Preventing Online Bullying:

What Companies and Others Can Do

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The Internet is nothing short of the landmark invention of our lifetime. It has changed forever the way we work, communicate, learn, play, and grow. It has quickened productivity, expanded global commerce, enabled new opportunities for social interaction, and even sparked the creation of online communities. Yet, like all public places, the online world is not without its risks and bad actors.

While Internet companies cannot be responsible for the online behavior of all individuals, nor be expected to police all corners of the web, the public rightly has an expectation that industry will do its level best in helping to make the Internet safer and more secure. If businesses fail to meet these expectations, consumers will be less inclined to use web-based services; the advancement of online commerce may stall[1], and both industry and individuals will suffer a lack of trust. Accordingly, Microsoft, and indeed all companies with an online presence, must do their part.

Moreover, Internet participants have a responsibility to help protect the most vulnerable members of our global society: children, the elderly, and those with disabilities.[2] Online bullying among young people has garnered significant attention in recent years. Media concentration on the most severe and tragic cases has triggered a borderline frenzy among some parents and others. A collective focus is needed to help raise awareness, educate, and change behavior in an effort to re-wire society, such that children are disinclined to bully.

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[1] In 2011, the digital economy accounted for 11 percent of U.S. Gross Domestic Product (GDP), according to the U.S. Department of Commerce.

[2] Microsoft's website dedicated to people with disabilities: www.microsoft.com/enable.

Defining Online Bullying

Protecting young people from online bullying has been a keen focus for Microsoft for the last five years. Experience shows us that young people, parents, educators, and government officials around the world continue to be concerned about the issue (also called "cyberbullying"), often asking: What is it? How can it be prevented? And, what resources are available to help raise awareness and educate the public?

Microsoft defines online bullying[3] as "the use of electronic technology to demonstrate behavior—often repeated—that teases, demeans, or harasses someone less powerful."[4] Kids who bully may, for example:

- **Send hurtful or threatening messages** to a target's phone or in an online game, or share humiliating pictures or a video on social media

- **Disclose secrets or private information** by forwarding, for instance, a confidential instant or text message

- **Deliberately exclude someone from a group** in a game or virtual world, or through social media

- **Impersonate the target** by gaining access to his or her phone or social media account, and then send or post hurtful comments, or otherwise instigate trouble with friends

- **Pretend to befriend someone**, gain his or her trust, and then betray that trust

Data vary on the prevalence of online bullying. Surveys estimate that between 10 percent and 40 percent of youth in the European Union[5], United States, and Australia have, at some point, been subject to cyberbullying. One important contribution companies and governments can make is to further society's understanding of the issue through study and analysis.

In an effort to determine the global pervasiveness of online bullying, Microsoft commissioned a study[6] earlier this year. In February, we polled young people between the ages of eight and 17 in 25 countries[7], asking whether they had encountered a range of negative behaviors online. That spectrum can begin on one end with general "meanness," such as teasing or name-calling; run through what most adults would consider "bullying," or other more severe displays of negative behavior, and end with outright "cruelty," including the willful intent to hurt or harm.[8] Three hundred youth from each country/region participated in the study, bringing to 7,644 the total number of respondents.

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[3] Other definitions of cyberbullying exist, including this one from the Cyberbullying Research Center based in Jupiter, Florida, USA: "Willful and repeated harm inflicted through the use of computers, cell phones, and other electronic devices."

[4] Fact Sheet: *Help Kids Stand Up to Online Bullying*, http://aka.ms/OnlineBullyingFS

[5] Leading research by EU Kids Online conducted by Prof. Sonia Livingstone, http://www2.lse.ac.uk/media@lse/research/EUKidsOnline/Home.aspx

[6] *Microsoft Youth Online Behavior Study*, February 2012, http://www.microsoft.com/security/resources/research.aspx#onlinebullying

[7] Youth were surveyed in: Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, Czech Republic, Egypt, France, Germany, India, Italy, Japan, Malaysia, Morocco, Norway, Pakistan, Poland, Qatar, Russia, Singapore, Spain, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, United Kingdom, and United States.

