



Cyber Bullying: Promoting Healthy Schools



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Cyber bullying is a problem that challenges professionals as well as families. Possibilities to detect it and intervene are limited and scientific research is still novel. This document provides information on cyber bullying and tips for promoting healthy school and home environments.

Definition: Cyber bullying entails *“aggressive, intentional acts carried out by a group or individual, using electronic forms of contact, repeatedly over time against a victim who cannot easily defend him or herself”* (Smith et al., 2008). Like any bullying, cyber bullying is enduring and characterized by a power imbalance between the bully and the victim (Rigby, 2002). Outlets include email, social networking sites, mobile phones, internet chat rooms, and instant messaging including offensive text, pictures, or videos sent directly to an individual, or indirectly to others.

Prevalence

Between 4% - 30% of youth are involved in bullying, depending on the study. With the use of technology on the rise (estimated 95% of teens are actively online; Lenhart et al., 2007), the Internet has become a medium to engage in bullying. However, there is no evidence that the prevalence of cyber bullying is greater than traditional face-to-face bullying. Leading experts have found either similar rates for traditional and cyber bullying, or lower rates for cyber than traditional bullying (Olweus, 2012). One large-scale study across four years in the U.S. with over 400,000 from 3th to 12th graders found that verbal face-to-face bullying rates were between 15-18% while cyber bullying rates remained between 4-5% and did not increase across four years. Recent estimates across studies suggest that close to 10% of 9-16 year-olds in the U.S. and Europe are involved in cyber bullying (Menesini & Spiel, 2012).

Timing in K-12 Education

Like other forms of bullying, cyber bullying peaks in middle school and declines again in high school (Williams & Guerra, 2007). Need for peer interaction and the ability to use technology for socialization increase during early adolescence (Menesini & Spiel, 2012).

Adjustment of Cyber Bullies and Victims

Psycho-social profiles of traditional and cyber bullies appear similar: both are at risk for externalizing and risk-taking behaviors (Wang et al., 2012) and poor psychosocial functioning (Haynie et al., 2001). Also, traditional as well as online bullies and victims all tend to have academic difficulties (Dake et al., 2003; Hinduja & Patchin, 2007). Findings on gender differences are mixed, but girls perceive online bullying as more of a problem than boys (Underwood & Rosen, in press). Also, boys may prefer to post offensive photos and videos more than girls, who, in turn, prefer instant messaging, email, and chat rooms (Menesini et al., 2012). Victims of cyber-bullying report elevated stress, embarrassment, and depressive symptoms (Finkelhor et al., 2000; Ybarra, 2004) and are likely to be anxious and socially isolated.

Detecting and Intervening Cyber Bullying*

I. Detection

Current findings across countries suggest that there is a high overlap between bullies and victims involved in face-to-face and cyber bullying (Ybarra et al., 2007). Thus, it is worthwhile to *monitor existing bullying situations* to observe potential additional or prolonged diminished psycho-social and/or academic well-being of victims.

However, some victims reporting online bullying do not report being victims of traditional bullying (Menesini & Spiel, 2012). Victims of cyber bullying cannot easily escape since bullying has no physical boundaries increasing vulnerability (Slonje & Smith, 2008) and the lack of face-to-face exposure may lead bullies to have less sensibility or sensitivity towards the victim, with increasingly harsh bullying (Ang & Goh, 2010). Thus, *cyber bullying has created new vulnerability* that may partially differ from traditional bullying. Students at risk are those who are immature and socially vulnerable, have naïve or overprotective parents, or temporarily impaired family relations with emotional upset (Feinberg & Robey, 2009).

Challenges for detecting cyber bullying include the unwillingness of the victims to inform parents or educators about their experiences, which may be facilitated by joint agreements not to expose bullies. This may also be facilitated by fear: bullying serves as a means to establish social power, which is maintained via status hierarchies among youth (Pellegrini & Long, 2002; in some cases, online aggression is used for retaliation by the victim). *Vigilance and monitoring of youth who may show signs of poor functioning without an apparent cause, as well as regular contacts with mature and well-functioning students* at each grade level for current information on relationships at school are likely to facilitate detecting cases of cyber bullying.

