NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGISTS

Cyberbullying: Intervention and Prevention Strategies

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Brian was a shy, quiet boy who was labeled a social outcast by his classmates. A group of students created an online chat room devoted to making fun of Brian, and they invited him to join, telling him that they wanted to be his friends. This harassment drove Brian to depression and he eventually dropped out of school.

Jessica and Ashley were best friends until they started liking the same guy. Jessica posted information on a social networking website that Ashley had told her in confidence. She also posted embarrassing pictures of Ashley. Almost everyone at school read about Ashley's secret and saw the pictures. Ashley was humiliated.

American teens make frequent use of the Internet for such activities as communicating with friends, finding information for school assignments, and downloading music. Recent research (e.g., McQuade & Sampat, 2008) suggests that nearly all youth in middle and high school with access to a computer at home or school will use the Internet and that this represents a rapid increase over the past decade. The number of teens with online profiles, including those on social networking sites like Facebook and MySpace, has also increased, and there is evidence that many of these teens who access the Internet at home make efforts to keep their activity away from parental scrutiny.

In 2006, national law enforcement leaders estimated that more than 13 million children and adolescents ages 6-17 were victims of cyberbullying (Fight Crime: Invest in Kids, 2006). Survey data shows that a significant number of youth report that they have harassed someone online (McQuade & Sampat, 2008). Research has identified characteristics of youth that predict cyberbullying as well as the consequences of such harassment. It is critical that parents and educators understand the characteristics of cyberbullying and strategies for prevention.

CHARACTERISTICS AND IMPACT OF CYBERBULLYING

In general, cyberbullying involves sending or posting harmful or cruel text and/or images using the Internet or other digital communication devices, such as cell phones. Cyberbullying may occur on personal websites or it may be transmitted via e-mail, social networking sites, chat rooms, message boards, instant messaging, or cell phones. Cyberbullying occurs most often when children are at home, but it can also take place during school. To their credit, many schools have made good use of filtering software that can often prevent cyberbullies from utilizing school computers to bully other students.

Types of Cyberbullying

Most cyberbullying falls into one or more of the following categories:

- *Flaming*: Online fights using electronic messages with angry and vulgar language
- *Harassment and stalking*: Repeatedly sending cruel, vicious, and/or threatening messages
- *Denigration*: Sending or posting gossip or rumors about a person to damage his or her reputation or friendships
- *Impersonation*: Breaking into someone's e-mail account and using it to send vicious or embarrassing material to others
- *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 (Willard, 2007a)

Characteristics of Cyberbullies

Cyberbullies are just as likely to be female as male and are more likely to be older teens rather than younger. Similar to traditional bullies, cyberbullies tend to have poor relationships with their caregivers. They are more likely than nonbullies to be targets of traditional bullying and to engage in delinquent behavior and frequent substance use. They are also more likely to be frequent daily Internet users.

A cyberbully may or may not be a person the victim knows. Cyberbullies can often remain anonymous, making it difficult if not impossible to tell who the abuser is. They may work in cahoots with their friends, making it even more difficult to determine who is doing the attacking. Although there is no clear evidence that youth who engage in traditional bullying are also prone to cyberbullying, it does appear that some victims of physical harassment engage in cyberbullying as a form of retaliation against their tormentors.

The STOP Cyberbullying program (Wired Kids, Inc.) describes four main types of cyberbullies:

- The "Vengeful Angel" does not see himself or herself as a bully, but rather as a vigilante, as he or she often becomes involved trying to protect a friend who is being bullied or cyberbullied.
- "Power-Hungry" cyberbullies want to exert their authority and control others with fear, and they are often victims of traditional bullying. Some people call this "Revenge of the Nerds" cyberbullying, because these bullies are often physically small and targeted by their peers for not being "cool" or technologically skilled.
- "Mean Girls" cyberbullying often occurs in a group. The perpetrators are usually bored and looking for entertainment.
- "Inadvertent" cyberbullies do not intend to cause harm; they just respond without thinking about the consequences of their actions.

Youth at Risk as Targets of Cyberbullies

On the continuum of risk, some youth are more susceptible to instances of cyberbullying than others. As with cyberbullies, victims are as likely to be female as male and are more likely to be older teens than younger children. Approximately half of the victims of cyberbullying are also targets of traditional bullying. Victims are generally unpopular, isolated, depressed, anxious, and fearful compared to their peers. Those at risk are more likely to be searching for acceptance and attention online, more vulnerable to manipulative techniques, less attentive to Internet safety messages, less resilient in dealing with a difficult situation, less able or willing to rely on parents for help, and less likely to report a dangerous online situation to an adult (Willard, 2007a). Youth most at risk for cyberbullying include:

- Vulnerable, immature, or socially naïve teens who may lack sufficient knowledge and skills to engage in effective decision-making
- Younger teens who may have overprotective or naïve parents but who likely have healthy peer relations and good values
- Youth who have temporarily impaired relations with parents and/or peers and are currently highly emotionally upset
- Youth who face major ongoing challenges related to personal mental health and disruptions in relations with parents, school, and/or peers

Impact

The emotional harm that may result from cyberbullying is significant. Victims of face-to-face bullying often experience depression, anxiety, school failure, and school avoidance. Targets of cyberbullying suffer equal if not greater psychological harm because the hurtful information is available to the public 24 hours a day, aggressors are often anonymous, the victimization is continuous and inescapable, and, since it is often difficult to remove posted material, the information may be publicly accessible for a long time. Teens may be reluctant to tell adults about the abuse that is happening to them because they are emotionally traumatized, think it is their fault, fear retribution, or worry that their online activities or cell phone use will be restricted. In its extreme, cyberbullying can lead to youth suicide and externalized violence.