[8] *The Drama! Teen Conflict, Gossip, and Bullying in Networked Publics*, published by Social Science Research Network, September 12, 2011, by Alice E. Marwick and danah boyd, http://aka.ms/teen drama

While "offline" or in-person bullying is still more prevalent by comparison, results show that youth are concerned and want to talk about online bullying. Specifically, on a worldwide basis:

- **Fifty-four percent** of young people said they are concerned they will be bullied online

- **Four in 10** said someone was mean to them online, and

- **Nearly one-quarter (24%)** admitted to having bullied someone else online at one time

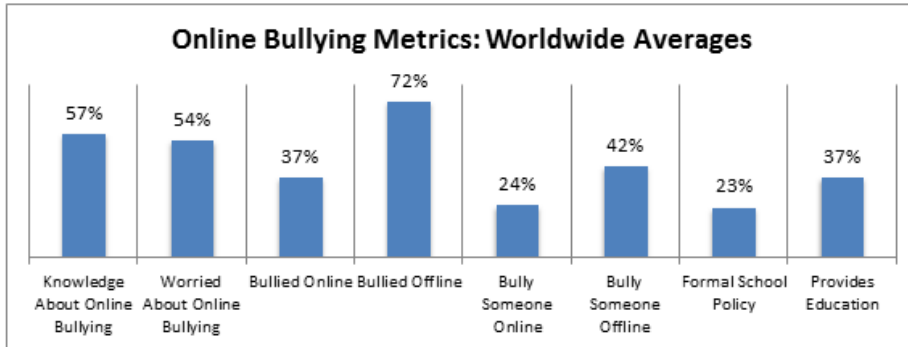*(See, Table 1 for additional results.)*

TABLE 1: *Microsoft Youth Online Behavior Study*, February 2012, online bullying metrics, worldwide averages

In addition, while more than half of the young people polled said they worry about being bullied online, less than a third (29%) said their parents have talked to them about the issue. Moreover, only 17 percent said their parents have communicated a clear set of rules for responding to negative online behaviors, and still less than a quarter (23%) noted that their schools have a bullying-prevention policy in place.

Brazil and Spain tied for the highest percentage of young people worried about online bullying (81% each), with 51 percent and 40 percent, respectively, saying they were "very worried." India and China followed with 79 percent and 80 percent of youth worried, respectively. Yet, while children in China were slightly more concerned about the prospects of being bullied online than those in India, significantly fewer were "very worried" (36% very worried in India; 27% very worried in China). Argentina rounded out the list of the top five countries in which youth are most concerned about online bullying at 65 percent, with 26 percent being "very worried." *(See, TABLE 2 for results across all 25 countries.)*
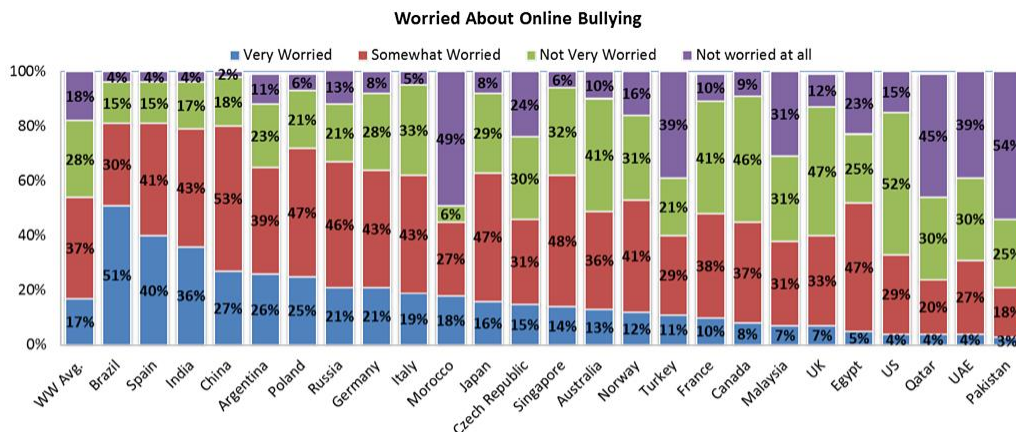

TABLE 2: *Microsoft Youth Online Behavior Study*, youth worried about online bullying, individual country/region results

Turning to those geographies in which youth admitted to having bullied someone at one time or another, results for the countries/regions with the highest percentages of online and offline bullying combined are as follows:

