “I’m a retarded [expletive] for ever believing that things would change. I’m starting to regret sticking around. It takes courage to turn the gun on your self, takes courage to face death.”

Celia met Andrew in a chat room. Andrew wrote: “bring a gun to school, ur on the front of every. . . i cant imagine going through life without killing a few people. . . if i dont like the way u look at me, u die. . . . i choose who lives and who dies.”

Greg set up an anonymous IM account and sent a threatening message to his older sister suggesting that she would be killed the next day at school.

A group of girls at his school had been taunting Alan through IM, teasing him about his small size, daring him to do things he couldn’t do. They dared him to commit suicide. He discussed this with them. The girls thought it was a big joke.

Just in case you are wondering—these are all true stories. Jeff killed nine people and then killed himself. Celia reported her online conversation to her father, who contacted the police. The police found that Andrew had many weapons, including an AK-47. He is now in prison. Greg’s sister told her parents, her parents told the school, and the school went into “lock- down.” Greg was identified easily—and arrested for making a threat. One afternoon, Alan got his grandfather’s shotgun, loaded it, and killed himself. He left this message, “The only way to get the respect you deserve is to die.”

IS IT REAL?

Sometimes when teens post what appears to be a threat, they are just joking. Other times, the threat could be very real. There are two very important things that you must understand about online threats:

- Don’t make threats online. If you post a threat online, adults may not be able to tell whether the threat is real. There are criminal laws against making threats. If you make a cyberthreat, even if you are just joking, you could be suspended, expelled, or even arrested.

- Report threats or distressing material. If you see a threat or distressing material posted online, it could be very real. It is extremely important to report this to an adult. If the threat is real, someone could be seriously injured.

REPORTING ONLINE CONCERNS

Many teens think that it is not okay to talk with adults about what is happening online. They think that adults will overreact. Or they may be afraid that other teens will retaliate.

The problem is that some teens are being harmed by others or are posting material that raises real concerns about their safety or the safety of others and frequently this is happening in online places where there are not any adults. So if teens witness online concerns don't report, someone might be really hurt.

If you see something happening online that worries you, here is what you can do:

- Download all the materials. Provide written instructions for how to find these materials online or where the communications occurred.
- If there is a possibility of immediate harm, report your concern to the local police or to a school violence or suicide prevention hotline.
- To report other concerns, show the materials to the principal or school counselor. If you want to remain anonymous, put the documents and instructions into an envelope, write "IMPORTANT" on the envelope, and put the envelope in your principal's or school counselor's office or mailbox.
- If the student does not go to your school, see if you can find out where the student does go to school by searching for the school Web site. Look for an e-mail address for the school principal or counselor. Send a "high priority" message explaining your concerns and telling this person where to find the material online.

THINKING IT THROUGH

1. Why is it not a good idea to post material that an adult might think is a threat?
2. Why is it a good idea to report any online material that appears to be a threat, even if it may just be a joke?