

MLUWC General Meeting – November 10, 2014

Dr. Shaheen Shariff, McGill University

Sexting and Cyberbullying:
Defining the Line for Digitally Empowered Kids

An internationally recognized authority on the emerging educational and public policy issues surrounding cyberbullying, Dr. Shaheen Shariff, spoke to us about cyberbullying and responsible digital citizenship. She stressed the need for more educated responses at all levels. She addressed the notion of being sage and teaching social responsibility where behavior should be tempered by the requirement not to hurt others.

Dr. Shariff pointed out that, as adults, we are failing in our responsibility to model good behavior. Perceptions of harm have changed whereby society has developed a higher tolerance for insults and jokes without consideration for others. Youth seem to be motivated by anger and fun in their cyberbullying actions and this appears to be acceptable behavior. Police are more concerned by distribution of online images than of the actual physical rape. There is too much victim blaming which leads to not reporting the rapes while sexting and cyberbullying continue with sometimes devastating effects.

There is a serious lack of legal literacy, not only among children and youth but also parents, educators, law enforcement officers and the legal community. Young adults and children appear not to understand the difference between public and private conversations, nor do they understand the parameters of socially responsible online communication. Because the internet hides the identity of the individual distributing information, many of the actors who simply do not care continue with tacit impunity. Youth also use this medium as a means of falsely accusing those in authority.

Dr. Shariff also stressed the need to understand that there is a difference between punishment and discipline. It is important to ensure that there is an educational component to all attempts at remediation of any situation. Digital and media literacy must be an integral part of the school curriculum.

There is emerging legislation to address cyberbullying including proposed higher sentences, younger children being tried as adults, more responsibility thrust at schools, and parents being made responsible for the actions of their children. Legal literacy needs to be included in teacher education and development programmes. And the legal community must in turn also be educated on the pressures and social situations surrounding children and young adults and also re-examine the legal framework in terms of enforceability.

Dr. Shariff presented a very thought-provoking and informative talk on a subject that is very current and of concern to us all.

Please visit the website: www.Definetheline.ca