

Cyberbullying, Youth Behavior and Society

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The old adage of “sticks and stones can break my bones but names will never hurt me” was never really true. Given the advent of the growing phenomenon of cyberbullying in our society, we are now more aware of the extent and impact to which name-calling and other slanderous practices can have on adolescents’ self-esteem and behavior. But the effects of name-call, teasing and forms of non-psychical abuse are not new to social and behavioral science researchers. Yet, cyberbullying has gained mass media appeal and coverage, which may be related to numerous horrific behavioral outcomes as demonstrated by a rash of youth suicides by victims of cyberbullying [1]. For sure, cyberbullying presents a new challenge for society and should garner specific attention as the digital age continues to unfold [2]. The goal of this commentary is to highlight the growing prevalence of cyberbullying and the need for greater social awareness of its incidence. In doing so, the author identifies some common behaviors associated with victims of cyberbullying as well as attributes associated with its perpetrators. Lastly, I echo the call by researchers cited in this text and others on the need for greater knowledge development and derived best practices aimed at reducing the spread of cyberbullying.

Cyberbullying has been defined as “the use of information and communication technologies to support deliberate, repeated, and hostile behavior by an individual or group that is intended to harm others” [3]. It involves the use of electronic communication devices to engage in text messaging, internet usage, and other digital forms of communication. Cyberbullying often coincides with face-to-face or physical bullying and its victims may experience loneliness, anger, high rates of depression, low self-esteem, an inability to concentrate on school work, poor school grades, anxiety, and even suicidal behavior [1-4]. Many of its victims are unwilling to seek help because of perceived embarrassment and fear of further exposure and reprisal from initiators [4,5]. Mishna et al. study revealed that youth were afraid of losing internet privileges and therefore less likely to report instances of experiencing cyberbullying to parents and school teachers [5]. Thus the initial harm, deprivation, and emotional trauma caused by cyberbullying are oftentimes “hidden in plain-sight.” Although many of the characteristics of cyberbullying overlap with traditional bullying, the perceived anonymity that use of the internet affords perpetrators presents a unique characteristic. Cyberbullies can engage in acts of aggression against someone without any immediate response and without witness to their actions [5]. They “can send harassing emails or instant messages, post obscene, insulting, and slanderous messages to online bulletin boards, or develop Web sites to promote and disseminate defamatory content” [4]. Studies demonstrate that fewer than 50% of youth who are victims of cyberbullying know the perpetrators [6].

The relative newness of cyberbullying coupled with the continuing advancement of internet technology presents a new set of social challenges that society must grapple with on multiple levels. Nearly 90% of American youth from ages 12 to 17 go online and more than half of these youth use the internet on a daily basis [2]. A study by the National Crime Prevention Council found that approximately

40% of online youth in the United States are victims of cyberbullying but only 10% inform their parents [3]. As the digital age continues to unfold, and in spite of the growing presence of cautionary measures that includes an expanding body of research literature, reports of pernicious and even fatal events linked to cyberbullying continues to mount. Contemporarily, the media is inundated with stories of children and youth who are victims of cyberbullying and the confines of this problem are international in scope as many industrialized countries have experienced horrific outcomes associated with cyberbullying. This has caused state and local authorities to develop legal mechanisms (juvenile, misdemeanor and even criminal offenses) for dealing with associated acts for those who perpetrate cyberbullying [3]. Yet, we are likely to see an increase in the use of online services as youth from the digital divide both national and international gain greater online access [5].

With the growing use of mobile communication devices by youth, the advent of cyber bullying has become a real and present danger that needs greater attention by adults such as parents, educators, counselors, social workers, coaches, and others who interact with adolescents daily. Many parents are not aware of the extent to which cyberbullying takes place, nor do they understand the link between cyberbullying and other problematic youth behaviors [5]. Adolescence is a critical period of personal growth, development, identity formation, and the search for acceptance among peers [2]. Although many of the characteristics of cyberbullying overlap with traditional bullying, the perceived anonymity that use of the internet affords perpetrators present a unique characteristic. Cyberbullies can engage in acts of aggression against someone without any immediate response and without witness to their actions [5]. They “can send harassing emails or instant messages, post obscene, insulting, and slanderous messages to online bulletin boards, or develop Web sites to promote and disseminate defamatory content” [4].

