
Raising Awareness: Education is the Key to Understanding Cyberbullying

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Abstract

In order to fully understand cyberbullying, it is critical that adults and children recognize the consequences that can occur from inappropriate communication taking place in the digital world. Education is the key to understanding the issues that arise from the use of technology. Parents, schools, and law enforcement need to take an active role in raising awareness about cyberbullying. Active campaign programs are necessary to fight the increasing problems associated with cyberbullying. Cyberbullying will only decrease once the extent of the problem is fully understood.

Keywords: cyberbullying, bullying, harassment by communication

1. INTRODUCTION

In order to fully understand cyberbullying, it is critical that adults and children recognize the consequences that can occur from inappropriate communication taking place in the digital world. Education is the key to understanding the issues that can arise from the use of technology. Adults must keep an open line of communication with children so that if a problem occurs they will be able to talk about the difficulties that take place in a the cyber world. Parents and educators must keep children informed about the unacceptable behaviors associated with using technology. Children need to understand that they can receive help if they become a victim of cyberbullying.

Cyberbullying occurs when youth use technology as an instrument to harass or threaten their peers via email, computers, social network sites,

text messaging, chat rooms or cell phones (Patchin & Hinduja, 2010). One of the biggest challenges facing cyberbullying is the anonymity of the bully. Often times it can be difficult to figure out who is actually sending the threats. There are many ways to disguise ones identity such as creating a fictitious account, using an anonymous remailer or sending messages from another person's account. Often times parents and educators believe that they do not have the technical skills needed to deal with cyberbullying. In many instances, the schools will not deal with the cyberbullying incident unless it takes place on their watch, during school hours. Additionally, law enforcement does not usually get involved unless there is a serious threat (NOVA, 2010). It is imperative that parents, teachers and law enforcement work together to solve this growing problem.

Bullying is not a new problem, but through the use of technology the face of both the bully and victim has changed. Most of us probably think of a bully as the big tough kid on the playground who has decided to pick on the runt or the nerd in the group. Today, because of technology, the bully might just be the runt or the nerd. By using technology, the harassment is not done in person which allows the bully to hide behind the computer screen or mobile device. Traditional bullying involves some form of face-to-face communication, either verbal or physical. With bullying, at the end of the day, the victim usually feels safe in the comfort of their own home knowing that they did not have to face the torture of the bully. Cyberbullying has brought harassment into a person's private space at home, school, or while at play. The victim does not have a chance to feel safe even behind locked doors. With the use of mobile phones, computers and the Internet, cyberbullying can occur 24 hours a day. The victim can receive text messages, emails and threats through social network sites such as Facebook and Twitter. The harassment does not stop which can leave the victim feeling hopeless.

2. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Dooley, Pyzalaski, & Cross (2009) explored the differences between traditional bullying and a new trend, cyberbullying, which is performed using electronic media. The researchers discussed that repetition and power imbalances are two characteristics that define cyberbullying. Repetition occurs when an individual conducts multiple acts of aggression towards another person. Power imbalance is a concept that is defined as when one person or group has greater power over another person or group. Additionally, this power can be characterized as social, psychological, or physical in nature.

Cyberbullying characteristics are similar to traditional bullies in the fact that they tend to have a poor relationship with their caregivers. Cyberbullies are equally likely to be male or female and are more likely to be older teens. There is no clear evidence that youth who engage in traditional bullying will also promote cyberbullying (Feinberg & Robey, 2010).

Patchin & Hinduja (2010) conducted a study in 2006 which was then replicated in 2009 to determine adolescent online behaviors with a focus on MySpace. The study revealed three prominent trends that included MySpace profile

abandonment, restricted access, and posting of personal/private information. First, the researchers found that 44% of profiles were considered invalid or abandoned in the 2009 study as compared to 6% in 2006. Additionally, 50% of the remaining profiles in 2009 compared to 9% in 2006 had not been updated in over one year (Patchin & Hinduja, 2010). Secondly, the researchers determined that more users set their profiles to "private" in 2009 (37%) as compared to 2006 (11.5%) (Patchin & Hinduja, 2010). It appears that those who have retained their MySpace profiles have chosen to increase their profiles security by restricting access to individuals outside of their circle. The third trend found in this study was that youths who maintained profiles were less likely to post personal information such as pictures of their friends in swimsuits/underwear or swear words in their profile and in their comments. In 2009, the study found that 85% of adolescents had restricted access to their profiles which is up from 39% in 2006 (Patchin & Hinduja, 2010). This could be an indication that adolescents are becoming aware of the need to stay safe online.

