Cyberbullying:

Identification, Prevention, & Response

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Kids have been bullying each other for generations. The latest generation, however, has been able to utilize technology to expand their reach and the extent of their harm. This phenomenon is being called *cyberbullying*, defined as: "*willful and repeated harm inflicted through the use of computers, cell phones, and other electronic devices.*" Basically, we are referring to incidents where adolescents use technology to harass, threaten, humiliate, or otherwise hassle their peers. For example, youth can send hurtful text messages to others or spread rumors using smartphones or tablets. Teens have also created web pages, videos, and profiles on social media platforms making fun of others. With mobile devices, adolescents have taken pictures in a bedroom, a bathroom, or another location where privacy is expected, and posted or distributed them online. Others have recorded unauthorized videos of other kids and uploaded them for the world to see, rate, tag, and discuss. Still others are embracing anonymous apps or chat functionality on gaming networks to tear down or humiliate others.

What are some negative effects that cyberbullying can have on a person?

There are many detrimental outcomes associated with cyberbullying that reach into the real world. First, many targets report feeling depressed, sad, angry, and frustrated. As one teenager stated: "It makes me hurt both physically and mentally. It scares me and takes away all my confidence. It makes me feel sick and worthless." Those who are victimized by cyberbullying also reveal that they are often afraid or embarrassed to go to school. In addition, research has revealed a link between cyberbullying and low self-esteem, family problems, academic difficulties, school violence, and various delinquent behaviors. Finally, cyberbullied youth also report having suicidal thoughts, and there have been a number of examples in the United States and abroad where youth who were victimized ended up taking their own lives.

Where does cyberbullying commonly occur?

Cyberbullying occurs across a variety of venues and mediums in cyberspace, and it shouldn't come as a surprise that it occurs most often where teenagers congregate. Initially, many kids hung out in chat rooms, and as a result that is where most harassment took place. In recent years, most youth are have been drawn to social media (such as Instagram, Snapchat, and Twitter) and video-sharing sites (such as YouTube). This trend has led to increased reports of cyberbullying occurring in those environments. Voice chat, textual chat, and texting via phones or tablets also can provide an environment in which hate and harm is expressed. We are also seeing it happen with portable gaming devices, in 3-D virtual worlds and social gaming sites, and in newer interactive apps like Yik Yak, Secret, and Whisper.

Cyberbullying by the numbers

Estimates of the number of youth who experience cyberbullying vary widely (ranging from 10-40% or more), depending on the age of the group studied and how cyberbullying is formally defined. In our research, we inform students that cyberbullying is when someone "repeatedly makes fun of another person online or repeatedly picks on another person through email or text message or when someone posts something online about another person that they don't like." Using this definition, about 25 percent of the over 10,000 randomly-selected 11-18 year-olds we have surveyed over the last seven years have said that they have been cyberbullied at some point in their lifetimes. About 17 percent admitted to cyberbullying others during their lifetime. In our most recent study of middle-school youth from January of 2014, 12 percent said they had been cyberbullied while 4 percent said they had cyberbullied others within the previous 30 days.

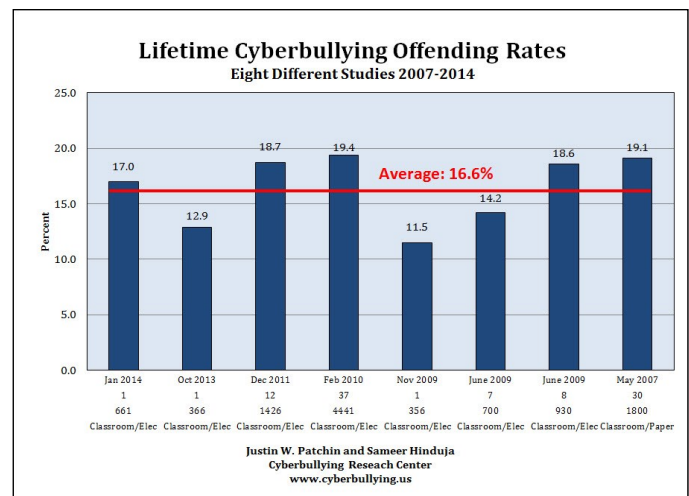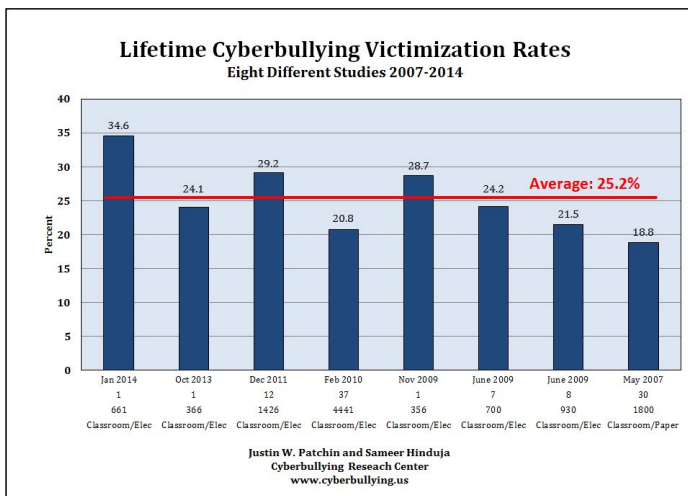## Cyberbullying vs. traditional bullying

