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Students warn peers about cyberbullying Video project shows that social media can hurt



Tiffany Witkowski, 17, of Von Steuben Metropolitan Science High School, discusses an anti-cyberbullying video she helped create called "Your Social Life." (Alex Garcia, Chicago Tribune / September 26, 2011)

Dawn Turner Trice --- September 26, 2011

Tiffany Witkowski, 17, is a rarity in her school — maybe in the universe — because she doesn't have a [Facebook](#) account.

A senior at Von Steuben Metropolitan Science High School in Chicago, Witkowski quit Facebook after growing tired of classmates posting comments on her wall such as, "You're a suck-up," and, "You think you're better than everybody else."

"They would go to my boyfriend's page, and the next day at school, people would say, 'Oh, you and your boyfriend saw whatever movie or did whatever,'" she said.

"I never felt physically threatened. But I felt emotionally threatened. I had just recently moved from Arizona. I had (a family tragedy), and I said, 'Why is this happening to me?' I needed

emotional stability, so I just got rid of Facebook," she said.

But this story isn't just about Witkowski's problems with Facebook and her peers. It's about how her travails led to her spearheading an anti-cyberbullying video called "Your Social Life," which comes with a discussion guide to get kids talking about the issue.

The video was screened Friday and stems from a research project that Witkowski and 14 other students at Mikva Challenge, the civic and leadership organization for youth, were asked to undertake last year by then-[Chicago Public Schools](#) CEO [Ron Huberman](#). The idea was to brainstorm ways to use technology to improve education.

A collaboration between Mikva and the small media arts organization Beyondmedia Education, the video is filled with poignant first-person accounts by CPS students as well as dramatizations. It makes the point that cyberbullying is just as serious as face-to-face bullying and can have lifelong consequences.

Witkowski, who has been with Mikva for three years, stressed that the focus isn't solely on teens "creeping," or stalking, one another on social media. Cyberbullying includes kids posting fights and other confrontational material on [YouTube](#), as well as the biggie — "sexting."

"My friend was a freshman when she sent her boyfriend inappropriate pictures of herself (topless), and he sent them to everyone in the school," Witkowski said. "I felt so bad for the girl.

"She was ridiculed so much that she transferred schools. She had suicidal thoughts. Now she's very insecure and she doesn't trust people. I see the way the incident has changed her."

Witkowski said that when she and other members of Mikva's Education Council began talking about cyberbullying, they realized that each had his or her own experience with it.

The Mikva students surveyed about 700 of their peers and found that 33 percent of those polled said they had been cyberbullied — some even dreaded going to school — and about 36 percent of the respondents admitted to engaging in some form of cyberbullying themselves.

The overwhelming majority of the students polled said they had dealt with such consequences as fights, broken relationships and emotional or psychological distress.

Witkowski said first-person accounts weren't hard to find. The video includes stories about a girl who was called "fat" and a "whore" on her Facebook page, a young man who was berated on social media after he defended a friend and a principal who learned her student was a gang member by the incendiary comments she read on his Facebook page after he was killed.

There was also an account by a young woman who won several scholarships to college and then wrote about her excitement on her Facebook page. One of her "friends," pretending to be the young woman, created a fake email account and sent messages to the scholarship boards rejecting the money. The young woman had to contact the agencies to tell them she was the victim of identity theft.

The video project began last year as part of a broader study the Mikva students undertook called "Bringing Chicago Public High Schools into the 21st Century."

In addition to suggesting that a video on cyberbullying be made, the students offered five other recommendations in their 53-page report, including that CPS provide a way for students to take courses from other schools via videoconferencing and that teachers be required to participate in workshops on integrating technology into the classroom.

Witkowski said the goal is to understand how to use technology and social media in ways that are positive, fun and constructive. (She and her peers used Facebook to help conduct research.)

She said that when she first screened the video in May for her fellow students at Von Steuben, many didn't care about what they posted on social media sites. But, she said, that has changed.

She would like students across the city and beyond to see the video.

"There are still kids who don't know that this is a big deal," she said. "I have a younger brother, and I'm constantly telling him not to add anybody on Facebook he doesn't know or put anything up there that he doesn't want people to see. It lasts forever and it can either hurt you or come back to haunt you."

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