

Cyberbullying: What School Administrators (and Parents) Can Do

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Abstract: Technology has transformed the lives of adolescents, including the ways they bully one another. Various referred to as electronic bullying, online bullying, or cyberbullying, this new method of bullying involves the use of e-mail, instant messaging, Web sites, voting booths, and chat or bash rooms to deliberately pick on and torment others. To combat cyberbullying, educators need to better understand the nature of it and be aware of actions that they can undertake to prevent cyberbullying in the schools.

Keywords: combating cyberbullying, electronic bullying, online bullying

In recent years, considerable emphasis has been placed on implementing bullying prevention programs in public schools (Colvin et al. 1998; Hernandez and Seem 2004; Pellegrini and Bartini 2000). Researchers and administrators have developed programs, written articles, delivered workshops, and given speeches focusing on the goal and importance of eliminating bullying behavior in schools. The difficulty, however, is that despite the major emphasis on prevention of bullying in schools, the problem persists. According to the results of the first national survey on school bullying, 74 percent of eight- to eleven-year-old students reported that bullying and teasing occurred at their schools (Nansel et al. 2001). To make matters worse, technology has escalated bullying to a new and particularly insidious level. Various referred to as electronic bullying, online bullying, or cyberbullying, this new method of bullying involves the use of e-mail, instant messaging, Web sites, voting booths, and chat or bash rooms to deliberately antagonize and intimidate others.

Although the Internet allows for unbridled communication, it also seems to encourage a measure of mean-spiritedness. When students think they can remain anonymous, they are less inhibited in saying things they never would say to a person face-to-face (Joinson 1998; Keith and Martin 2005; Sparling 2004). Even if he or she can be identified online, an adolescent can blame someone else for using his or her screen name. Because technology provides a screen behind which young people may hide, they do not have to be accountable for their actions, and if a person cannot be identified with an action, fear of being caught and punished is diminished. This phenomenon is referred to as disinhibition and requires that administrators create a comprehensive *sunlight* plan for bringing cyberbullying out of the shadows and to the attention of teachers, parents, students, and staff (Willard 2005).

Although few studies that have documented students' experiences with cyberbullying exist, the one national study to date (R. Kowalski, pers. comm.) found that cyberbullying was prevalent among middle school students, with 25 percent of girls and 11 percent of boys reporting being cyberbullied at least once in a two-month period. Ironically, online bullying seems to follow a gender pattern that is the opposite of what happens off-line. On playgrounds, on school buses, and in school hallways, boys tend to be the primary perpetrators and victims of bullying behavior; online, girls are the major players (Beale and Scott 2001; R. Kowalski, pers. comm.). Additionally, what makes cyberbullying so particularly hurtful is that the anonymity of the act often emboldens the person doing it and increases the fear factor for the victim

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(Belsey 2004). Because it does not occur face-to-face, bullies are able to mete out pain without witnessing the consequences and victims often cannot stand up for themselves, even if they are so inclined. In large part, it is the secretive nature of electronic bullying that helps to make it so insidious. A tormentor can get into a victims' home, harassing him or her while parents sit comfortably in the next room (Keith and Martin 2005; Willard 2005).

As with traditional bullying, cyberbullying seems to increase through the elementary school years, peak during the middle school years, and decline in high school (Migliore 2003). Although girls generally mock others for their physical appearance, boys tend to make more sexually explicit comments (R. Kowalski, pers. comm.; Worthington 2005). Students who are considered overweight, small in size, learning disabled, or overly sensitive (i-SAFE 2004; Willard 2005) are often targeted. However, all students are potential victims of electronic bullying aimed at inflicting unwarranted hurt and embarrassment on its unsuspecting victims. To assist the victims of cyberbullying and develop interventions aimed at preventing it, educators need to be informed about cyberbullying, the forms it takes, and what strategies or actions they might take to combat it in their schools.

Forms of Cyberbullying

We are becoming an increasingly "wired" society. Although technology offers many exciting possibilities for students to create, connect, and learn from one another, there also exists the inherent potential for some students to exploit technology in ways that deliberately antagonize and intimidate others. Cyberbullying involves the intentional use of information and communication technologies to support intentional, repeated, and hostile behavior directed at an individual or a group (Belsey 2005). Six major forms that cyberbullying might take are the following: e-mail, instant messaging (IM), chat rooms or bash boards, small text messaging (SMS), Web sites, and voting booths.