The National Crime Prevention Center indicates that 41% of all teenagers with Internet access have reported being bullied online. Only 10% of the youth that were a victim of cyberbullying conveyed the incident to an adult (National Crime Prevention, 2012). Similar findings from the i-SAFE Foundation revealed that half of adolescents and teens have been bullied online. Over 25% of youth have been repeatedly bullied through their cell phones or the Internet (i-SAFE, 2012). Fewer than 1 in 5 cyberbullying incidents are reported to law enforcement and 1 in 10 adolescents or teens have had embarrassing or damaging pictures taken of themselves without their knowledge. These pictures were later used as a form of harassment (Webster, 2010).

Burgess-Proctor, Patchin, & Hinduja (2010) conducted a study of 1,203 girls who were bullied online. Of those that were bullied, 27% reported being targeted at home and 22% reported being affected at school. The researchers studied the emotions of the respondents and found that 35% felt angry, 30% felt sad, and 41% felt frustrated from being a victim of cyberbullying. Other reactions from the respondents included feeling upset, depressed, violated, hated, annoyed, helpless, exploited, and stupid. The research also concluded that 55% of the respondents reported

that they were not affected by being cyberbullied because they felt that cyberbullies were "merely stupid, pathetic, bored, and just trying to amuse themselves" (Burgess-Proctor et al, 2010).

Kraft and Wang (2009) conducted a study of 713 adolescents that were grouped into four categories based upon their response to whether they have been bullied by someone in the past year or if they were the victim of cyberbullying in the past year. The four categories were (1) neither victim nor offender, (2) pure victim, (3) both offender and victim, and (4) pure offender. The results of the study found that females were more likely to report being both the victim and offender of cyberbullying. Additionally boys were more likely to be offenders and less likely to be victims. For the "pure offenders" category, 57% of the respondents were male and 43% were female.

3. CONSEQUENCES OF CYBERBULLYING

In 2010, Hinduja and Patchin continued their research by understanding how cyberbullying can impact the thoughts of suicide. Some people are under the opinion that bullying may simply lead to hurt feelings, but in reality its consequences can be far reaching and can cause permanent damage to the psyche of adolescents (Hinduja & Patchin, 2007). The researchers surveyed 2,000 middle school students from one of the highest populated school districts in the United States. Of the respondents, 20% (20% females and 21% males) stated they seriously thought about attempting suicide. Additionally 19% reported they attempted suicide. The researchers discussed that cyberbullying could be noted as offending (ranging from 9% to 23%) which included the most common example of posting something online about someone to make others laugh. The most popular form of cyberbullying was reported as receiving a threatening or harassing email from someone they knew (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010). Lastly, the researchers found cyberbullying victims were twice as likely to attempt suicide as compared to youths who were not a victim of cyberbullying.

There have been many instances of teen suicides related to cyberbullying. The Cyberbullying Research Center (2012) reported that online bullying was responsible for suicidal thoughts in 20 percent of middle school children. Additionally, each year there are 19,000 "reported" suicide attempts in the United States

due to cyberbullying. The Megan Meier suicide brought national attention to cyberbullying. Megan Meier committed suicide after she became friends with a boy on MySpace by the name of Josh Evans. Josh and Megan chatted online almost every day. After a few weeks of being friends Josh posted a message to Megan stating "the world would be better place without you" and then ended the friendship. Megan took that comment literally and hung herself in the bedroom closet. Weeks after Megan's death the family found out that Josh was not a real person but rather a character that was being represented by their neighbor Lori Drew. Drew wanted to get back at Megan for having a fight with her daughter. At the time of the suicide, Missouri did not have a cyberbullying law on the docket. Instead, the case was held in California where the MySpace headquarters are located, with charges of a violation of the terms of service. Drew was originally convicted of three misdemeanor counts for unauthorized access to a computer until a U.S. District Judge threw the convictions out (McCarthy and Michels, 2009).