While often similar in terms of form and technique, cyberbullying and bullying have many differences that can make the latter even more devastating. With the former, victims may not know who the bully is, or why they are being targeted. The cyberbully can cloak his or her identity behind a computer or phone using anonymous email addresses or pseudonymous screen names. Second, the hurtful actions of a cyberbully are viral; that is, a large number of people (at school, in the neighborhood,

in the city, in the world!) can be involved the victimization, or at least find out about the incident with a few keystrokes or touchscreen impressions. It seems, then, that the pool of potential victims, offenders, and witnesses/bystanders is limitless.

Third, it is often easier to be cruel using technology because cyberbullying can be done from a physically distant location, and the bully doesn't have to see the immediate response by the target. In fact, some teens simply might not recognize the serious harm they are causing because they are sheltered from the victim's response. Finally, while parents and teachers are doing a better job supervising youth at school and at home, many adults don't have the technological know-how (or time!) to keep track of what teens are up to online. As a result, a victim's experiences may be missed and a bully's actions may be left unchecked. Even if bullies are identified, many adults find themselves unprepared to adequately respond.

Why is cyberbullying becoming a major issue?

Cyberbullying is a growing problem because increasing numbers of kids are using and have completely embraced online interactivity. A remarkable 95% of teens in the US are online, and three-fourths (74%) access the Internet on their mobile device. They do so for school work, to keep in touch with their friends, to play games, to learn about celebrities, to share their digital creations, or for many other reasons. Because the online communication

Lifetime Cyberbullying Victimization Rates
Eight Different Studies 2007-2014

	Jan 2014	Oct 2013	Dec 2011	Feb 2010	Nov 2009	June 2009	June 2009	May 2007
Percent	34.6	24.1	29.2	20.8	28.7	24.2	21.5	18.8
n	1	1	12	37	1	7	8	30
	661	366	1426	4441	356	700	930	1800
	Classroom/Elec	Classroom/Elec	Classroom/Elec	Classroom/Elec	Classroom/Elec	Classroom/Elec	Classroom/Elec	Classroom/Paper

Average: 25.2%

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Lifetime Cyberbullying Offending Rates
Eight Different Studies 2007-2014

	Jan 2014	Oct 2013	Dec 2011	Feb 2010	Nov 2009	June 2009	June 2009	May 2007
Percent	17.0	12.9	18.7	19.4	11.5	14.2	18.6	19.1
n	1	1	12	37	1	7	8	30
	661	366	1426	4441	356	700	930	1800
	Classroom/Elec	Classroom/Elec	Classroom/Elec	Classroom/Elec	Classroom/Elec	Classroom/Elec	Classroom/Elec	Classroom/Paper

Average: 16.6%

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tools have become such a tremendous part of their lives, it is not surprising that some youth have decided to use the technology to be malicious or menacing towards others. The fact that teens are connected to technology 24/7 means they are susceptible to victimization (and able to act on mean intentions toward others) around the clock. As alluded to, is also easier to be hateful using typed words rather than spoken words face-to-face. And because some adults have been slow to respond to cyberbullying, many cyberbullies feel that there are little to no consequences for their actions. Many even feel that there is little chance of detection and identification, let alone sanction.

Cyberbullying crosses all geographical boundaries. The Internet has really opened up the whole world to users who access it on a broad array of devices, and for the most part this has been a good thing (a really good thing!). Nevertheless, because of the issues previously discussed, some kids feel free to post or send whatever they want while online without considering how that content can inflict pain – and sometimes cause severe psychological and emotional wounds.

