**Can cyber-citizenship tame the digital ‘Wild West’?**

***By Mark Hyatt, Pres. & CEO, Character Education Partnership (CEP)***

*The sudden emergence of a plethora of cyber issues that literally defines K–12 policy toward technology integration has created a dire need for ethical clarity and behavioral policy. The digital age beckons us to usher in a new era of character education, aimed directly at addressing the opportunities and challenges of living a digital lifestyle.*

**Jason Ohler**,author

*Digital Community, Digital Citizen*

Amazingly, those timely words were written more than two years ago. But many parents, educators and other stakeholders—including some social networking sites—have been much too slow to dive into the rushing cyber currents already tossing youngsters to and fro online. So now, as another school year chugs toward the holidays and social media from coast to coast gears up for yet another tsunami of teenage emotions, unfiltered comments and inappropriate pictures, I hope more of us are ready to engage in our children’s digital lives.

In other words, even adults who feel woefully behind the e-curve now are coming to the grudging realization that they can’t bury their heads in the sand forever. And they cannot deny that they have an important role to play in guiding young people through what some have called “the Wild West” of the internet. And just as that bygone era of American history was known for its frontier justice before law and order could migrate from the East, today’s digital free-for-all is notoriously short of enough monitors to protect it from its own worst impulses.

To be sure, some industry safeguards do exist, and more are on the way (see below). But as Emily Bazelon pointed out last spring in her new book, ***Sticks and Stones: Defeating the Culture of Bullying and Rediscovering the Power of Character and Empathy***, even tech behemoth Facebook concedes that its 800 million global users produce more social media traffic each day than the company can possibly keep up with. When Bazelon visited the Palo Alto, CA, headquarters of Facebook last year, she met its 10-member “Hate & Harassment Team”, which each week sifts through some 2 million reports of abuse. They told her that each complaint has to be dealt with in less than 30 seconds, at the most.

Hard to imagine any valuable life lessons either being taught or learned in that window of time.

To me, this underscores the overriding and compelling need for K-12 character education, which is just as applicable on any digital playground as it is in the schoolyard. No matter how technologically sophisticated we may become as a society, at the end of the day, it is our individual character that will dictate how we treat each other. Students who are taught respect, empathy, compassion, honesty, resiliency and perseverance are far more likely to have the self-confidence, temperament and judgment needed to be successful citizens, in person and online.

Of course, some industry help is already available and more is in development. For instance, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology’s Media Lab last fall launched *BullySpace*, an online filter application that allows social media sites such as Facebook, Google, Pinterest, Formspring, etc., to act as “air traffic controllers” to monitor sites for outbreaks of abusive language and message exchanges that suggest cyber-bullying and escalating harassment. Once such cases are detected, the app actually intervenes online to offer advice and options for resolving the situation or blocking further communication between the parties. Of note, a stated goal of the M.I.T. pilot project is “promoting empathy among social networking participants”.

In May, Facebook, Mozilla, the MacArthur Foundation and the Family Onsite Safety Institute all teamed up in New York City to co-sponsor “Project:Connect, Hacking for a Better Web”, a day-long hackathon intended to “create a more equitable, social, and participatory internet… to make young people’s online experiences more civil, more empowering and more firmly under their control.” Toward that end, the event included a Digital Media and Learning Competition that awarded $48,000 in prizes to participating programmers, designers and educators who devised the best new ‘Social Tools for Social Good’, for promoting literacy, and for enabling greater control of personal information. Look for those at least some of those helpful tools to hit the markets in the months and years to come.

So technology may be catching up in the arena of online safety, at least for now. But we all would do well to remember this. **No matter how creative and clever programmers may become in devising systems to protect our children from each other online, it is still going to be that inner child at the keyboard who consciously makes the decision to be a person of character, or not.**

It is up to all of us to help lead that young person to the right choice.

*Resources*

**Facebook for School Counselors**

*created by iKeepSafe and the American School Counselor Association* <http://www.schoolcounselor.org/index.asp>

<http://www.ikeepsafe.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/Facebook-For-School-Counselors-Final-Revision1.pdf>

**Cyberbullying Research Center**

<http://cyberbullying.us/>

**Family Online Safety Institute (FOSI)**

<http://fosi.org/>

**M.I.T. Media Lab *BullySpace***

web.media.mit.edu/~lieber/Publications/Bullying-TiiS.pdf

**The Project:Connect Hackathon**

http://dmlcompetition.net/project-connect/project-connect-hacking-for-a-better-web