On October 3, 2007 Ryan Halligan took his own life to escape being bullied by his classmates online. After hundreds of taunting messages Ryan committed suicide by hanging. Recently, on April 8, 2012 Grace McComma ended her life due to the torture that she endured being harassed by her peers (Reimer & Wegner, 2012). One of the most disturbing instances was that of Alexis Pilkington, who like the others took her own life due to being harassed online by her classmates. Even after Alexis committed suicide her classmates continued to harass her online. One of the posts after Alexis' death read, "She was obviously a stupid depressed *!*@ who deserved to kill herself..she got what she wanted...be happy for her death...rejoice in it" (Martinez, 2010).

As of July 15, 2012, 49 states have bullying laws, 15 states have cyberbullying laws, 45 states have harassment by communication laws and 49 states require schools to have a policy in place to deal with cyberbullying. As of September 14, 2012, there are no Federal laws dealing with bullying. On April 2, 2009 a federal bill addressing cyberbullying was placed before the House of Representatives titled the "Megan Meier Cyberbullying Prevention Act". We are still waiting for a vote on the act as electronic violence continues (Hinduja & Patchin, 2012).

4. CYBERBULLYING PREVENTION METHODS

School officials are often reluctant to deal with cyberbullying if it does not take place during the hours of school or at a school sponsored event. Administrators have found the best way to resolve this issue informally is to contact parents (Kraft & Wang, 2009). A study conducted by Agatston, Kowalski, and Limber (2007) found that students are less likely to report an incident of cyberbullying to school officials because they do not believe that they will receive help in resolving the issue.

To help mitigate the problems associated with cyberbullying parents and caregivers must have constant communication with children and supervise their online activities (Kraft & Wang, 2009). It is less likely that teenage adolescents will engage in cyber activities that causes harm if there is ongoing dialogue by parents, teachers, and other caregivers about cyber activities. Additionally, adolescent girls who received this ongoing discourse were also less likely to disclose personal information, agree to meet someone in person that they met online, or send suggestive emails (Kraft & Wang, 2009). Consequently, decreased parental monitoring led to an increased frequency of victimization online.

Providing education and awareness programs to both adults, adolescents and teens is the key to dealing with cyberbullying. These strategies include building cyberbullying prevention into anti-bullying campaigns, setting rules and consequences, increasing awareness of cyberbullying, internet filters, and increased supervision of students, acceptable use policies, internet safety programs, and anonymous reporting of incidents for preventing cyberbullying (Kraft & Wang, 2009).

The "Protecting Children in the 21st Century Act" was passed in 2008, which specified that schools must inform students about proper online behavior, including social networking sites, chat rooms, and cyberbullying sites. However, a study in 2010 illustrated that America's youth are not receiving adequate information on using digital technology nor how to navigate cyberspace in a safe, secure, and responsible manner (Kraft & Wang, 2009). Additionally, America's youth are ill prepared in addressing these issues.

5. PREVENTION AND CONCLUSION

Ending cyberbullying is almost as impossible as ending driving while under the influence of alcohol. To deal with the problem of people driving while under the influence of alcohol organizations such as Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) were formed. The purpose of MADD was to help both the victims and families that became a victim of a drunk or drugged driver and to raise public awareness about the problem. The MADD alliance was able to fight for tougher state laws in all 50 states in support of the victims of drunk driving and underage drinking (MADD, 2012). Public awareness campaigns and drinking while driving programs were launched in all 50 states. Drinking while driving will never entirely go away but by enacting tougher laws and stricter penalties the number of cases has decreased.

Cyberbullying organizations such as End to Cyberbullying (ETCB) and Stop Cyberbullying have been formed to help raise public awareness about cyberbullying victimization. Organizations alone are not enough to raise public awareness in regard to cyberbullying. Parents, schools, organizations and law enforcement must work together to combat this growing problem. Cyberbullying will only decrease when the extent of the problem is fully understood.

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