

# Cyberbullies harass, humiliate peers

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**By David Briggs**

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—Beware the wrath of a dumped boyfriend or girlfriend spreading rumors about a former partner on [MySpace](#). Pity the middle-school student whose clothes, popularity or appearance becomes the object of derision in public chat rooms frequented by classmates.

These days, teenagers and their parents don't have to look out just for sexual predators online. Some of their peers are turning into cyberbullies, using sites such as MySpace and [Facebook](#) to harass and humiliate classmates.

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Religious groups and schools are responding to the explosive popularity of blogs by prohibiting access to MySpace, [Xanga](#), Facebook and other [social networking](#) sites, and asking young people to let their faith guide them in cyberspace as they would on the playground or in the classroom.

Three years ago, there was no MySpace. Now the site and others like it have become part of kids' lives. Young people use the social networking sites to talk, share photos and post personal journal entries on their pages or in chat rooms that can be specific to their schools.

At their best, blogs can help young people develop their voices as writers, enabling them to share their feelings and the challenges they face, say teenagers and adults who monitor these sites. The conversations and experiences also can help others through an often-tumultuous stage in life.

But these sites can cause real problems. In addition to sexual predators searching out potential victims, cyberbullying has become a growing concern.

That's where Grace comes in—Grace Doe of [Grace Notes](#), the teenage protagonist of the first book in author Dandi Daley Mackall's new four-part fiction series, *Blog On*. Mackall, from West Salem, Ohio, developed the series with Zondervan, a Christian publisher, as a fun way to encourage young girls to use the Internet in positive ways.

Mackall, who often visits schools to find out what youth are talking about, said one young girl received 350 hate e-mails because of false information posted about her online.

Young people deal with cyberbullying in different ways. Some try to ignore the insults and bar people who post offensive remarks from their sites. By staying cloaked in anonymity, online combatants are less likely to learn how to forgive after a fight, Mackall said.

Fortunately, there is a flip side to cyberbullying, Mackall said.



"It's easier to stand up for yourself or your friends in cyberspace," she said.

In *Grace Notes*, Mackall's main character is a shy person who considers herself invisible in school. But she finds it rewarding to share her experiences online. As the book goes on, Grace finds herself constantly having to revise the stereotypes of classmates she refers to in her blog as

“Bouncy, Perky Girl” and “New Girl.”

Once Grace begins to know these people, and the anger they feel at her judgments from afar, she realizes both that her blogging can hurt others and that people are more complex than the boxes adolescents can use to classify one another.

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