STRATEGIES FOR INTERVENTION AND PREVENTION

No one should have to endure cyberbullying. It leaves children and teens frightened, upset, and perplexed. They tend to not know why this attack is happening to them and often are unsure as to who can help them resolve this troublesome and often scary situation. Combined efforts of school and home are needed need to prevent, reduce, or eliminate cyberbullying.

What Can Victims Do?

Victims of cyberbullying should not retaliate, as this may promote more intensive harassment from the cyberbully and may make it unclear as to who originally instigated this aggressive, hurtful behavior. All victims of this type of behavior need to alert a responsible adult as soon as it occurs. Depending on the severity of the cyberbullying, the following steps should be considered by victims and their parents:

- Calmly and strongly tell the cyberbully to stop the harassing behavior and remove any offensive material from future communications.
- Ignore or block the communications.
- Make a hard copy of the material the cyberbully has posted and send it to the cyberbully's parents to solicit their help in ceasing this problematic behavior.
- Clean up the instant messaging buddy list to help reduce the number of other people who have access to the victim's e-mail location.
- File a complaint with the website, Internet service provider (ISP), or cell phone company.
- Enlist the help of the school psychologist, school counselor, principal, or school/police liaison officer.
- Contact an attorney if less drastic steps are ineffective.
- Contact the police if the cyberbullying includes threats of harm.

How Can Parents Help Prevent Cyberbullying?

Since cyberbullying occurs most often while children and adolescents are at home, parents can be a great resource in preventing instances of this type of bullying. The following steps should be considered:

- Keep home computer(s) in easily viewable places, such as the family room or kitchen.
- Talk regularly with children about their online activities and Internet etiquette in general.
- Talk specifically about cyberbullying and encourage children to notify adults immediately if they become victims of cyberbullying.
- Tell children that you may review their online communications if there is any reason for concern.
- Help children understand that cyberbullying is harmful and unacceptable behavior.
- Emphasize expectations for responsible online behavior and make clear the consequences for violations of Internet etiquette.
- Consider establishing a parent-child Internet use contract.
- Beware of warning signs that might indicate the child is being bullied, such as reluctance to use the computer, a change in the child's behavior and mood, and/or reluctance to go to school.
- Consider installing parental control filtering software and/or tracking programs, but do not rely solely on these tools.
- Encourage antibullying legislation and Internet safety policies at the state, local, and district levels. Many states have enacted antibullying laws that address all forms of bullying in schools. Further, some school districts have instituted computer use rules and protocols.

What Can Educators Do?

Educators should determine the prevalence of cyberbullying, conduct a threat assessment in response to reports of cyberbullying that might involve violence or suicidal behaviors, and develop programs, policies, and training to prevent and stop cyberbullying on campus.

- Conduct a cyberbullying needs assessment to identify the incidence of cyberbullying in the school, including where it occurs and any factors that discourage reporting. This might involve creating a survey and distributing it to teachers, administrators, and parents. The results can be analyzed and used to pinpoint areas of concern. It might also be a good idea to conduct a structured interview with the principal to obtain more information about the school's needs and the principal's goals with regard to cyberbullying.
- Make a plan to implement a threat assessment for any report of cyberbullying that raises concerns about the possibility of violence or suicide.
- Include cyberbullying in the school's comprehensive antibullying program to educate students and ensure that all personnel respond appropriately when cyberbullying is reported. Review written policies related to students' use of the Internet and mobile communication devices to ensure that they address on-campus cyberbullying. Also review the district's Internet use policies to ensure effective student supervision and monitoring.
- Provide colleagues, parents, students, and community members with information about preventing and responding to cyberbullying. Faculty and staff should also be trained in early warning signs that may identify victims of cyberbullying, including rejection or isolation from peers and being the focus of more traditional forms of bullying. Be adamant about looking for the circulation of pictures, video clips, sound files, and any other items used to ridicule and defame students' characters.

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RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Center for Safe and Responsible Internet Use: http://www.cyberbully.org

Cyber Bullying: Bullying in the Digital Age: http://www.cyberbullyhelp.com

Cyberbullying.us: http://www.cyberbullying.us

Enough Is Enough: Making the Internet Safer for Children and Families. *Tips on talking to your child openly and honestly about cyberbullying:* http://www.enough.org/inside.php?id=BDCXOS7OS

Guidance Channel: http://www.guidancechannel.com

See the archives for February 2006 and June 2007 for special articles on Internet safety.

In Memory of Ryan Patrick Halligan: http://www.ryanpatrickhalligan.org

Stop Bullying Now: Take a Stand. Lend a Hand. *What Adults Can Do: Cyberbullying:* http://stopbullyingnow.hrsa.gov/adult/indexAdult.asp?Area=cyberbullying

STOP Cyberbullying: http://www.stopcyberbullying.org

Willard, N. (2007b). *Cyberbullying and cyberthreats: Responding to the challenge of online social aggression, threats, and distress.* Champaign, IL: Research Press.

Wired Safety: http://www.wiredsafety.org

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