India: 52% offline; 50% online

China: 43% offline; 58% online

Turkey: 60% offline; 35% online

Singapore: 43% offline; 46% online

Argentina: 51% offline; 35% online

(See, TABLE 3 for results of all countries/regions.)
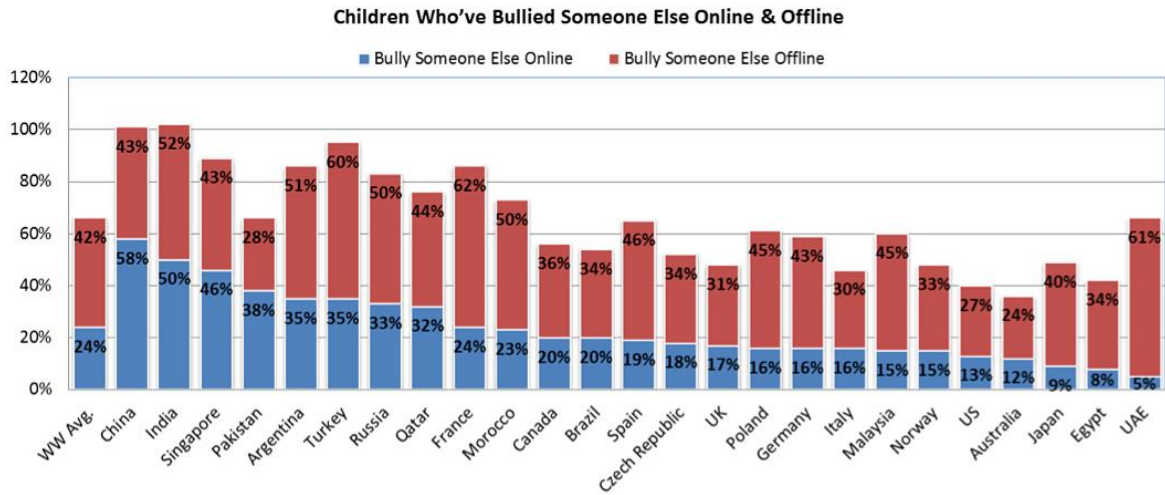
Children Who've Bullied Someone Else Online & Offline

■ Bully Someone Else Online   ■ Bully Someone Else Offline

TABLE 3: *Microsoft Youth Online Behavior Study*, youth who've admitted to bullying, individual country/region results

Protecting Children from Online Bullying

In addition to conducting or sponsoring research, companies can help protect children online by offering advice and guidance in a variety of forms. At Microsoft, such efforts are part of a three-pronged strategy[9] to promote responsible and appropriate use of technology among all Internet citizens—what we refer to as "fostering digital citizenship."[10] Our "360-degree" approach to help raise online-safety awareness involves: (1) defining an online risk, (2) providing tools and resources to help individuals and families better protect themselves from such risks and, (3) in the event someone should fall victim to a scam or scheme, arming them with the resources they need to help address, and preferably correct, the problem.

In the online bullying context, we offer guidance at the personal and practical level, as well as some tips that are more collaborative in nature and have the ability to benefit society as a whole. For example, first and foremost, whatever the online safety issue, Microsoft believes in keeping the lines of communication open among children, teens, and adults. Parents, school counselors, coaches, clergy, mentors, and other trusted adults, play a critical role in children's lives. Young people want to know that someone cares, will listen, and will take action, as and when appropriate. Accordingly, parents and adults should ask that children report bullying directly to them. In addition, we suggest adults lead by example; be on the lookout for signs of online cruelty, and encourage empathy. *(See, Table 4.)*

Prevention

Personal & Practical

Pay Attention
Make time; regularly sit with kids as they explore online

Encourage Kids to Make Friends

Watch for Signs
Look for online meanness; ask kids to report bullying; make bullying consequences clear

Together, Make a Plan
Act immediately; acknowledge the pain; avoid retaliation; block the bully; report it

Communal & Cooperative

Encourage Empathy
Lead by example; help kids support each other, inspire them to become "Upstanders"

Promote Kindness
Provide reassurance; teach thoughtfulness

Get the Full Story
Listen & take it seriously; consider that kids may be the target, the bully or the bystander

Get Help
Talk with counselors; find trained experts

Intervention

TABLE 4: Microsoft's recommended actions and behaviors to help reduce online bullying, from prevention to intervention

Microsoft Tools and Resources

When sharing Microsoft's online safety work generally, or the company's focus on an issue such as online bullying in particular, people routinely are surprised to learn of our commitment and involvement. They wonder why Microsoft would be focused on such issues, and they are pleased to hear of the company's decade-long Trustworthy Computing[11] effort. Recent engagements have been no exception.

