

Schools slow to respond to rise in 'Net bullying'

OSAKA (Kyodo) There is no sign of a letup in "Net bullying" among children via Internet and cell phone e-mail messages, but countermeasures by authorities and schools are a step behind.

In Kobe in July, an 18-year-old high school student jumped to his death at school after he was threatened by other students who demanded money from him via an Internet bulletin board.

The site has threads devoted to individual schools in which students post anonymously.

The thread for the Kobe school contains messages such as "You are pushing yourself too much, though your face is ugly. You shall be killed" along with topics about club activities and cram schools.

The site manager often deletes items that mention students' real names, but those with only initials tend to go untouched. The thread also has mobile phone numbers and mail addresses of individuals, as well as links to pornographic images.

The principal and vice principal at a junior high school in Ibaraki, Osaka Prefecture, learned about the bulletin board last year and began monitoring the thread for their school. If they see a message with a personal attack, they ask the site manager to delete it.

Few other schools take any countermeasures.

For example, the thread for a junior high school in the city of Osaka was launched more than five years ago and currently has more than 1,500 posts, but its vice principal said that he wasn't aware of the site.

"I didn't know of its existence. It has never been talked about

among teachers, either," he said.

Schools may not be reacting to the problem, but statistics show it is on the rise.

According to the National Police Agency, 8,037 complaints about harassing messages on the Internet were reported to police stations across the country last year, up 39 percent from the year before and 250 percent from five years earlier.

The complaints came chiefly from junior high and high school students, the NPA said.

The National Web Counseling Conference in Tokyo, which takes inquiries via e-mail and telephone, said a third of its 3,000 consultations in the last year were related to the Internet and e-mail. Its chief, Masashi Yasukawa, said Net bullying was on the radar screen before, but never in numbers like that.

Damage from "school behind-the-scenes Web sites" launched by junior high and high school students using mobile phones is also spreading. However, this phenomenon is hard to grasp because negative messages on personal computers and mobile phones are rarely seen by outsiders and the victims themselves have no idea where to turn to for help.

"Not only are the central and local governments as well as schools slow in recognizing the issue, they are out of touch in terms of what's going on in the world of the Internet," Yasukawa said. "And our consultations are only the tip of the iceberg."

Yasuko Ikenobo, senior vice minister of education, also expressed a sense of urgency over the problem during a meeting of an expert panel under the education ministry on Sept. 28, noting, "The Kobe incident is very regrettable. The content and quality of bullying now are far beyond our imagination."

Starting that day, experts on Net usage joined the panel.

"Japanese children can access the Internet anywhere and anytime. They are under no protection," said Hirotsugu Shimoda, a professor at Gunma University, one of the panel's new members.

"Social responsibility rests not only with parents and schools

but also with mobile phone companies," another member said.

Most school computers have restrictions, but it is difficult for teachers to supervise bulletin boards during working hours. Therefore, teachers interested in the Internet have to supervise boards before and after their regular work hours.

Wakio Oyanagi, an associate professor at Nara University of Education who is studying media education for children, said there should be a joint effort to fight the problem.

"Teachers, children and parents should study communications on the Net together in special school activities," Oyanagi said. "Also required is the creation of a system among prefectural governments to give swift administrative guidance."

The Japan Times: Friday, Oct. 26, 2007
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