Cyberbullying – The New Age of Harassment

SUMMARY

The reality of cyberbullying and its far-reaching effects are described in this author's cautionary review of the many ways that cyberbullies pervade the landscape in our schools. This author presents an overview of the digital footprint, explores some of the reasons for cyberbullying, and offers tips for schools on its prevention.

For school-aged children, being harassed before, during or after school is a long existing problem. While many schools have certainly mobilized to address the issues associated with bullying on school property, the problem has unfortunately expanded beyond the school. Since the classic schoolyard bully now extends into the cyber world, our digitally bound youngsters are at risk in new and different ways. Within this vast network it can be difficult for adults to monitor and protect children from the dangers they face from the cyberbully. With the advent of mobile devices, the bullying that goes on "beyond school" can sometimes hover right under the radar. Undermining trust and peer-to-peer relations, cyberbullies have no boundaries and their efforts can easily disrupt the natural flow of social dynamics that reinforce classroom culture. This type of harassment can have far reaching effects on students' social and emotional well-being and can interfere with learning and the healthy development of social relationships.

Cyberbullying: What Is It and What Does It Look Like?

According to the Pew Internet and American Life Project, 93 percent of teens use the Internet and 63 percent of teens go online daily. Lenhart (2010) shares that among teens, 75 percent have cellphones (up from 63 percent in 2007), 50 percent talk to friends daily (up from 35 percent in 2007), and 54 percent send text messages daily (up from 27 percent in 2007).

> "[Cyberbullying is the]…willful and repeated harm inflicted through the use of computers, cellphones, and other electronic devices (Hinduja & Patchin, 2009)."

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Cyberbullying can take many forms. These include rumor spreading; flaming — sending angry, rude, vulgar messages; harassment — repeatedly sending a person offensive messages; cyberstalking — harassment that includes threats of harm; denigration — put downs; masquerading — pretending to be someone else and sending/posting material that makes that individual look bad; outing and trickery — sending/posting material about a person that contains sensitive, private or embarrassing information; and exclusion — intentionally excluding a person from an online group, such as an IM (instant message) buddy list.

Here is one example of a cyberbullying text: "U R 1 ugLE l%kin chk. Ill b suR 2 catch U l8r." (Translated: You are one ugly looking chick. I'll be sure to catch you later.) Another example is creating a fake Facebook page in an innocuous name, yet with sufficient clues contained within the page to give the appearance of being an actual student in school and using that page to post derogatory comments about classmates. The emotional and mental toll on the student who appears to be the creator of the page can be such that they avoid coming to school and when in school they are ostracized by their friends.

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Cyberbullying occurs in (but not limited to) the following environments:

- Instant messaging (IM) — This venue allows for multiple users, has the appeal of anonymity and the ability to exclude others; text can be copied and sent to others.

- Chat rooms — This venue allows for real time communication with the ability for the cyberbully to exercise exclusion.

- Polling websites — This venue has questions which allow participants to vote for youth with particular traits.

- Email — This venue allows the cyberbully to send offensive messages and masquerade as someone else.

- Text messages — In addition to text, cellphones have the ability to send images and video as well. The rise in the use of cellphones has lead to two phenomena related specifically to cyberbullying: "Bluetooth Bullying" and "Happy Slapping." Bluetooth Bullying allows a cyberbully to send a message to all Bluetooth-enabled cell phones within a certain radius; it is meant to shock and upset the victim as he does not know from where the message is originating. Happy Slapping involves a target who is approached and provoked in some manner while a third person videotapes the event on a cellphone. The video is uploaded to a social networking or media sharing website.

Reasons for Cyberbullying: What Does the Data Say?

"The perception of invisibility can influence behavioral choices. It undermines the impact of the potential for negative consequence. This makes it easier to rationalize an irresponsible or harmful action due to the lack of potential for detection (Willard, 2007)."

According to a study by Hinduja and Patchin (2009) the top three reasons given by cyberbullies for their actions are: revenge (22.5 percent), the victim deserved it (18.7 percent), and 'for fun' (10.6 percent). Cyberbullies justified their actions with the following excuses: "It was just text," "I didn't mean to hurt them," and "I was just messing around."

Why are people willing to do or say things on the Internet that they would be much less likely to do or say in person? Perhaps because the young and adolescent brains have not yet developed to the point where they can make decisions and exercise self-control. Youth are very "now" oriented; their focus is on the present and not on any long-term implications so there is no connection for them between action and consequences.

Prevention: A Call to Action

In an effort to address issues of bullying in public schools, New York state lawmakers passed the Dignity for All Students Act (DASA), which took effect in July 2012. This act seeks to provide a safe and supportive environment (bully-free) for elementary and secondary school students when they are on school property, a school bus, or at a school function. While this act helps to address incidences within the school 'environment', school districts need to raise awareness and help students develop strategies to deal with the cyberbullying that is beyond the reach of school districts.

Hinduja and Patchin (2009) have identified six elements for an effective school cyberbullying policy. These six elements include clear and specific definition of language that relates to and is communicated to ALL stakeholders; graduated consequences in place for violations; procedures for reporting incidences; procedures for investigating incidences; clearly stated language in a school district's Acceptable Use Policy regarding in-school discipline of a student's off-campus speech which has a "substantial disruption of the learning environment" (Tinker v Des Moines Independent Community School District, 1969); and preventive measures (workshops, professional development, assemblies). Preventive measures are most effective if set-up as a three pronged approach — staff, students, community/parents. The staff receives training on identifying incidences of cyberbullying (some possible signs include avoiding friends, appearing sleep deprived, and reluctant use of cellphones and computers), reporting incidences and on how to incorporate cyberbullying into their curriculum. New York state's DASA amendment (July 2013) requires teacher candidates to complete six hours of training in harassment, bullying and discrimination prevention. Students are instructed in issues of cyberbullying through a variety of resources, including small counseling groups. Students are also instructed using Common Sense Media curriculum units that are available for free for teachers to use within the classroom (see resource section). Students are
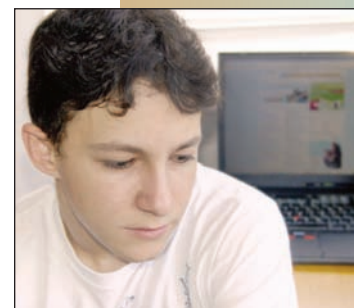
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Regardless of the approach taken to address the issues of cyberbullying, one of the key components is teaching our students how to detect and manage their own emotions and make good social decisions.

