Cyber Bullies on the Prowl
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By Reuters , eWEEK

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"Even when I stopped going to school and stayed at home, my cell phone kept ringing with harassing e-mails," said Makoto, who became anorexic and rarely emerged from his room for nearly half a year after becoming the target of "cyber bullying".

Makoto, now 19 and working as a hair stylist after graduating from high school, said classmates posted photos of him along with insults on a Web site and e-mailed him at all hours telling him to die. He attempted suicide twice. "When people tell you your life is not worth living, you start to think that way," said Makoto, who requested that his last name not be used. "I couldn't believe in human beings anymore."

Schoolyard bullying has long bedeviled Japan and, as in other countries, has taken a high-tech twist in recent years.

Ten percent of high school students said they have been harassed through e-mails, websites or blogs, a recent survey by the Hyogo Prefectual Board of Education showed.

Cyber bullying is a global trend, but the anonymity it provides for perpetrators may have extra significance in Japan, where wariness of direct confrontation is a cultural norm, said Shaheen Shariff, principal investigator for the International Project on Cyber Bullying at McGill University in Canada. "Something is falling through the cracks, so they need to address what the problem is," she said in a phone interview. "Are they (children) too controlled, are they under too much pressure to be academically successful, do they have an avenue to express their feelings ... are those taboos?" Shariff said.

Bullying in Cyber Darkness

Most cyber bullying in Japan, where 96 percent of high school students have their own cell phone, is conducted through mobile phones with Internet and e-mailing capabilities.

Common methods include e-mailing pictures showing victims' genitals to classmates and posting insults on class Web sites.

Experts say high-tech bullying is far harder for parents and teachers to police than physical violence because of the anonymity of cyber space and a lack of technical knowledge. "Schools often do not have Internet-savvy teachers, and parents cannot control or see what is going on in the cyber world," said Yasukawa of the National Web Counseling Conference. "No one knows what is going on."

The obscurity of cyber bullying is making the problem of bullying, which schools have long been accused of sweeping under the carpet, even harder to address.

The problem drew public attention in July, when an 18-year-old boy leapt to his death at his high school in Kobe, western Japan, after classmates posted a nude photo of him on a Web site and repeatedly sent him e-mails demanding money.

The school first denied bullying had occurred and only admitted that was the case after some of the teen's classmates were arrested. "Things that shouldn't have happened are secretly settled and hidden by schools as if they never took place," said Chiharu Utsumi, a representative of the Association for the Bereaved by School Accidents and Events, whose 11-year-old son committed suicide 13 years ago after being beaten by his teacher at school.

Education ministry surveys from 1999 to 2005 reported no suicides related to bullying, but the ministry decided earlier this year to review 16 cases that took place over the six year period.

Some Japanese schools and parents are already using e-mail filtering software and special settings on cell phones and computers that protect children from harassment by blocking messages sent through suspect servers or IP addresses.

But experts agree that the solution to cyber-bullying requires more than the latest technology."In terms of technology, e-mail filtering systems are effective," said Motohiro Hasegawa, associate professor of Department of Information and Culture at Kinjo Gakuin University. "But in the end, the problem is not about technology—it is about humans."