Cyberbullies use e-mail to send harassing and threatening messages to their targets. Most e-mail programs allow for e-mail filters that will block or automatically delete messages from undesirable senders, but these blocks work only to a limited degree, as most e-mail users know. And although it is possible to trace from which e-mail account the offending message was sent, it is almost impossible to prove who actually used the account to send the offending message.

IM is similar to e-mail, but it allows for much faster communication. Typically, the IM system alerts the user when somebody on his or her private list is online, thus allowing the user to initiate a chat session with that particular individual in real time. IM has become a very large part of the social lives of students. Social relation-

ships formed at school are extended and maintained beyond school hours through IM. Most IM programs allow users to create a list of others from which users may wish to block messages. This exclusion feature is one of the most prevalent forms of cyberbullying, that is, willfully excluding a particular student from contacting the user or being allowed to join online chat room conversations. Because screen names can be switched, IM allows students to hide their identities, thus enhancing the potential for bullying.

Chat rooms or bash boards allow for real-time communication between users via their computers. A "virtual" room affords students the opportunity to write back and forth to one another. Once a chat has been initiated, either user may enter text by typing on the keyboard and the entered text will appear on the other user's monitor. Most networks and online services offer a chat feature. The "bash board" is the nickname for an online bulletin board, or virtual chat room, in which students can anonymously write anything they want, true or false, creating or adding mean-spirited postings for the world to see.

SMS is a service for sending and receiving short text messages via mobile phones. The text can include words, numbers, or an alphanumeric combination. A single message can be up to 160 characters long using default global system mobile communications (GSM) alphabet coding and seventy characters when using two-byte universal character set (UCS2) international coding. Similarly, personal digital assistants (PDAs)—such as Palm Pilot, Blackberry, Sony Clie, iPaq, Handspring Visor/Tree, and Pocket PC—are not only personal information organizers, they can now also connect to and browse the Internet and receive and send e-mail.

Cyberbullies can create Web sites that mock, antagonize, and harass others. Voting or polling booths offer users the opportunity to create Web pages that allow students to vote online for "ugliest," "fattest," "dumbest," and so on, boy or girl at their school. It is easy to understand the devastating effect such a "contest" would have on the hapless student(s) selected for inclusion.

Willard (2005) described cyberbullying as sending or posting harmful or cruel text or images using digital communication devices. She identified the following seven ways in which cyberbullying may occur: (a) *flaming* involves sending angry, rude, or vulgar messages directed at a person or persons privately or to an online group; (b) *harassment* involves repeatedly sending a person offensive messages; (c) *denigration* is sending or posting harmful, untrue, or cruel statements about a person to other people; (d) *cyberstalking* is harassment that includes threats of harm or is highly intimidating; (e) *masquerading* is pretending to be someone else and sending or posting material that makes that person look bad or places that person in

potential danger; (f) *outing* and *trickery* involve engaging in tricks to solicit embarrassing information about a person and then making that information public; and (g) *exclusion* describes actions that specifically and intentionally exclude a person from an online group, such as blocking a student from an IM buddies list. Willard speculated that every student who communicates online has played one or more of the roles in the cyberbullying triad: bully, victim, or bystander. Regrettably, the nature of cyberbullying, with its ease and wide scope of dissemination of harmful information, its virtual anonymity for the perpetrators, and the fact that the victims cannot easily escape serves to make it even more harmful than traditional bullying.

Because cyberbullying occurs so extensively in the schools, teachers and administrators need to address it schoolwide. School administrators must implement a comprehensive prevention plan that has the support and cooperation of parents, the school, and community members if students are to be free from cyberbullying. Combating cyberbullying is a mission that requires administrators, teachers, counselors, parents, and students to work together to ensure that all students are afforded a safe and fear-free learning environment.

Recommended Preventions and Interventions

What School Administrators Can Do

School administrators are responsible for ensuring that all students are provided an opportunity to attend school free from fear and intimidation. This includes ensuring that students are using school network or mobile devices in a manner that does not cause harm to others. One of the first steps to eliminate cyberbullying is to assess the level of electronic bullying occurring both at home and at school. Some ways to determine the prevalence, attitudes toward, and gaps in perception and knowledge of cyberbullying include focus groups, class meetings, and surveys sent to teachers, parents, and students. It is naive to assume that cyberbullying is not taking place. A more realistic approach is to attempt to assess the pervasiveness of the problem, thus allowing school leaders to target specific areas or aspects of the problem (for example, incident rates, times, locations, forms). It is equally important to make certain that teachers, staff, parents, and students clearly understand the scope and seriousness of cyberbullying and the consequences of violating school rules regarding harassment, intimidation, and antagonistic behavior. School administrators can begin by implementing the following prevention-intervention strategies gleaned from cyberbullying literature (Aftab 2005; Belsey 2005; Hernandez and Seem 2004; Keith and Martin 2005; Media Awareness Network 2007; Willard 2005):

- Provide student education. Internet bullying lessons should be integrated into the school's curriculum. School counselors, in particular, could collaborate with classroom teachers for presenting classroom guidance sessions on appropriate Internet etiquette.

