

Cyber Bullying on Today's Youth

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Youth today are experiencing a new and distinct form of bullying that is no less harmful, if not more, than traditional bullying. This new form of bullying, called cyber bullying, refers to bullying by the means of technologies such as emails, text messages and Web sites. It has evolved as the Internet becomes part of the culture of today's youth, as the possession of individual computer and cell phone becomes common to a middle school teenager, and as technology has developed to the point a normal six-year-old kid could handle. Anguished stories of cyber bullying are increasingly popping up in the country and spreading across the world.

Growing up with cell phones and personal computers, today's youth are keeping pace with technology development much more readily than adults. Then a question rises up: Is the cyberspace a battleground or a heaven? The answer is both. It can be a nurturing environment for kids to establish social contact and develop social responsibility. However, in the same cyber social world, youth are faced with numerous potential dangers and tragedy happens all the time. Cyber bullying is one of the issues that begin calling attention of government officials, legal practitioners, educators and parents (Kowalski, Limber & Agatston, 2008).

To discuss the social phenomenon, conceptual issue should be first worked out. Unfortunately, it turns out to be a difficult task. First, the concept is relatively new. Other terms may refer to cyber bullying include "online bullying", "e-bullying", "digital bullying", "Internet bullying", "cyber-harassment" and "cyber-stalking" (Kowalski et al., 2008). It varies in forms and by means. Cyber bullying can be as simple as sending an instant message with threats, or go to an extreme to create an abusive web site designed to insult someone. Second, the age group of the phenomenon may cause confusion. Some researchers (Parry Aftab) specify cyber bullying

occurs only between children and adolescents; and when the behavior involves adults, it is referred to cyber-stalking or cyber-harassment. However, cyber-stalking is by nature a type of cyber bullying. Cyber-bullying is ambiguous when it occurs between children and adults. Like other social phenomena, a single unanimous definition of cyber bullying is difficult to obtain. But at its core, cyber bullying involves the use of technology to harm others. Cyber bullying “involves 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” (Belsey, 2005). The National Crime Prevention Council's definition of cyber bullying is "when the Internet, cell phones or other devices are used to send or post text or images intended to hurt or embarrass another person."

Cyber bullying shares some common characteristics with traditional bullying. It is a form of abuse, often repeated over time; the behavior is aggressive; it involves an imbalance of power between victims and perpetrator; there may be a large number of bystanders who aggravate the imbalance. However, it represents in a different way. For instance, an email may only be sent once initially, but could be sent to many recipients and be forwarded to hundreds of kids in a short time. Cyber bullying, as a phenomenon in cyberspace, distinguishes itself from other types of bullying. The most crucial factor may be anonymity.

First, it is simply easy for kids to conduct bullying. What they need is an access to communication devices and typing a few words or uploading a picture. They can hide behind without facing anybody. When tragedy happens, it is hard to trace the responsibility, and it is no matter about size. Kids who are physically weak and typically victims in traditional bullying can seek “revenge”. Second, without being easily detected, perpetrators are very likely to pursue

behaviors further than they normally would. A social psychological phenomenon called deindividuation could explain this. It suggests that anonymity lessens self-awareness, reduces concern over social evaluation, and weakens restraints against harmful behavior (Zimbardo, 1969). Third, the situation often goes far beyond what the perpetrators intend to do (Kowalski et al., 2008). On one hand, they may not be aware of how far they have already gone. They cannot modulate their behavior based on the effect and reaction of the victims as in the case of face-to-face bullying. Thus, a good-naturedly teasing may turn friends into enemies without awareness. The theory of aggression states that aggression is “the intentional behavior aimed at causing either physical or psychological pain. (Aronson).” There are different forms of aggression, hostile and instrumental. Hostile aggression is “an act of aggression stemming from a feeling of anger and aimed at infliction pain or injury.” Instrumental aggression is “an intention to hurt someone to hurt someone as a means to some goal other than causing pain.” Cyber bullying is more a form of instrumental aggression than hostile aggression because the bully is inflicting emotional and psychological pain rather than physical injury. The fact makes it difficult or even impossible for kids to access and evaluate the consequences. Anonymity also adds to the challenge to school, home, and even court.

Another characteristic of cyber bullying is infinite audience or bystanders (Shariff, 2007). According to social psychology, the longer the situation persists, the more bystanders join in, the more imbalances it creates, and the less likelihood someone would offer to help. The unique nature of cyberspace makes the situation even worse. A rumor may spread from local school district to the other side of the ocean, from classmates to strangers, all over a short period of time. Youth carry cell phones everywhere and use computers every day. Even if they are unwilling to,

it is difficult to ignore and they may become facilitators unconsciously. As discussed earlier, anonymity assists the process. Furthermore, unlike oral and physical bullying, expressions in cyber bullying cannot be easily erased. Once messages or emails are sent out, it is barely possible to remove because millions of people could download and save it immediately (Shariff, 2007).

