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Government Relations & Advocacy

**EXTENDED REMARKS OF DOMINIQUE NAPOLITANO
ON BEHALF OF GIRL SCOUTS OF THE USA**

U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Education and Labor
Healthy Families and Communities Subcommittee Hearing
Ensuring Student Cyber Safety
June 24, 2010

Thank you, Chairwoman McCarthy, Ranking Member Platts, and Members of the Committee. My name is Dominique Napolitano, and I am here on behalf of youth across the country to lend the teen perspective to an important issue affecting my generation – cyber safety. I am also here representing Girl Scouts of the USA, and girls across the country who are directly affected by this issue. I hope that my testimony will help you all better understand what it’s like for teens today, and also highlight how this issue affects girls.

A TALE OF CYBERBULLYING

“An intimidating boy at my school created a Facebook “fan club” called the “Mary T. Fan Club” that was created expressly for the purpose of publically humiliating my classmate Mary. The “Mary T. fan club” made sarcastic comments about Mary’s body, hair and personality, and encouraged her peers to make fun of Mary.

I’m happy to report that this student was not only disciplined in school, but also outside of school. His prank socially backfired on him when students started joining the fan club and began standing up for Mary. He realized how bad this idea was when the rest of the school agreed that his behavior was one of the most hurtful things to do to another person. It was amazing to see that even people who are not friendly with Mary stood up for her in unbelievable ways. That said, this bully continues to poke fun of her behind her back. I’m sure Mary will always have the emotional scars he left when he made the fan club.”

CYBERBULLYING, RELATIONAL AGGRESSION AND RELATED CYBER THREATS

Mary’s story is only one example of the challenges that many youth face today in cyberspace. In more heartbreaking cases, we hear stories of Megan Meier, Phoebe Prince, and Alexis Pilkington, each of whom ended her life after unrelenting bullying, including cyberbullying. A common theme in each of these cases, is that these girls were not the victims of *physical violence*, but were instead the subjects of a form of *emotional and social bullying* called relational aggression (RA).

Where Girls Grow Strong.

Relational aggression encompasses behaviors that harm someone by damaging, threatening, or manipulating her relationship with her peers, or by injuring a girl's feeling of social acceptance. Girls are more likely to use this subtle, indirect and emotional form of aggression than boys.ⁱ They are also more likely to report feeling angry (56 percent), hurt (33 percent), embarrassed (32 percent), or scared (10 percent) after being bullied.ⁱⁱ

Cyberbullying is a perfect example of relational aggression. By using digital media such as cell phones, social networking sites, email and other technologies, children can frighten, embarrass, harass or otherwise hurt their peers anonymously, without engaging in physical aggression, and without seeing the immediate responses to their behavior. This type of behavior is also startlingly common. Cyberbullying starts as early as 2nd grade and peaks in 4th grade and then again in 7th grade. Eighty-five percent of middle school students polled last year said they had been cyberbullied at least once, and 70 percent of 13-16 year olds polled said they had cyberbullied someone else at least once.ⁱⁱⁱ

While in most instances relational aggression or cyberbullying does not end in suicide, this behavior does pose a very real threat to children's – especially girl's -- safety. In the groundbreaking original research report *Feeling Safe*, the Girl Scouts Research Institute found that nearly half of all girls (46 percent) defined safety as not having their feelings hurt; girls who face cyberbullying or the threat of cyberbullying do not feel safe. Moreover, girls' number one concern (32 percent) was a fear of being teased or made fun of, and 38 percent of girls surveyed worry about their emotional safety when spending time with their peers. Girls who feel emotionally unsafe are more likely to feel sad, have trouble paying attention in school, get low grades, and have trouble making decisions.

Because R.A. is not as overt as “traditional” schoolyard bullying, it has not received the same attention from researchers, educators, and parents. However, Relational Aggression is just as harmful as physical bullying to a student's ability to learn, grow, and succeed. **It is imperative that we recognize cyberbullying for what it is – a symptom of the larger problem of relational aggression.**

Cyberspace poses a number of other threats to young girls, such as online sexual predators, inappropriate sharing of information, and the disturbing new trend of “sexting”. One in seven boys and one in four girls reports meeting strangers off the internet^{iv} – at clear risk to their own safety. Teens often misjudge “how much is too much,” and share personal information or post inappropriate pictures that will hurt them when applying to college or for jobs. An extreme example of over-the-edge behavior is the trend of “sexting,” or sending sexually explicit images or messages via cell phone. One study found that 31 percent of young men and 36 percent of young women have sent nude or seminude images of themselves, and even more have sent sexually suggestive messages. Fifty-one percent of teen girls cite pressure from a guy as a reason for sexting, while only 18 percent of teen boys cite pressure from girls.^v This behavior can clearly have life-long consequences for a girl.