- Make certain the school or school board's anti-bullying policy includes harassment perpetrated with mobile and Internet technology.

- The school's acceptable use policy should be updated to specifically prohibit using the Internet for bullying. The policy should spell out what constitutes cyberbullying and specify the anticipated negative consequences. Aftab (2005) recommended that a provision be added to the school's acceptable use policy reserving the right to discipline students for actions conducted away from school if such actions have an adverse effect on a student or if they adversely affect the safety and well-being of the student while in school. This makes cyberbullying a contractual, not a legal, issue.

- Provide parents with education. Encourage parents to discuss Internet bullying with their children and the adverse consequences of such behavior, including school discipline, civil litigation, and criminal prosecution.

- Establish a relationship with the local police department, perhaps inviting "cybercops" to school to speak to parents and students on proper Internet use.

- Conduct professional development seminars so that all faculty and staff are alerted to issues related to cyberbullying, especially detection.

- Create a school climate in which students feel encouraged and comfortable reporting any and all forms of cyberbullying to a responsible adult.

- Coordinate with other schools in the district to provide consistent cyberbullying prevention information as students move through grade levels and among schools.

- Establish a schoolwide cyberbullying task force composed of technologically savvy educators, parents, students, and community members to develop and implement anticiberbullying programs aimed at keeping schools safe and secure.

Because school administrators must walk a tightrope to protect students affected by cyberbullying without trampling the free speech rights of bullies, school districts should petition state legislatures to add an electronic bullying component to existing state laws that prohibit traditional bullying. Under such legislation, cyberbullying would not have to occur on school property, take place during school hours, or be done using school equipment, so long as the activity has an adverse effect on a student or school. Currently, forty-five states have passed legislation prohibiting electronic bullying in its various forms. Virginia, for example, has legislation in place that makes it a misdemeanor for a person to use a computer or computer network to

coerce, intimidate, or harass another person (Code of Virginia 18.2-152.7:1 2000).

Because many parents are not as computer savvy as their children, schools should sponsor workshops designed to enlighten parents about the nature and forms of cyberbullying. Unless parents are aware of the scope of cyberbullying and its adverse consequences for children, and know what to look for and how to respond, one of the school's major lines of defense against it is ineffective.

One of the most troubling aspects of electronic bullying is that frequently it occurs away from school, thereby limiting administrators in what they can do to control it in a typical disciplinary manner. Absent a *nexus* or direct connection to the school, administrators are stifled in what direct responses they may take to confront those who engage in cyberbullying. Because it does occur away from school, cyberbullying makes it imperative for school administrators to provide information to parents that will allow them to monitor more closely their children's use of technology.

What Parents Can Do

The best advice for students affected by cyberbullying is to get their parents and school administrators involved as soon as possible and not attempt to handle the situation online or suffer in silence. Parents must stand behind the school's efforts to counter cyberbullying by recognizing that it is a reality and addressing the problem with their children. Although traditional bullying occurs at school, electronic bullying mainly occurs at home, causing those affected to believe there is no safe place (Wollack and Mitchell 2000). Lauren Savage, a school counselor in Richmond, Virginia, noted, "In the past when students were bullied at school they could at least seek the safety of their homes, but with cyberbullying the bully goes home with them" (pers. comm.).

Some schools require that students and their parents sign an "Acceptable Internet Use" policy in which students agree to not use their computers to antagonize or harass other students, and parents agree to be responsible for their children's Internet use outside of school. Parental responsibility for monitoring their children's computer use is tricky. Part of the problem in combating cyberbullying is that parents and young people relate to technology differently (Keith and Martin 2005). Most adults approach computers as practical tools, whereas their children view the Internet as a lifeline to their peer groups (Keith and Martin). Adolescents know there is a gap in the understanding of technology between themselves and their parents (Belsey 2004). Students can tell their parents they are doing homework, but may actually be engaging in some form of Internet bullying. Additionally, instant messaging, chat rooms, and text messaging are likely to be foreign terms to many parents; they are not unfamiliar terms