Obstacles in the fight to stop cyberbullying

There are two primary challenges today that make it difficult to prevent cyberbullying. First, even though this problem has been around for well over a decade, some people still don't see the harm associated with it. Some attempt to dismiss or disregard cyberbullying because there are "more serious forms of aggression to worry about." While it is true that there are many issues facing adolescents, parents, teachers, and law enforcement today, we first need to accept that cyberbullying is one such problem that will only get more serious if ignored.

The other challenge relates to who is willing to step up and take responsibility for responding to inappropriate use of technology. Parents often say that they don't have the technical skills to keep up with their kids' online behavior, and that schools should be covering it in detail during class time and through other programming. Educators are often doing their part through policies, curricula, training, and assemblies, but sometimes don't know when and how to intervene in online behaviors that occur away from school but still involve their students. Finally, law enforcement is hesitant to get involved unless there is clear evidence of a crime or a significant threat to someone's physical safety. As a result, cyberbullying incidents either slip through the cracks, are dealt with too formally, are dealt with too informally, or are otherwise mismanaged. At that point, the problem behaviors often continue and escalate because they aren't adequately or appropriately addressed. Based on these challenges, we collectively need to create an environment

> "The last time I was cyberbullied was when my friend, or at least used to be, sent horrible things about me to all of my friends on this app called Kik. This person is from my school. This made me feel angry and wanted to get revenge but I knew it was a bad thing. I did not tell anyone."

where kids feel comfortable talking with adults about this problem and feel confident that meaningful steps will be taken to resolve the situation. We also need to get everyone involved - kids, parents, educators, counselors, youth leaders, law enforcement, social media companies, and the community at large. It will take a concerted and comprehensive effort from all stakeholders to make a meaningful difference in reducing cyberbullying.

The role of parents

The best tack parents can take when their child is cyberbullied is to make sure they feel (and are) safe and secure, and to convey unconditional support. Parents must demonstrate to their children through words and actions that they both desire the same end result: that the cyberbullying stop and that life does not become even more difficult. This can be accomplished by working together to arrive at a mutually-agreeable course of action, as sometimes it is appropriate (and important) to solicit the child's perspective as to what might be done to improve the situation. It is so critical not to be dismissive of their perspective, but to validate their voice and perspective. Victims of cyberbullying (and the bystanders who observe it) must know for sure that the adults who they tell will intervene rationally and logically, and not make the situation worse.

If it is deemed necessary, parents should explain the importance of scheduling a meeting with school administrators (or a teacher they trust) to discuss the matter. Parents may also be able to contact the father or mother of the offender, and/or work with the Internet Service Provider, Cell Phone Service Provider, or Content Provider to investigate the is-

sue or remove the offending material (many times, the victim simply wants the content or account deleted so they can move on with their life). The police should also be approached when physical threats are involved or a crime has possibly been committed (extortion, stalking, blackmail, sexual exploitation of minors, etc.).

Overall, parents must educate their kids about appropriate online behaviors just as they convey appropriate offline behaviors. They should also monitor their child's activities while online – especially early in their exploration of cyberspace. This can be done informally (through active participation in your child's Internet experience, which we recommend most of all) and formally (through software). Spying on kids and unnecessarily invading their privacy should only be done as a last resort when there is a significant cause for concern. Honest and open monitoring is a part of a healthy parent-child relationship. Spying conveys distrust and may encourage children to go further underground.

In time, parents will need to give their children more freedom, privacy, and responsibility. They will not be able to monitor their child's activities 24/7, nor should they need to do so. As a result, it is crucial that parents cultivate and maintain an open, candid line of communication with your children, so that they are ready and willing to come to you whenever they experience something unpleasant or distressing when interacting via text, or Facebook, or a gaming network. Reinforce positive morals and values that are taught in the home about how others should be treated with respect and dignity. Point out models to emulate in society, and use viral mistakes made by other youth and adults as teachable moments.

Parents may also utilize an age-appropriate "Technology Use Contract" to foster a crystal-clear understanding about what is and is not appropriate with respect to the use of various devices and online communication tools. To remind the child of this pledged commitment, we recommend that this contract be posted in a highly visible place at home. When there are violations, immediate logical consequences must be given that are proportionate to the misbehavior. Kids need to learn that inappropriate online actions will not be tolerated. Get them to understand that technology use and access is a privilege, and not a right—and with those privileges comes certain responsibilities that *must* be respected.