Communication tools used in cyber bullying are of great variety. Frequently used tools include instant messaging (IM), email, text message and social network sites. Among these, social networking such as Facebook and MySpace calls much attention, because it is part of today's youth culture, and it links to real life closely. Individuals create profiles and link to "friends" and diverse groups. Bullying can also be spread by means of chat rooms, blogs, on-line games, bulletin board system (BBS) and web sites. With development of technology, especially 3G technology, new communication modalities appear, enrich and endanger children's life simultaneously. One example is Twitter, a new social networking service named micro-blogging via Short Message Service (SMS) and Internet. By Twitter, people deliver the most relevant information as it is happening in the world (Williams, 2009). Market research shows that about 41 percent of the sample messages are pointless babble (Pear Analytics, 2009). Pointless babble is easily misunderstood or transferred to verbal-bullying by someone on purpose.

Before discussing the type of cyber bullying, a distinction needs to be made between the means by which cyber bullying is carried out, and the type of behavior being transmitted that leads to a label of cyber bullying (Kowalski, et al. 2008). Though it is common that a particular kind of bullying is associated with particular communication tools, it may always be the case and sometimes cause confusion. Based on Willard's (2006) book, Kowalski et al. describe several types of cyber bullying including flaming, harassment, denigration, impersonation, outing and

trickery, exclusion, cyber-stalking, and happy slapping. Among these, some share basic characteristics with traditional bullying but differ slightly due to the nature of cyberspace; impersonation and happy slapping occur almost exclusively in cyber bullying. With impersonation, the perpetrator pretends to be the victim, often by using the victim's account, and then delivers negative, aggressive, or inappropriate speech to others. In happy slapping, someone deliberately assaults a victim, known or unknown, while another person captures the acts, commonly using a camera phone. Then the video is uploaded to a Web site or sent through a cell phone. YouTube is one of the most popular web sites that can be used in this kind of cyber bullying. However, no matter what means it is used or what type it is labeled, cyber bullying has a great impact on the victims.

As the years continue and adolescents' use of technology is more frequent, the prevalence of cyber bullying is increasing. Hinduja and Patchin (2005), results showed that out of 1,500 adolescents who use the internet, 34.4% stated that they have been cyber bullied, and 12.6% stated that they were physically threatened and scared for their safety. Of these students that have experienced cyber bullying only 14.3% told their parent(s), a teacher, or some other adult. This research also surveyed the offenders of cyber bullying. Of these 1,500 students surveyed 16.7% reported that they have bullied someone online. 50% of the bullies claimed that the bullying was done out of fun, and 40% felt that online bullying is not as hurtful or as bad as bullying in person.

Most of bullying, more specifically cyber bullying takes place in the middle school environment. Through experience and research, this stage of adolescence (11-14 years old) has always been known as the years that the individual is trying to find their self identity, morals,

and peers. According to Santrock (2008), adolescents turn to their peers in order to identify their selves.

Even though bullying students feel that cyber bullying is out of harmless fun, it is changing and hurting the bullied student lives and their families. There is a link between suicidal ideation with adolescents being bullied. Hinduja and Patchin (2009), stated that cyber bullied victims were 1.9 times more likely to attempt suicide than students who were not cyberbullied. This was the case for two students, Ryan Halligan and Megan Meirer, who were cyber bullied by their peers.

Ryan Halligan was 13 years old when he committed suicide in 2003. Ryan suffered from some learning setbacks, such as speech and language skill and motor development, therefore was placed in special education until fifth grade. During the fifth grade Ryan started to experience bullying by the boys in his school. His parents connected him to a therapist to help him develop coping skills and build his self esteem, by the end of fifth grade the therapist felt that therapy was no longer needed.

The first year of middle school Ryan again encountered intermittent bullying. His parents did not find it of real concern; they believed that it was middle school students being themselves. In the seventh grade the bullying became severe. Ryan cried as he told his parents about the bullying. His dad wanted to talk to the principal about this problem, but Ryan insisted not to, and that it will make matters worse. Instead Ryan was enrolled into a kickboxing class so he can protect himself at school. After fighting one of his bullies, the bully later befriended him. Ryan told his new friend (bully) a funny yet embarrassing moment he had, and the bully instant messaged his story and began rumors that Ryan was gay. In the eighth Ryan also was bullied by

a girl at his school, which pretended to like him online in order for him to tell embarrassing and personal things about him, so her and her friends can laugh and joke about it. Bullying moments at school and cyber bullying experiences at home, started to bring Ryan into a depression, and then took his life. Even though Ryan's dad was constantly monitoring his internet access, to make sure personal information was not given to or no chatting was done with strangers. His father did not know that Ryan's fellow peers were bullying him online too.

