Let's leave no hiding place for these cruel, silent cyberbullies

So farewell then, Grange Hill. When it came to recommissioning the series for a new generation, the BBC decided to "just say no". No more Zammos, Tucker Jenkinses, Pogo Pattersons, Gripper Stebsons and Trisha Yateses. You will be missed.

In its heyday, the programme introduced young viewers to the pains and pleasures of urban school life - friendships, fights, a creeping realisation of drugs, violence and, of course, bullying.

That "of course" is rather telling. It's a sign that schools have always been associated with bullying. From Jane Eyre and David Copperfield to Lord of the Flies and Harry Potter, the message seems to be: whether you're at a school for choristers or would-be wizards, bullying is a grim fact of life.

This can lull us into a school-of-hard-knocks mentality: an assumption that bullying is one of those things that, like bereavement, is a natural process that toughens us up for adult life.

The reality, of course, is that bullying can be utterly debilitating and casts a long shadow over the victim's life. Its long-term impact can be deeper than we realise. A report for the New Zealand Commissioner for Children in 1996 asked secondary pupils what were the worst experiences of their lives. The death of a parent or friend came top of the list. Second was being bullied.

This week, Ofsted warned us that bullying in schools appears to be on the rise and that schools need to tackle it with greater determination. Certainly the figures make depressing reading. ChildLine reports that 31,000 young people phoned its helpers last year as a result of bullying, making it the main issue dealt with by the charity. And nearly 20 per cent of the children say that their tormentor is a former friend.

Traditionally, bullying included name-calling, teasing, being hit, punched or kicked. But in the internet age, the terrain has become more insidious, blurring the boundaries between life at school and home. As the Department for Children, Schools and Families' excellent web pages remind us, cyberbullying includes being sent abusive emails, being taunted in online chatrooms and through instant messaging, being ganged up against on social networking sites, being sent humiliating text messages or images, being the victim of false rumours spread through interactive gaming sites and being sent malicious viruses.

It's a bleak world that makes Grange Hill look like the grassy hillock of the Teletubbies.

Technology is changing the nature of bullying, making it darker, less easy for the victim to escape and harder for a school to police effectively.

So, while Ofsted is right to remind schools to redouble efforts against bullying in the age of Every Child Matters, we can't counter it by ourselves. Recent research from Goldsmiths College at the University of London reported that between a fifth and a quarter of students had been cyberbullied at least once over the previous few months; phone calls, text messages and email were the most common means; there was more cyberbullying outside school than in; girls are more likely than boys to be involved, usually by phone; picture/video clip and phone-call bullying were perceived as most harmful.

If you want to give yourself a masochistic insight into the horrors of this brave new world, go to YouTube, type in "teacher" and brace yourself for a chilling selection of mobile phone footage taken in classrooms around the globe, showing the ritual humiliation of teachers and pupils. At our school, we take a tough line on mobiles. They aren't allowed to be seen inside the building. If they are, we confiscate them for the day. If it happens again, a parent or carer has to come into school to collect the offending mobile.

Given how much a phone is part of a teenager's identity, this is an unpopular but easily policed rule. Pupils are desperate not to lose their phone, even for a matter of hours, so we almost never see them. And the motives for our rule aren't to be killjoys as some pupils and their parents may assume. We know how insidious the use of technology has

become in bullying and believe this provides some protection to pupils and staff by limiting opportunities for phone bullying.

So what to do? The issue needs to move on from clear statements of no tolerance and displaying a robust anti-bullying policy. We need to show technology doesn't ensure a hiding place for bullies by demonstrating the routine monitoring schools can do, with spot checks on pupils' internet and email usage and, perhaps most importantly, by helping parents recognise their responsibilities.

We know that parents lose their confidence over time about how far they should intervene in their child's life. Let's educate them about the technology their children are using, give them the morale-building resolve of learning about it with other parents, and encourage them to monitor much more actively the activities of their children.

There are other things we can be doing in schools too: developing our older pupils as trusted mentors and listening ears; exploring strategies such as no-blame mediation which, it is claimed, can root out the causes of bullying; and doing more to reinforce a culture in which people who witness bullying are not prepared to be drawn in as passive spectators.

One more thing is equally important. Some pupils, ravaged by the effects of bullying, retreat into themselves and become defined only by being a victim. We owe it to these pupils to provide them with activities in which they can immerse themselves, make new relationships, retreat from the brutal peer pressure of unstructured lunchtimes and regain their self- esteem. That may sound idealistic, but it's the kind of heady idealism great schools exude day in, day out.