If a parent discovers that their child is cyberbullying others, they should first communicate how that behavior inflicts harm and causes pain in the real world as well as in cyberspace. We must remember that kids are not sociopaths—they are just kids who sometimes lack empathy and make mistakes. That said, there are ramifications for every choice they made. Depending on the level of seriousness of the incident, and whether it seems that the child has realized the hurtful nature of his or her behavior, consequences should be firmly applied (and escalated if the behavior continues). Moving forward, it is essential that parents pay even greater attention to the technology use of their child to make sure that they have internalized the lesson and are continually acting in responsible ways. Not only should they not be doing the wrong thing, they should be doing the right thing online!

What should schools do to prevent cyberbullying?

The most important preventive step that schools can take is to educate the school community about responsible Internet use. Students need to know that all forms of bullying are wrong and that those who engage in harassing or threatening behaviors will be subject to discipline. It is therefore essential to discuss issues related to appropriate online communications in various areas of the general curriculum. To be sure, these messages should be reinforced in classes that regularly utilize technology. Signage also should be posted around campus to remind students of the rules of acceptable use. In general, it is crucial to establish and maintain an environment of respect and integrity where violations result in informal or formal sanction.

Furthermore, school district personnel should review their harassment and bullying policies to ensure that it allows for the discipline of students who engage in cyberbullying. If their policy covers it, cyberbullying incidents that occur at school - or

> "I like the way they [my school] handled it because they treated me with respect and did not laugh at the situation.
> They took it seriously."

that originate off campus but ultimately result in a substantial disruption of the learning environment - are well within a school's legal authority to intervene. The school then needs to make it clear to students, parents, and all staff that these behaviors are unacceptable and will be subject to discipline. In some cases, simply discussing the incident with the offender's parents will result in the behavior stopping.

What should schools do to respond to cyberbullying?

Students should already know that cyberbullying is unacceptable and that the behavior will result in discipline. Utilize school liaison officers or other members of law enforcement to thoroughly investigate incidents, as needed, if the behaviors cross a certain threshold of severity. Once the offending party has been identified, develop a response that

A youth may be being cyberbullied if he or she:

• unexpectedly stops using their device(s)

• appears nervous or jumpy when using device(s)

• appears uneasy about being at school or outside

• appears to be angry, depressed, or frustrated after texting, chatting, using social media, or gaming

• becomes abnormally withdrawn

• avoids discussions about their activities online

A youth may be cyberbullying others if he or she:

• quickly switches screens or hides their device

• uses their device(s) at all hours of the night

• gets unusually upset if they can't use device(s)

• avoids discussions about what they are doing online

• seems to be using multiple online accounts, or an account that is not their own

In general, if a child acts in ways that are inconsistent with their usual behavior when using these communication devices, it's time to find out why.

is commensurate with the harm done and the disruption that occurred.

School administrators should also work with parents to convey to the student that cyberbullying behaviors are taken seriously and are not trivialized. Moreover, schools should come up with creative response strategies, particularly for relatively minor forms of harassment that do not result in significant harm. For example, students may be required to create anti-cyberbullying posters to be displayed throughout the school, or a public service announcement (PSA) video conveying an anti-bullying and/or a pro-kindness message. Older students might be required to give a brief presentation to younger students about the importance of using technology in ethically-sound ways. The point here, again, is to condemn the behavior (without condemning the offender!) while sending a message to the rest of the school community that bullying in any form is wrong and will not be tolerated.

Even though the vast majority of these incidents can be handled informally (calling parents, counseling the bully and target separately, expressing condemnation of the behavior), there may be occasions where formal response from the school is warranted. This is particularly the case in incidents involving serious threats toward another student, if the target no longer feels comfortable coming to school, or if cyberbullying behaviors continue after informal attempts to stop it have failed. In these cases, detention, suspension, changes of placement, or even expulsion may be necessary. If these extreme measures are required, it is important that educators are able to clearly articulate the link to school and present evidence that supports their action.

Cyberbullying and school climate

The benefits of a positive school climate have been identified through much research over the last thirty years. It contributes to more consistent attendance, higher student achievement, and other desirable student outcomes. Though limited, the research done on school climate and traditional bullying also underscores its importance in preventing peer conflict. One of our recent studies found that students who experienced cyberbullying (both those who were victims and those who admitted to cyberbullying others) perceived a poorer climate at their school than those who had not experienced cyberbullying. Youth were asked whether they "enjoy going to school," "feel safe at school," "feel that teachers at their school really try to help them succeed," and "feel that teachers at their school care about them." Those who admitted to cyberbullying others or who were the target of cyberbullying were less likely to agree with those statements.