to most students (i-SAFE 2004). Today's young people, including bullies, are computer savvy. Parents, if they are to be successful in monitoring their children's computer use, must learn what to look for, as well as how to "talk the talk." For example, IM has created a whole new user language. How many parents know the meaning of the following common IM acronyms: PIR (parent in room), NOYB (none of your business), G2G (got to go), POS (parents over shoulder), NBD (no big deal), and ILU (I love you)? How many teenagers know the meaning of the same acronyms (and these are the easy ones)? Parents also need to know that the major Internet service providers, such as AOL, Yahoo!, and Microsoft offer forms of parental controls that allow parents to monitor their children's Internet activities.

Often, school administrators, in an attempt to crack down on electronic bullying and increase parental accountability, require that students present a signed permission slip from their parents before they are allowed to have mobile phones in school. Teachers, in turn, inform students that the use of cell phones during class time is prohibited.

In addition to being reminded to monitor their children's activities on the Internet, parents also require assistance in appropriate intervention strategies if they learn that their children are either engaging in cyberbullying or are being affected by it. Parent-teacher associations have teamed up with local law enforcement agencies to create cyberbullying programs aimed at helping parents and students recognize and deal with the problem of cyberbullying (Slater 2005). Using specially trained police officers (commonly referred to as cybercops) and parent volunteers, these programs emphasize the importance of safe learning environments, while offering factual information regarding the consequences associated with cyberbullying and providing instruction aimed at stopping online harassment and keeping students safe on the Internet (Slater). Parents are encouraged to discuss with their children what is and is not acceptable on the computer.

Today's young Internet users have created an interactive world away from adult knowledge and supervision. A recent study found that only 16 percent of the students surveyed regularly talked with their parents about what they do online (Media Awareness Network 2007). Parents should learn everything they can about the Internet and what their children are doing online (Federal Bureau of Investigation n.d.). At a minimum, parents should develop a family online agreement with their children including where they can go online, what they can do there, how much time they can spend on the Internet, what to do if they receive messages that make them feel uncomfortable, and how to protect their personal information (Keith and Martin 2005).

The students affected by cyberbullying are often embarrassed to approach their parents about the online

bullying (Aftab 2005; Barr 2005; Belsey 2004). For this reason, parents should encourage their children to come to them if anybody says or does anything online that makes them feel uncomfortable or threatened. Many cases of Internet bullying go unreported because those being bullied fear they will have their computers taken away or will be barred from using the Internet (Barr). Therefore, rather than overreacting, parents are encouraged to stay calm and keep lines of communication and trust open.

Parents of children who are affected by cyberbullying should notify school officials, even if the bullying is after school. Although there may be little the school administrator can do in terms of direct intervention, there are suggestions they can make to parents. For example, administrators can advise parents to contact the parents of the cyberbully and request that the behavior stop. If this does not stop the harassment, save the harassing messages and forward them to your Internet service provider (e.g., Hotmail or Yahoo!) for action. Most service providers have appropriate use policies that restrict users from harassing others over the Internet. As a last resort, parents may wish to contact an attorney about suing the parents of the bully for defamation, invasion of privacy, and intentional infliction of emotional distress. However, in most instances, cyberbullying does not go that far, although parents often try to pursue criminal charges (WiredKids 2005). Of course, parents should contact the police if there are threats of physical violence, intimidation, extortion, hate crimes, or sexual exploitation. The parents' Internet service provider or cell phone service provider should also be contacted for help in resolving the problem.

Conclusion

Cyberbullying is emerging as one of the most challenging issues facing parents and school personnel as students embrace the Internet and other mobile communication technologies. Believing they are free from attribution, cyberbullies engage in cruel and harmful practices that demean, embarrass, and hurt fellow students without the fear of facing the consequences for their actions. From voting for "The biggest _____ (add derogatory term) in the school," to sending candid locker room pictures of a person taken with a digital phone camera to others (Willard 2005), electronic bullying has reached a level of seriousness in the schools that demands swift and decisive action. Because the problem occurs in the hidden online world of students and it reaches beyond the school and into the home, it is imperative that school administrators, parents, and community representatives work together to eradicate this twenty-first century form of bullying. By working together to deal with this cruel practice, parents

and educators will ensure that all children share a learning environment that is free from harassment and intimidation. School administrators' failure to confront cyberbullying head on is to turn their collective backs on the most insidious aspect of modern technology in the schools.

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