Mason notes that “cyberspace creates an illusion of invisibility” because it is faceless and therefore removes “concerns of detection, social disapproval, and punishment” [2]. Because of the absence of social cues such tone of voice and as body language, “some adolescents lack tangible feedback regarding the impact of their online actions, which could interfere with their recognition that they actually caused harm to another person” [2]. Cyberbullies are those that attempt to assert power and “seek implicit or explicit pleasure or profit through the mistreatment of other individuals” [4]. Friends who use profanity

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and that make degrading comments about an individual's appearance or personhood and who are technologically literate are at-risk for perpetrating as cyberbullies. For information on cyberbullying tactics, see the website for iPredator Inc. (<http://www.linkedin.com/in/iPredator>).

Permissive parenting styles where youth have unfettered access to the online world without parental oversight facilitates the context in which youth are likely to be victims of cyberbullying [2,5]. Children are not just being left alone with television; they are increasingly gaining unfettered access to the digital world. In fact, studies have demonstrated a correlation among lack of parental supervision, knowledge of internet technology, and increased emailing by youth [7].

Concerning gender issues, study using a national representative sample found that boys were more involved in physical or verbal bullying and girls were more involved in relational bullying. "Boys were more likely to be cyber bullies, whereas girls were more likely to be cyber victims" [8]. However, studies are mixed in this area with some researchers finding no difference between boys and girls in terms of offenders or victims of cyberbullying [9].

Intervention and Prevention

While research on prevention and intervention to reduce the likelihood of cyberbullying is limited, partnerships among schools, parents, and community members have been suggested in the research literature. Similar to the widespread adoption of school-based bullying intervention programs, schools need to develop appropriate strategies aimed at the reduction of cyberbullying [5]. Schools are encouraged to establish guidelines for the appropriate use of computers and other online mechanisms [2,5]. "Students need specific guidelines on how to prevent and stop cyberbullying" [2]. Teaching students effective decision-making, problem-solving, conflict resolution, self-regulation, anger management, and communication skills are suggested methods for reducing the incidence of cyberbullying. Parental education on the dangers and increasing incidence of cyberbullying should be the task of professionals and paraprofessionals, schools, educators, and organizations that garner adolescent participation and interaction. It is important for parents to monitor their children's use of the internet and to place restrictions on access to the internet [5]. Studies have demonstrated that parental support can protect adolescents from cyberbullying victimization [8]. Community-based programs that engage children and youth must do their part by developing media campaigns similar to anti-doping for youth sports. Electronic social media outlets such as Google, Facebook, and Twitter should do their part to educate through advertisements and other efforts aimed at school children and parents.

Conclusion

Cyberbullying is a growing phenomenon in our society and the need to have continued vigilance in halting its progression is a task that social and behavioral science researchers, practitioners, schools, and parents must undertake. As a new form of bullying with many of the same results in terms of outcomes for its victims, society is currently adapting to a socialization process for children and youth that includes

the growing span of unpleasant realities derived from online peer interactions. A central point in this commentary is that there are unique attributes that characterize cyberbullying and that society must develop an acute awareness of its signs, incidence, and impact.

Although scholars who engage in child and adolescent research have moved with a sense of urgency to understand behaviors and outcomes associated with cyberbullying, the public at-large needs greater awareness and solutions for reducing its incidence and its impact. To this end, public education and awareness campaigns on the tactics of perpetrator of cyberbullying and prevention methods must saturate our society. It should go without saying that for-profit internet companies must do their part as a form of social responsibility. For social and behavioral scientists this means greater attention to research investigation and the need to develop evidence-based methods for effective intervention. For children and youth the growing presence of cyberbullying adds another twist to growth, development, socialization and behavioral outcomes in the digital age.

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