Indeed, more so than at any point in the last five years, interest in and concern about online bullying among youth have increased markedly. In the last few months, Microsoft's Trustworthy Computing Online Safety Group[12] has been asked to engage with several local, national, and international groups, including: scholastic institutions, the Office of the Washington State Attorney General in the U.S.[13], Ben Cohen's StandUp Foundation[14], Lady Gaga's Born This Way Foundation[15], The Executive Women's Forum,[16] and the European Commission to name a few.[17]

Microsoft shares with these organizations and all interested parties a collection of tools and resources about online bullying. These include:

- Features and functionality[18] to block bullies and report abusive behavior[19]

- A fact sheet[20], brochure[21], and interactive quiz[22] all designed for parents, educators, and child caregivers

- A PowerPoint presentation[23] entitled *Help Young People Stand Up to Online Bullying*, as well as

- A series of "info-graphics"[24] aimed at children, young adults, and parents that focus on behaviors that could lead to online bullying

Despite numerous efforts to heighten awareness and prevent online bullying from the outset, there are those instances that require contacting and engaging law enforcement.[25] Microsoft maintains an around-the-clock law enforcement compliance team to respond to lawful demands from relevant authorities worldwide.

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[11] Trustworthy Computing is Microsoft's promise to deliver secure, private, and reliable computing experiences for everyone based on sound business practices. In January 2002, then-Chief Executive Officer Bill Gates outlined in a company-wide memo his prediction that computing would become an integral and indispensable part of almost every aspect of people's lives. Accordingly, the company needed to prioritize security, privacy, and availability to help instill trust in computing.

[12] www.facebook.com/SaferOnline and www.twitter.com/Safer_Online

[13] http://kcydn.pugetsoundoff.org/event/cyberbullying-summit

[14] The Ben Cohen StandUp Foundation, http://www.standupfoundation.com/

[15] The Born This Way Foundation, http://bornthiswayfoundation.org/

[16] The Executive Women's Forum for Security, Privacy, and Risk Professionals' Cyber Security School Challenge, http://challenge.ewf-usa.com/

[17] Past Microsoft collaborations include: The movie *Bully*, Lee Hirsch, 2011, sponsored by Bing, http://aka.ms/bingbullymovie; iKeepSafe's Generation Safe, http://generationsafe.ikeepsafe.org; Anti-Defamation League Cyberbullying curriculum, http://www.adl.org/cyberbullying; American Bar Association Section on Antitrust Law anti-cyberbullying video, http://aka.ms/ABAcyberbullying; ISC2 cyberbullying prevention curriculum, https://cyberexchange.isc2.org/safe-secure.aspx; Stop Cyberbullying by Wired Safety, http://stopcyberbullying.org

[18] Microsoft Hotmail allows customers to report abuse, phishing, and spam, as well as delete or block contacts, http://aka.ms/AbuseHelpinHotmail

[19] Microsoft suggests bullying be reported to the website or company where the abuse occurred. For example, contact Microsoft at www.microsoft.com/reportabuse

[20] Fact Sheet: *Help Kids Stand Up to Online Bullying*, http://aka.ms/OnlineBullyingFS

[21] Brochure: *Help Kids Stand Up to Online Bullying*, http://aka.ms/OnlineBullyingBro

[22] Quiz: *Stand Up to Online Bullying*, http://aka.ms/StandUpQuiz

[23] PowerPoint: *Help Young People Stand Up to Online Bullying*, http://aka.ms/OnlineBullyingPPT

[24] Info-graphics for "tweens," teens, and parents, respectively: http://aka.ms/tweeninfograph; http://aka.ms/teeninfograph; and http://aka.ms/parentinfograph

[25] Microsoft advises: if a parent or guardian feels his or her child is *physically* at risk, contact local authorities immediately

Helping Prevent Online Bullying:
A Shared Responsibility

No singular entity can combat online bullying on its own. Indeed, creating a safer, more secure Internet is very much a shared responsibility among youth, parents, educators, law enforcement, government, civil society, and community organizations. Microsoft suggests a range of activities and behaviors for all participants in this social and technological equation. For instance:

What Parents and Adults Can Do:

- **Lead by example.** Children learn from what adults do. They notice how their elders respond to stress, and they take note if family, friends, neighbors, and even strangers are being treated with kindness and respect.

