

Cyberbullying

Whether it happens at school or off-campus, cyberbullying disrupts and affects all aspects of students' lives.

By Ted Feinberg and
Nicole Robey

Cyberspace presents a serious challenge for adults who are concerned about the safety and well-being of adolescents. Approximately 93% of U.S. youths ages 12–17 use the Internet, a significant increase from 2004. The number of teens with online profiles, including those on social networking sites, also has increased. Importantly, 38% of high school students make efforts to hide their online activities from their parents (Enough Is Enough, 2006).

Cyberbullying has grown in concert with increased rates of Internet use. In 2006, national law enforcement leaders estimated that more than 13 million children and adolescents ages 6–17 were victims of cyberbullying (Fight Crime, 2006). Survey data show that a significant number of youths report that they have been harassed online in the past year. Further, research indicates a direct relationship between the frequency of cyberbullying and negative psychosocial characteristics and behavioral problems (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2007).

The problem for schools has grown as well. Although bullying and relational aggression among students are longtime concerns, the elusive nature of cyberbullying compounds the difficulty of identifying harmful behavior and intervening to stop it. Principals across the country are struggling to determine their authority over actions that technically may occur outside of school but for which the effects on students in school are very real. Cyberbullying can undermine school climate, interfere with victims' school functioning, and put some students at risk for serious mental health and safety problems. Out of sight cannot be out of mind. School leaders cannot ignore cyberbullying but rather must understand its legal and psychological ramifications and work with staff members, students, and parents to stop it.

What Is Cyberbullying?

Cyberbullying involves sending or posting harmful or cruel text or images using the Internet (e.g., instant messaging, e-mails, chat rooms, and social networking sites) or other digital communication devices, such as cell phones. It can involve stalking, threats, harassment, impersonation, humiliation, trickery, and exclusion.

The boundaryless nature of cybercommunications means that students can experience bullying wherever they have access to their phones or a computer: at home, at a friend's house, during school, and even on the bus or at the mall. A 2006 study by the organization Fight Crime: Invest in Kids found that 45% of preteens and 30% of teens are cyberbullied while at school (Opinion Research Corporation, 2006).

To their credit, many schools have made good use of filtering software that helps prevent students from using school computers to bully others. But this does not mean that cyberbullying is not a part of the school context or does not negatively affect students' school experience, and it raises many questions about the scope and prerogative of school intervention. For instance, is it a school problem if a student bullies another student in a text message that was sent while physically off campus during lunch? Or if a student posts a cruel message about a classmate on Facebook after school but the victim doesn't learn about it until he or she hears other students talking in class? Discussing the nuances of such questions with relevant staff members and legal counsel is vital to addressing cyberbullying.

Cyberbullies and Victims

Cyberbullies and victims are as likely to be female as male and more likely to be older,

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rather than younger, adolescents (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004). Some cyberbullies and victims are strangers, but most often they know each other. A study of adolescent girls found that the bully was a friend or someone they knew from school 68% of time and someone from a chat room 28% of the time (Burgess-Procter, Patchin, & Hinduja, 2008). Some cyberbullies remain anonymous or work in groups, making it difficult to identify the abuser.

Like traditional bullies, cyberbullies tend to have poorer relationships with their caregivers than their peers. They are more likely than nonbullies to be targets of traditional bullying, to engage in delinquent behavior and frequent substance use, and to be daily Internet users (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004).

Cyberbullies can have different goals. Some do not see themselves as bullies, but rather as vigilantes who are protecting a friend who is under attack. Others intend to exert power through fear. For victims who are normally considered weak physically or socially, cyberspace can offer power through anonymity or through greater skill in manipulating technology. Female cyberbullies often act in a group and may simply be bored or feel justified in their Internet attack of a weaker, less socially adept peer. Some cyberbullies do not intend to cause harm; they just respond without thinking about the consequences of their actions (Stop Cyberbullying, n.d.).

Approximately half of cyberbullying victims are also targets of traditional bullying. Victims generally are more unpopular, isolated, depressed, anxious, and fearful than their peers (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004). Those at risk are more likely to be searching for acceptance and attention online, more vulnerable to manipulation, less attentive to Internet safety messages, less resilient in getting out of a difficult situa-

tion, less able or willing to rely on their parents for help, and less likely to report a dangerous online situation to an adult (Willard, 2007).

