Cyberbullying: What Schools, Parents, and Teachers Can Do to Prevent It

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Introduction

• Although the use of technology has created many opportunities to enhance teaching and learning, it has also led to some severe problems.

• One concern students, parents, and educational institutions have to deal with as a result of the technology boom is cyberbullying.

• Bullying using cell phones, computers, or other electronic devices is a growing problem because more and more young people are using technological devices as their primary means of social interaction (Hinduja and Patchin 2011).
What is Cyberbullying?

- Cyberbullying occurs when students participate in harmful behavior directed at others through the use of e-mail, Web sites, or other electronic resources (Beale and Hall 2007).
- Willard (2007, 1) defines cyberbullying as “being cruel to others by sending or posting harmful material or engaging in other forms of social aggression using the Internet or other digital technologies”.
- This type of bullying has potential to be devastating to students as a result of the constant exposure many students have with technology and the amount of people it can reach.
Methods Students Use

- Communication through Web sites
- Text messages
- Digital photos sent electronically
- Instant messaging
- E-mail
- Videos posted on websites or sent electronically
- Social networking sites such as Facebook
It Can Be Easier to Do than Traditional Bullying

- Attacking students through malicious e-mails, Web sites, or other electronic formats makes it less difficult than direct confrontation as a result of the ability to avoid face-to-face interaction (Keith and Martin 2005).
- Students who bully each other through electronic devices also have a higher degree of anonymity compared to traditional types of bullying, and as a result, bystander intervention may be less likely to occur (Slonje and Smith 2008).
- In addition, students often feel that computers will prevent them from being held accountable for attacking others.
Since the increased use of computers, the Internet, and mobile electronic devices is a relatively recent phenomenon, little research is available on cyberbullying (Slonje and Smith 2008).

The studies that do exist suggest that cyberbullying can affect a considerable number of youth.

Floreno (2011), for example, refers to statistics indicating that 42% of teenagers report having been cyberbullied.
Effects of Cyberbullying

- Youth who are cyberbullied often experience fear in school.
- Hinduja and Patchin (2011), for example, discuss how their research found a link between cyberbullying and low self-esteem, delinquent behaviors, and family problems.
- Cyberbullied students are more likely to have suicidal thoughts.
- Mason (2008) discusses that the outcomes of cyberbullying are similar to those of traditional bullying, and victims often suffer from eating disorders, chronic illnesses, and forms of depression, which may perpetuate into adulthood.
Cyberbullying Tragedies

- A well publicized case of how tragic cyberbullying can be is the story of Phoebe Prince.
- Phoebe had been harassed in person and also on Facebook and eventually committed suicide by hanging herself.
- Her school district superintendent mentioned that Phoebe was the victim of cyberbullying but said that she didn't report the harassment.
- People who knew her described her as bright, and some witnesses reported seeing her crying with an iPod in hand.
A freshman at Rutgers University, Tyler jumped from the George Washington Bridge in New York City after his roommate had recorded a video of Tyler kissing another guy and then posting it on YouTube.

Authorities have subsequently charged two students, the student who made the video and another whose computer was used to make it. Although the student whose computer was used will likely not get jail time, the student who made the video could face a maximum 10-year sentence for invasion of privacy and hate crime charges.
The Different Forms of Cyberbullying

- Students can attack others in different ways through electronic means, and some researchers have given the different methods to bully others through technology different names to indicate the varying forms of cyberbullying.

- Willard (2007), for example, identifies eight ways of cyberbullying: flaming, harassment, denigration, impersonation, outing, trickery, exclusion, and cyberstalking.
The Different Forms of Cyberbullying

- Flaming occurs when students exchange angry and vulgar messages.
- Harassment involves constantly sending mean and insulting messages.
- Impersonation occurs when someone takes the identity of another in order to damage the other person’s reputation.
- Denigration happens when a student posts gossip designed to damage another person’s reputation.
The Different Forms of Cyberbullying

• Trickery involves influencing someone to reveal personal or confidential information and then sharing it online for others to see.
• Outing occurs when embarrassing information or photos about a person is shared online.
• Cyberstalking involves repeated threatening behavior that creates fear.
• Exclusion refers to preventing someone from joining an online group.
Other Risky Behaviors