II. Interventions

At this time, systematic intervention programs focused specifically on cyber bullying are missing and the implications of anti-bullying legislation for cyber-bullying are unclear. This leaves educators in a difficult position with limited authority to intervene in bullying occurring outside of school. However, most state laws (and in Florida, the Jeffrey Johnston Act) now prohibit *all forms of bullying, also electronic involving the school's network or emails*. Also, if a situation outside of school reaches the point of *disturbing the academic environment*, educators have some authority to intervene (for suggestions upon legal challenges, see Hinduja & Patchin, 2011).

Because predictors of bullying include normative beliefs about bullying, perceptions of a negative school climate, and lack of social support from peers (Williams & Guerra, 2007), a whole-school approach in which all youth, rather than just those involved in bullying, are included is likely to create a more positive environment (successful intervention programs include the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program and the Kiva Koulu program by Salmivalli and colleagues). Because *norms and values direct behavior in the presence as well as absence of authority*, this approach may decrease bullying in school and online (Salmivalli et al., 2011).

Because victims of bullying tend to be anxious, avoid social situations, and experience feelings of stress, sadness, and embarrassment (e.g., Ybarra, 2004), *addressing the situation in private, at first*, will likely help. Although other students may be aware of bullying situations, it is possible that they are not (in case of personal emails, for instance). Thus, finding out more about the situation from the victim prior to initiating a larger investigation may facilitate better emotional coping, and acquisition of information regarding the circumstances.

*Note. Because research on cyber bullying is still novel and lacks scientific evidence for systematic intervention and prevention programs, recommendations are based on our subjective evaluation of the best practice methods to detect and intervene cyber bullying and to promote healthy school environments.

Promoting Healthy Schools and Homes

Professionals at School

Due to the novelty of research on cyber bullying, the field is yet to develop effective intervention and prevention programs. However, while technology provides a new medium for bullying, cyber bullying assumedly serves similar purposes than traditional bullying, that is, to achieve or maintain power and status among peers (and in some cases, retaliation by the victim). Because bullying reflects adjustment among all students at school, those involved as well as uninvolved in bullying, *involving bystanders to intervene bullying and to promote healthy school environments* is efficient (Salmivalli et al., 1996). This may also be worthwhile in preventing cyber bullying, although research evidence specific to this form of bullying is still lacking.

Research suggests that youth have an understanding of strategies that will block or ignore bullies online, but *less knowledge about how to remove harmful websites and respond positively as a bystander* (Agatston & Limber, 2007). Also, youth in the U.S. (and likely elsewhere) do not feel that cyber-bullying is discussed in school as a problem, and do not perceive school district personnel as helpful resources (Agatston & Limber, 2007). Thus, it may be worthwhile for schools to *distribute information on preferred ways to conduct oneself online and how deal with bullying occurring in this medium*.

Because most online bully-victim relationships mirror those at school (Mishna, et al., 2009), it is ideal to promote schools that allow students to excel by creating a social context where *consideration for others is valued and harassing and putting down others is devalued and sanctioned formally as well as socially*. Including all related parties (parents, students, and educators) in the development of school-specific policies related to bullying creates a feeling of *ownership in all involved*, which can lead to more successful implementation of these policies. Obtaining *feedback from parents*, as well as *setting examples of accepted social values and conduct, which are repeatedly and consistently rewarded and reinforced by all staff, faculty, and key example students* in each grade level and class room are likely to help with this task. Efficient communication and collaboration with parents is always needed (see below).