Overall, it is critical for educators to develop and promote a safe and respectful school climate—one marked by shared and palpable feelings of connectedness, belongingness, peer respect, morale, safety, and even school spirit. A positive on-campus environment will go a long way in reducing the frequency of many problematic behaviors at school, including bullying and harassment. In this setting, teachers must demonstrate emotional support, a warm and caring atmosphere, a strong focus on academics and learning, and a fostering of healthy self-esteem. As mentioned, it is crucial that the school seeks to create and promote an atmosphere where certain conduct not tolerated—by students and staff alike. In schools with healthy climates, students know what is appropriate and what is not.

> Educators who establish a nurturing and caring classroom and school climate will make great strides in preventing a whole host of problematic behaviors, both at school and online.

What can youth do?

First and foremost, youth should develop a relationship with an adult they trust (a parent, teacher, or someone else) so they can talk about any experiences they have online (or off) that make them upset or uncomfortable. If possible, teens should ignore minor teasing or name calling, and not respond to the bully as that might simply make the problem continue. They should also use the account and privacy settings within each device, app, or network to control who can contact and interact with them, and who can read their online content. This can significantly reduce their victimization risk.

It's also useful to keep all evidence of cyberbullying to show an adult who can help with the situation. If targets of cyberbullying are able to keep a log or a journal of the dates and times and instances of the online harassment, that can also help prove what was going on and who started it—which greatly helps during an investigation. This information can also be forwarded to the respective site or company that serves as the venue or medium for the cyberbullying. Youth should take the time to report any harassment, threats, impersonation, or other problems they see or experience, and remember that their identity will be protected to the maximum extent of the law when doing so (for more information, see www.cyberbullying.us/report).

In addition, youth should go online with their parents – show them what sites and apps they use, and share with them why they are great. Chat with them about what safety precautions they use while texting or tweeting, and give their parents (and other adults they trust) a chance to come through for them if a problem arises. Finally, they should pause before they post—and make really wise decisions with what they share or send online, considering the possibility that anyone and everyone may see it (including their parents, and others with opportunities to give them).

Don't stand by

Bystanders also have a very critical role to play. Those who witness cyberbullying generally do not want to get involved because of the hassle and

problems they fear it might bring upon them, yet they often recognize that what they are seeing is not right and should stop. However, by doing nothing, bystanders are doing something—they are passively encouraging the behavior. By actively standing up—in that moment or right afterward, we believe that bystanders can make a huge difference in improving the situation for targets, who often feel helpless and hopeless and need someone to come to the rescue. Bystanders should note what they see and when. They should also intervene when they feel comfortable doing so, and afterwards tell an adult they trust who can really step in and improve the situation. Finally, they should never encourage or indirectly contribute to the behavior – by forwarding hurtful messages, laughing at inappropriate jokes or content, condoning the act just to "fit in," or otherwise silently allowing it to continue.

When should law enforcement get involved?

Law enforcement officers also have a role in preventing and responding to cyberbullying. To begin, they need to be aware of ever-evolving state and local laws concerning online behaviors, and equip themselves with the skills and knowledge to inter-

vene as necessary. In a recent survey of school resource officers, we found that almost one-quarter did not know if their state had a cyberbullying law. This is surprising since their most visible responsibility involves responding to actions which are in violation of law (e.g., harassment, threats, stalking). Even if the behavior doesn't immediately appear to rise to the level of a crime, officers should use their discretion to handle the situation in a way that is appropriate for the circumstances. For example, a simple discussion of the legal issues involved in cyberbullying may be enough to deter some youth from future misbehavior. Officers might also talk to parents about their child's conduct and express to them the seriousness of online harassment.

Relatedly, officers can play an essential role in preventing cyberbullying from occurring or getting out of hand in the first place. They can speak to students in classrooms about cyberbullying and online safety issues more broadly in an attempt to discourage them from engaging in risky or unacceptable actions and interactions. They might also speak to parents about local and state laws, so that they are informed and can properly respond if their child is involved in an incident.

Suggested citation

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Together, they speak on the causes and consequences of cyberbullying across the United States and abroad and offer comprehensive workshops for parents, teachers, counselors, mental health professionals, law enforcement, youth and others concerned with addressing and preventing online aggression. They have written six books and numerous articles on teen technology use and misuse.

The **Cyberbullying Research Center** (www.cyberbullying.us) provides research findings, stories, cases, fact sheets, tips and strategies, current headlines, quizzes, a frequently-updated blog, and a number of other helpful resources. It also has downloadable materials for educators, counselors, parents, law enforcement officers, and other youth-serving professionals to use and distribute as needed.