- Willard (2007) mentions other risky behaviors involving the use of technology in addition to cyberbullying.
- For example, some students are addicted to the Internet and spend too much time online in an attempt to escape real world problems.
- Other students are depressed and learn how to harm themselves through a Web site.
- In addition, some Web sites recruit students to join a gang involved in hate crimes.
What Schools Can Do

- Many recent research papers on cyberbullying contain guidelines for schools and parents on what can be done to prevent this problems.
- The following guidelines were put together from the research of Beale and Hall (2007), Floreno (2011), Hinduja and Patchin (2011), and Siegle (2010).
Education for Students

• Hinduja and Patchin (2011) believe that education is the most important step to prevent cyberbullying.
• Schools can organize lessons or hold a school assembly on Internet bullying.
• Counselors and teachers can coordinate presentations offering information on Internet etiquette.
Education for Parents

• Providing information for parents about the problem of cyberbullying is one way to fight this problem.

• Administrators can organize information about cyberbullying in a newsletter to be sent home with students.

• The school may also organize a community event and invite parents and other family members to attend.
Education for Teachers and Staff

- Schools can educate staff and faculty through professional development meetings designed to create awareness of topics involving electronic bullying.
- Such meetings can discuss case studies and emphasize the role of the school.
- Experts on the topic could train teachers and staff on appropriate ways to handle cyberbullying.
- Teachers can be trained to remind students regularly and to post signs in all classes emphasizing the appropriate ways to use technology.
Using an Anti-Cyberbullying Policy

• Providing school rules and a policy specifying that cyberbullying is prohibited and will result in disciplinary action are important.

• Since a great deal of electronic bullying occurs on a 24/7 basis, schools can also include a statement regarding disciplinary action towards cyberbullying occurring off of school premises if it is targeted on students at the school.

• School districts need to require their policy regarding acceptable use of technology be signed by parents and students at the start of each school year.
Software to Block Inappropriate Content

• Although filtering and blocking software cannot replace the close interaction and dedicated involvement of a concerned parent or teacher, it does offer concerned adults more protection to restrict children from harmful sites.

• Adults need to remember that if young students are adept at using technology, they will likely have the ability to circumvent this type of software.
Involving Members of the Community

• Some schools invite members of the local police department on a regular basis to establish good relationships with students.

• This can be a good way to involve members of the police department in order to provide information on cyberbullying to students and parents.
Responding Promptly

• It is important for teachers to respond quickly when cyberbullying occurs even if it is a minor case. In doing this, an environment fostering safety is essential. The victim needs to feel safe, and the bully needs to know that consequences will result from his/her actions even if it is a minor case. Schools need to have a plan for minor incidents before they develop to more serious forms of bullying.
Creating An Anonymous Reporting System

- Students will very often not share cyberbullying experiences with adults.

- One method that will likely encourage them to discuss this type of behavior is to implement an anonymous reporting system which will allow students to share information without threatening their reputation.
What Parents Can Do

Regular Discussion

- Parents should have discussions focusing on appropriate usage of computers with their children.
- Beale and Hall (2007) refer to a study finding that only 16 percent of students who were surveyed indicated they regularly talked to parents about online activity.
Providing a Trusting Attitude

- Children often do not report cases of online bullying because they are afraid parents will confiscate their computers.

- In order to avoid this, parents are encouraged not to overreact but to support their children should something inappropriate occur and to let their children know they will provide support.
What Parents Can Do if Children Become Victims

• In a case of cyberbullying, parents of the victim should notify the school. Schools often provide the appropriate steps to take even if the bullying happens out of school.

• If it is a severe case and the cyberbullying persists, parents should contact an internet provider such as Yahoo and provide a copy of the harmful messages as evidence.

• If none of this solves the problem and a child is in danger of being abused physically or mentally, parents need to contact the police.
Conclusion

• It is evident from the recent tragedies resulting directly from cyberbullying that more needs to be done to protect students.

• In the 21st century, bullies are often under the impression that they can attack others without consequences, and in some cases using phony identities and the computers of others allows them to do this.

• Fortunately for students attending educational institutions, knowledge exists to prevent this new form of bullying. Schools can train teachers, provide guidance for parents, and organize programs involving community members. In severe cases, the police needs to intervene.
Additional Resources

• The Cyberbullying Research Center has an excellent Web site that educators and parents can visit at: http://www.cyberbullying.us.

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