made aware of procedures for reporting incidences through assemblies at the beginning of the school year. Parents and guardians are provided with various opportunities to attend workshops dealing with not only cyberbullying, but also how to manage their "connected" child.

As educators, we need to assess cyberbullying in our districts. To do this effectively, anonymous surveys are recommended, with the terms clearly defined (cyberbullying, etc.). Surveys can be used to ascertain whether a student has been cyberbullied, where the incidence(s) occurred, who the bully was (anonymous, school friend, friend of the family), and frequency of occurrences. It is important for these surveys to be conducted at regular intervals in order to evaluate trends. As educators, we need to educate and be educated on the subject. In addition to assemblies for students, the use of peer mentoring has been used to familiarize students with issues related to cyberbullying. A simple Web search will show that there are a number of organizations that provide resources to help educate students and that offer professional development options for K-12 educators.

Educators can incorporate concepts of cybersafety and cyberbullying into their curriculum. Specifically, at the elementary school level one might use the book, *Officer Buckle and Gloria*, by Peggy Rathmann; though this book addresses safety rules in general,

Internet safety rules can easily be added into the discussion. At the middle school level, the use of hoax photographs (pictures of 30-foot alligators, etc.) can help students understand that not all they see or read online is true. At the high school level, students can focus on their personal use of technology and how these affect their lives. As educators, we need to make certain that our students are aware of the district's monitoring and filtering software (normally maintained by the district's Instructional Technology position and is required by law for districts to adhere to the Children's Internet Protection Act).

Instruction about cyberbullying and what it means to be a responsible digital citizen needs to begin in the primary grades. Englander (2012) studied more than 11,000 third through fifth graders in New England schools during 2010 to 2012. In her findings she reported,

> "Most elementary cyberbullying occurred in online games. Use of Facebook increased among third, fourth, and fifth graders between 2010-12, especially among girls. Cellphone ownership increased in every grade." (Englander, 2012)

Regardless of the approach taken to address the issues of cyberbullying, one of the key components is teaching our students how to detect and manage their own emotions and make good social decisions.

How can we as educators and the educational community address the issues surrounding cyberbullying and help to ensure the learning and social and emotional well-being of our students?

"… [the] best way for a school district to protect its students & protect itself from legal liability is to have a clear and comprehensive policy regarding bullying and harassment, technology and their intersection: cyberbullying (Hinduja & Patchin, 2009)."

The Digital 'Footprint': What Steps Your Students Should Take Now

It is never too early — nor too late — to teach about one's digital footprint. As the music group, The Police, sing in their song, "Every Breath You Take," "… every move you make, every step you take, I'll be watching you." There is a permanent record of everything that you do online, or, what others have posted about you online. The Facebook account you thought was private is NOT actually private. The picture taken by someone who was a friend yesterday, but is no longer a friend today is now part of a larger online photo sharing website, with the rights set to "public." An email address you had 12 years ago and deleted 11 years ago is still available for all to view. How easy is it to access this information? Go to the Internet Archive (http://www.archive.org/) or

Tips for Staying Safe Online

- Set up a Google Alerts to monitor your online presence. Not only should you use your names as the search query, but also any aliases (gaming avatar names, etc.) that you may be known as online.

- Never, ever post anything about yourself or anyone else that you would not want to see as the main story of tomorrow's newspaper or this evening's television news story. Ask yourself how you would feel if that information was the main story of a newspaper or the evening television news story one year from now.

- Since many websites require registration, do not provide more information than is absolutely necessary (oftentimes the fields that are required are marked by an asterisk). In this case, less is better.

- Do a monthly Google search on your own name (and any aliases). Check not only the 'Web' portion of the search, but also the 'Images' portion.

simply do a Google search and click on the word 'cached' in the results to see previous pages of a website.

More and more college admission offices are now checking an applicant's online presence as part of the admissions process. More employers are requesting permission of perspective employees to visit their social networking profiles. What students do today online may have an impact on their futures. The graphic above includes some steps students can take to make certain that their online presence is one they can be proud of. While some of these strategies can be used by upper elementary students themselves, others should be shared and supported by educators and parents/guardians.

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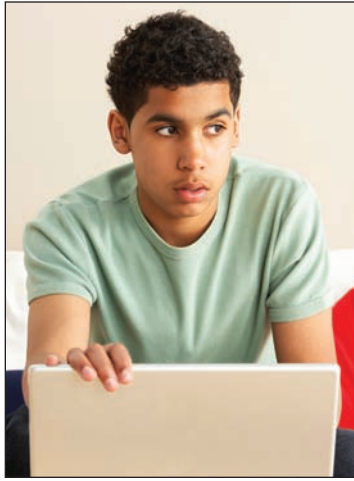
Remember, there is NO such thing as a "Delete" button online. PERIOD.

Cyberbullying and its resulting damage to a student's learning and social and emotional well-being is not a risk any educator is willing to take. Take action now. Learn more about the changes you can make in your classroom, speak with colleagues, bring up these discussions with your administrators, and always, always keep the well-being of your students in mind.

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