- **Watch for signs.** Is a child upset when online or texting? Does he or she display a reluctance to go to, or stay at, school? Adults should make it clear that bullying is not acceptable under any circumstance.

- **Encourage empathy.** Adults should suggest that children look at things from others' perspectives, including those of the bully. Expressing empathy is a key component of "social and emotional" learning, which has been successful in many countries and regions to help combat meanness and bullying.[26]

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[26] Committee for Children (www.cfchildren.org), Seattle, Washington, USA, is a not-for-profit organization established more than 30 years ago. It has created a social and emotional learning (SEL) curriculum that, as of this writing, is in use in 40% of schools in the United States and in 70 other countries. SEL helps to prepare young people for adulthood and success in the 21st century by emphasizing, among other things, communication skills, a focus on achievement, and concern for community. It also promotes positive classroom behavior and academic excellence. Conversely, it helps to reduce in-school conduct problems, aggressive behavior, and emotional stress. Given cultural and societal differences the world over, SEL is by no means a singular response to negative behavior among youth, but it is one approach to consider.

Preventing Online Bullying:

What Companies and Others Can Do

What Educators Can Do:

- **Teach digital citizenship** in primary and secondary schools, so all young people can learn to be responsible, respectful, and informed participants in our 21st century world.

- **Advocate for and teach social and emotional learning** to grow self- and social-management abilities, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making.

- **Invest in and provide professional development** to assist teachers and school staff with curriculum in digital citizenship.

What Young People Can Do:

- **Live "The Golden Rule."** Treat others online (and off) how they would like to be treated.

- **Make friends**. Be true to the ones they have, and stand up for them when it's safe and fitting to do so.

- **Talk it out**. Turn to a parent or trusted adult, if someone or something makes them feel uncomfortable.

- **Be a good digital citizen**. Use technology responsibly and appropriately.

What the Technology Industry Can Do:

- **Embrace Safety by Design**. Design products and services from the outset with safety in mind, and create family-safety features and functionality that allow parents to limit and monitor children's online access.

- **Be kind online**. Encourage civil behavior among customers of online services by deploying monitors to enforce policies against abusive behavior.

- **Raise awareness**. Develop public awareness-raising and educational materials, and work with families, governments, and law enforcement agencies to promote digital citizenship.

What Law Enforcement Can Do:

- **Enforce the Rule of Law**. Create a safer overall environment by enforcing laws against harassment and those designed to protect children.

- **Advocate for in-school curriculum**. Promote an online safety curriculum in schools that is based on foundational research, appropriately characterizes risks, emphasizes empathy, and includes social and emotional learning.

What Government Can Do:

- **Promote SEL**. Invest in educational approaches that focus on social and emotional learning and help to develop empathy.

- **Grow PPPs**. Support, organize, and promote public-private partnerships (PPPs); awareness-raising and messaging campaigns, as well as studies and research.

- **Foster innovation**. Support legislation that allows technological innovation to continue to flourish, free of mandates and restrictions.

Conclusion

Empowering, inspiring, and enabling young people to thrive in our 21st century world should be a priority for all. Indeed, children have the greatest chance for success when their learning and developmental environment is positive and constructive, free from undue stress and strain. The technology industry, businesses with an online presence, and others—working together—can help foster that productive climate by raising awareness, educating, and promoting behavioral change—all in an effort to enhance every facet of our evolving, digital culture.

Acknowledgements

Many at Microsoft contribute to and support the company's work to help protect children online generally, and to prevent online bullying in particular. Indeed, this paper is a compilation of the many Microsoft projects and programs—both ongoing and incubational—that demonstrate the company's role in these efforts. I cannot attempt to name all the individuals at Microsoft, both past and present, who have made and continue to make a daily difference in helping to protect people online. You know who you are, and I thank and applaud you.

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