Parents at Home

Because online bullying cuts across school and home (Bhat, 2008), parents and educators need to be on the same page to prevent cyber bullying. In fact, several sources perceive parents as the primary agents in promoting healthy youth development in modern days (Steinberg, 2000). Schools have limited control over behaviors occurring outside of schools, but parental monitoring of technology is related to lower levels of traditional as well as cyber bullying (Espelage; presented at the annual meeting of the American Psychological Association 2012). However, supervision should remain *at a comfortable level* in which youth have a sense of trust from parents, rather than overly strict monitoring that may lead to dishonest use of technology.

To facilitate school-parent communication targeted at cyber bullying, it may be worthwhile for schools to *send a brief encouragement to parents to monitor children's online activities to prevent and intervene in cyber bullying*. This may help to promote healthy educational and social environment in school and beyond, by alerting the parents to express any concerns they may have and inform the school about potential bullying situations. Also, it is important to note that youth who are morally engaged, have a strong sense of "right and wrong" values, and high levels of empathy and compassion are substantially less likely to be involved in bullying (Menesini et al., 2011; Caravita et al., 2009) and likely to defend the victims (Pöyhönen et al., 2010). Thus, *increasing empathy, morality, and perspective-taking skills* in youth is likely beneficial for preventing and reducing traditional as well as cyber bullying across contexts.

Resources on Cyber Bullying

The following documents may be useful in detecting, intervening, and preventing cyber bullying. All sources are freely accessible, or can be obtained from us free of charge (see below).

Online Resources

- Florida Anti-Bullying Law: http://www.bulypolice.org/fl_law.html
- Cyberbullying Research Center: <http://www.cyberbullying.us/>
- Division of Violence Prevention at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC): <http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/>
- Olweus Bullying Prevention Program <http://www.violencepreventionworks.org>
- KIVA Anti-Bullying Program (rated #1 program for Crime Prevention in Europe) <http://www.kivakoulu.fi> (select "English")

Research Articles

Feel free to contact us at any time (Danielle Findley at dfindley@mail.usf.edu) for free copies of the following papers. These high-quality articles provide scientific and practical insights on cyber bullying.

- Agatston & Limber (2007). Students' Perspectives on Cyberbullying.
- Ang, R. P., & Goh, D. H. (2010). "Cyberbullying among adolescents: The role of affective and cognitive empathy, and gender"
- Blumenfeld, W.J. "Cyberbullying: A New Variation on an Old Theme"
- Caravita et al., (2009) "Unique and interactive effects of empathy and social status on involvement in bullying"
- Feinberg, T. & Robey, N. (2009). "Cyberbullying: Intervention and Prevention Strategies"
- Hemphill et al. (2012) "Longitudinal Predictors of Cyber and Traditional Bullying Perpetration in Australian Secondary School Students"
- Hinduja & Patchin (2007) "Cyberbullying: A Review of the Legal Issues Facing Educators"
- Menesini et al. (2011) "Morality, Values, Traditional Bullying, and Cyberbullying in Adolescence"
- Olweus (2012) "Cyberbullying: An Overrated Phenomenon?"
- Pöyhönen et al. (2010) "What Does It Take to Stand Up for the Victim of Bullying? The Interplay Between Personal and Social Factors"
- Salmivalli (2010). "Bullying and the Peer Group: A Review"
- Salmivalli et al. (2011). "Counteracting bullying in Finland: The KiVa program and its effects on different forms of being bullied"
- Slonje, R., & Smith, P. K. (2008) "Cyberbullying: Another main type of bullying?"
- Smith et al. (2008) "Cyberbullying: It's Nature and Impact in Secondary School Pupils"
- Underwood & Rosen (in press) "Gender and Bullying: Moving Beyond Mean Differences to Consider Conceptions of Bullying, Processes by which Bullying Unfolds, and Cyber Bullying"
- Wang et al. (2012) "Patterns of Adolescent Bullying Behaviors: Physical, Verbal, Exclusion, Rumor, and Cyber"
- Williams & Guerra (2007). "Prevalence and Predictors of Internet Bullying"
- Ybarra, M. L. (2004) "Linkages between depressive symptomatology and Internet harassment among young regular internet users"

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