Consequences of Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying can cause significant emotional harm. Victims of face-to-face bullying often experience depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, physiological complaints, problems concentrating, school failure, and school avoidance. Targets of cyberbullying suffer equal if not greater psychological harm because the hurtful information can be transmitted broadly and instantaneously and can be difficult to eliminate. Aggressors can remain anonymous and are hard to stop. Not knowing who an aggressor is can cause adolescents to be hypervigilant in terms of surveying their social environment, both cyber and real, to avoid hurtful encounters. Cyberbullying also may be worse than face-to-face bullying because people feel shielded from the consequences of their actions and often do or say things online that they would not in person. In some cases, cyberbullying can lead to severe dysfunction, externalized violence, and suicide.

Some adolescents are more susceptible to instances and effects of cyberbullying than others. Adolescents who are socially well-adjusted and have healthy peer and family support systems are likely to have better decision making and coping skills. They are usually better equipped to ignore or effectively rebut cyberbullying and are less likely to escalate the situation through retaliation. Vulnerable adolescents tend to have few coping skills, poor relationships, mental health problems, and family difficulties. Some adolescents engage in or become victims of cyberbullying because of acute episodic emotional distress, such as from a romantic breakup.

Links to online resources about cyberbullying are available at www.principals.org/pl

Types of Cyberbullying

Most cyberbullying falls into the following categories:

- **Flaming:** online fights using electronic messages that include angry and vulgar language
- **Harassment, threats, and stalking:** repeatedly sending cruel, vicious, or threatening messages (including sexual harassment)
- **Denigration:** sending or posting gossip or rumors about a person to damage his or her reputation or friendships
- **Impersonation:** using another person's e-mail account to send harmful material or leading a victim into a hurtful or embarrassing situation by pretending to be someone else
- **Outing and trickery:** engaging someone in instant messaging, tricking him or her into revealing sensitive information, and forwarding that information to others
- **Exclusion:** intentionally excluding someone from an online group.

Source: Willard, N. (2007). Educator's guide to cyberbullying and cyberthreats. Retrieved November 1, 2007, from www.cyberbully.org/cyberbully/docs/cbcteducator.pdf

What Schools Can Do

Research indicates that adolescents are not optimistic about being able to prevent cyberbullying. Victims of cyberbullying are significantly less likely to tell someone of the abuse than victims of traditional bullying, and when they do reach out, it is more often to friends than to adults. Adolescents can be reluctant to tell adults about the abuse because they are emotionally traumatized, think it is their fault, fear retribution by the bully, or worry that their online activities or cell phone use will be restricted. The most popular intervention strategy that is adopted by students is avoidance, such as blocking messages or changing their e-mail addresses (Smith et al., 2008). This approach might help specific individuals, but it does little to change the overall behavior. Principals can use the following suggestions to work with parents and staff members to prevent and respond more effectively to cyberbullying.

Incorporate cyberbullying into all relevant school policies. This includes bullying,

harassment, sexual harassment, and Internet and cell phone use policies. Principals should work with staff members to develop a clear definition of cyberbullying; determine how its effect on students' school experience will be measured; and create protocols for reporting cyberbullying, intervening, and collaborating with local law enforcement.

Determine the extent and perception of cyberbullying in the school population.

Conduct a needs assessment to identify the incidence of cyberbullying among students, including where it occurs and any factors that discourage reporting it. The assessment will help guide prevention efforts.

Educate staff members, students, and parents about cyberbullying. This should include how and where most cyberbullying occurs, how to recognize the behavior, its damaging effects (social, behavioral, and academic), and how to prevent and respond to it. Parent participation is important because the majority of cyberbullying is initiated at home. Parents can benefit from training on how social networking sites work, signs that indicate that their child is being bullied or is bullying, strategies for talking to their children about cyberbullying, and what support the school is offering students.

Teach students to be Internet savvy. In addition to the risks and consequences of cyberbullying, curricula should address responding appropriately to a cyberbully, documenting online threats (e.g., print screens), recognizing online predators, using appropriate online etiquette (e.g., tone of e-mails and risk of posting improper content), and being discerning consumers of online information. Young students or those lacking strong social and emotional skills can benefit from exploring suggested discussion topics and role play.