GIRL SCOUTS RESEARCH AND PROGRAMMING

I am proud to be here today representing Girl Scouts of the USA. Girl Scouts is the world's preeminent organization for building leadership in girls, serving 2.5 million girl members and 900,000 adult members in every corner of the United States, Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands and ninety-five countries worldwide.

My experience as a Girl Scout really helped me become an advocate on cyberbullying. About 1.5 years ago, I was invited by Girl Scouts of the USA to become one of the teen editors of *LMK* (text-speak for *Let Me Know*). This innovative program, which was created by Girl Scouts and Microsoft, is a unique online safety resource designed by girls, for girls. At *LMK*, girls are the technology experts on subjects that are often best discussed at a teen-to-teen level, like cyberbullying, online predators and social networking. This girl-led campaign allows girls to share their online concerns with peer "tech-perts" about the issues that affect them while raising awareness about how to help keep girls (ages 13–17) safe while surfing the Web. In addition, parents have access to a site specifically geared to their needs, equipping them with the tools necessary to understand and act on the rapidly changing world of online safety. *LMK* offers a digital patch to Girl Scouts, motivating them to increase their knowledge of internet safety. For more information, please visit: <http://lmk.girlscouts.org>.

I have also benefited from Girl Scouts new program, the Girl Scout Leadership Experience (GSLE). The GSLE helps girls build the leadership skills they need to address the challenges of daily life, including relational aggression, bullying and girls cyber safety. The GSLE engages girls in discovering themselves and their values, connecting with others, and taking action to make the world a better place.

For example, when I was a cadette Girl Scout, my troop did a new Girl Scout Leadership Journey program called "aMAZE: The Twists and Turns of Getting Along," where we learned about friendships, cliques and conflicts, bullies, and cyber-relationships. This program helped us recognize and combat cyberbullying and other forms of relational aggression, how to safely use social networking websites, and how to deal with online friends or acquaintances who want to meet in person. We signed an Internet Safety Pledge, through which we promised to not give out personal information online, to follow the rules of Internet sites, to never meet with someone they meet online without talking to a parent first, to set up rules with a parent for going online, to practice online "netiquette," and more.

POLICY SOLUTIONS

As Congress considers various policy proposals to address cyber safety, Girl Scouts stands ready to provide resources, information and solutions. Girl Scouts encourages Congress to take a broad, holistic approach, including efforts to build confidence among girls, empowering them to prevent cyberbullying before it starts and to stop it when they see it. Specifically, we encourage you to:

- Recognize the significant threat posed by relational aggression and encourage schools to adopt and strengthen policies specifically to prevent and address relational aggression and cyberbullying.
- Educate parents, teachers, administrators, and other school personnel in recognizing, preventing, and mitigating the effects of relational aggression and cyberbullying.
- Support community-based organizations, including the Girl Scouts, that prevent cyberbullying and teach about cyber security, online privacy, online sexual predators, and the use of social networking sites and mobile devices.

On behalf of Girl Scouts of the USA, and girls across the country, thank you, again, for your focus on this important topic.

GSUSA's Public Policy and Advocacy Office, located in Washington, D.C., works in partnership with local Girl Scout councils to educate representatives of the legislative and executive branches of government and advocate for public policy issues important to girls and Girl Scouting.

For further information please contact Sharon Pearce, Director of Public Policy at 202-659-3780 or advocacy@girlscouts.org.

ⁱ Marion K. Underwood. *Social Aggression among Girls (Guilford Series On Social And Emotional Development)*. New York: The Guilford Press, 2003.

ⁱⁱ Harris Interactive, *Trends and Tudes: Cyberbullying, April 2006*.

ⁱⁱⁱ "Prevent Cyberbullying Before It Starts." LMK: Life Online. Girl Scouts of the United States of America. <<http://lmk.girlscouts.org/Online-Safety-Topics/Cyberbullying/Stop-Cyberbullying/Prevent-Cyberbullying-Before-It-Starts.aspx>>

^{iv} Parry Aftab. "What can you do to protect your child from sexual predators online?" <http://www.wiredsafety.org/askparry/special_reports/spr1/index.html>

^v *Sex and Tech: Results from a Survey of Teens and Young Adults*. The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, 2007.