Investigate all reports of cyberbullying. Encourage students to report inappropriate or threatening behavior. Assuring them of confidentiality is important. Determine who can authorize search and record-keeping procedures, as well as the circumstances under which searches can be legally conducted. Conduct a threat assessment for any report of cyberbul-

lying that raises concerns about the possibility of violence or suicide. Principals should contact law enforcement officials when there are threats of violence to people or property, coercion, stalking, obscene or harassing phone calls or text messages, hate crimes, sexual exploitation, or photography of someone in a private place (Willard, 2007).

Support students who are victims or perpetrators. Regardless of disciplinary action against the bully, victims should receive appropriate supports, such as targeted skills development, counseling, monitoring, and referral to community resources. It may also be appropriate to contact the cyberbully's parents and to provide behavioral interventions to the bully.

Understand legal obligations and restrictions. Work with district legal counsel to determine appropriate policies. In general, disciplining students for engaging in cyberbullying outside of school requires that the bullying action must have caused or threatened to cause a significant and material threat of disruption on school grounds. This can include "demonstrating that harmful material was posted, sent, or displayed to other students through the district's Internet system or on campus" (Willard, 2007) or that a victim's school functioning was directly undermined by the cyberbullying.

Safeguard staff members as well as students. Online harassment of school staff members is an emerging concern for administrators. Cyberspace offers a perception of safety and power to students who are angry at a teacher or think that it is amusing to poke fun at or humiliate an adult in power. There is a fine line between free speech and harassment in these cases, so principals should work closely with district legal counsel to appropriately address harassment of staff members in school policies.

Conclusion

Although cyberbullying does not necessarily begin at school, the behavior can have serious negative effects on the social, emotional, and academic functioning of the victim, as well as on the overall learning environment. Administrators must work with parents and

Responding to Cyberbullying

TIPS FOR STUDENTS

- Do not retaliate, because retaliation can escalate the harassment and make it unclear who first instigated the aggression.
- Either ignore the communication or calmly tell the cyberbully to stop.
- Tell an adult about the cyberbullying, particularly if there is anything threatening in the messages.
- Make a hard copy of the posted material.
- Write down how you feel or what you might want to say, but don't send it to anyone. Walk away and read it later. You will feel better and probably won't want to send it to the bully, but you may want to include it with other documentation.
- Do not delete e-mail or text messages until an adult has reviewed and documented the material.
- Block future communication and clean up your instant messenger buddy list.
- Do not do or say anything online that you wouldn't do in person or that you are not comfortable having other people know.

TIPS FOR PARENTS

- Keep computers in easily viewable places, such as the family room or kitchen.
- Talk regularly with your children about the online activities in which they are involved and Internet etiquette in general. Be specific about the risks of cyberbullying and their need to tell you if something bothers them.
- Respect for adolescents' privacy is important, but tell your children that you may review their online communications if you become concerned.
- Set clear expectations for responsible online behavior and phone use. Explain the consequences for violating those expectations.
- Consider establishing a parent-child Internet use contract.
- Be aware of warning signs that might indicate that your son or daughter is being bullied, such as reluctance to use the computer, a change in the child's behavior and mood, or reluctance to go to school.
- Consider installing parental control filtering software and tracking programs, but do not rely solely on these tools.
- Be equally alert to the possibility that your child is bullying others online, even if unintentionally.
- Document any bullying.
- Contact the school to enlist the help of the school psychologist, the school counselor, the principal, or the resource officer.
- File a complaint with the Web site, ISP, or cell phone company.
- Contact the police if the cyberbullying includes threats.

What Next?

Following are important questions and steps for principals and staff members to consider when developing policies and programs to prevent cyberbullying:

- How do current policies support the prevention and intervention of cyberbullying? What is the genuine level of awareness of these policies and the related issues among parents?
- What existing curricula dovetail with skills development related to cyberbullying prevention? Do the teachers of those curricula have the training to address cyberbullying prevention?
- Given the nature of cybercommunication and the relevance of legal precedent, how can cyberbullying policies and procedures be coordinated among cluster schools within the district and across districts?
- What current policies trigger disciplinary action for behavior that occurs off campus?
- What steps can be taken to prevent retaliation against students who report cyberbullying? How would this inform reporting and intervention practices?

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community agencies to address the problem. Failing to do so sets the stage for potentially tragic outcomes. **PL**

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More in PL

Explore the legal issues associated with cyberbullying in “Cyberbullying: Is There Anything Schools Can Do?” by Kelley R. Taylor, Esq., (*Principal Leadership*, May 2008)