Megan Meier was also 13 years old when she committed suicide. Megan battled an attention deficit disorder, depression, and low self esteem. Megan's self esteem was increased and she also had a better outlook on life when she became friends with a guy name Josh Evans on the website Myspace. According to Megan's mom, she was amazed that this "hot" guy was interested in her and thought she was pretty. After having various conversations with Josh, Josh sent her messages saying that he changed his mind about being her friend and liking her. He said that she was mean to her friends. A bulletin was also made surveying Megan about being a slut and fat.

After crying when receiving the messages and viewing the comments from others, Megan went to her room, and then took her life. Weeks after Megan's death, a neighbor who had a daughter the same age as Megan, informed the Meier family that Josh Evans never existed. Josh Evans was an account created by the Meier's family friend which lived down the street. In reports it was stated that the account was created by the mother of Megan's ex-friend, to see if Megan was talking about her daughter behind her back.

After these unfortunate deaths both Ryan's and Megan's parents saw the need to inform others about cyber bullying and the effects on adolescents. Ryan's dad and Megan's mom go

around the country and hold seminars and assemblies for parents and students. Megan's mom is also working on a law to be put into effect, which will prosecute bullies.

Since cyber bullying is on the rise and a prominent issue facing many young people today, many states are passing laws to protect young people. Parents, educators, and community leaders understand the importance of preventing cyber bullying and how that bullying is a distressing form of abuse that can have long-term effects on victims, which effects their self-esteem, can isolate them from their peers, may cause them to drop out of school, and can cause serious health problems such as suicide, and school shootings. Forty-one states have passed anti-bullying laws and the remaining nine states are currently taking anti-bullying legislative action.

The most recent recognized case in cyber bullying is the case of Megan Meier. Since her suicide on October 17, 2006, Democratic Representative of California Linda Sanchez created a cyber bullying prevention act. H.R.6123 also known as Megan Meier Cyber bullying Prevention Act (<http://www.opencongress.org/bill/110-h6123/show>), amends the federal criminal code to compel criminal penalties on anyone who participates in cyber bullying. As of July 28, 2008 the Act has been referred to the Subcommittee on Crime, Terrorism, and Homeland Security. Most states including Arkansas, Idaho, Iowa, Minnesota, New Jersey, Oregon, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, and Washington have passed laws that mandate that school districts outline bullying and the repercussions in a school manual, create methods to deal with bullying and enforce the protocol. (http://www.socialsafety.org/law_enforcement_cyberbullying.html) Another case that has proposed a law against cyber bullying is the suicide case of Ryan Halligan, who committed suicide on October 7th, 2003. Governor Jim Douglas of Vermont signed into law in 2004, 2004 Vermont ACT 117, a bill establishing bullying prevention procedures for schools

(<http://www.ryanpatrickhalligan.org/laws/laws.htm>). We, as a society, need to take action against cyber bullying. Laws are the best way to start prevention.

Many of us remember bullying on the playground but now that bullying is following kids home. Cyber bullying is a relatively new concept but one that is very real in today's technological world and one that many of today's youth experience. Youth understand and are very sophisticated with the use of technology, and are using that technology to criticize, torment, and terrorize their classmates. How can we prevent cyber bullying? What can victims, parents, kids, and schools do to aid in the prevention of cyber bullying?

According to Feinberg and Robey (2009), the first things victims of cyber bullying should remember is to not retaliate, as this will just encourage the cyber bully and become a grey area of who initially started this hostile, cruel behavior. When youths feel bullied their first reaction is to step up and defend themselves not realizing that bullies feed off of their reactions. The next thing a victim needs to do is to advise an adult of this behavior so proper action can be taken (Feinberg and Robey, 2009). Victims need to calmly tell the cyber bully to stop this cruel hurtful behavior and cut off any further communication with the cyber bully. It is important to make hard copy of any and all materials the cyber bully has posted or sent online, as evidence, and file a complaint with the website, Internet service provider (ISP), or cell phone company. If the cyber bullying continues and includes threats of violence, contact the police and report this behavior (Feinberg and Robey, 2009).

Parents need to take an active role in their youth's internet supervision. Since cyber bullying occurs most often while children and adolescents are at home, parents can be proactive in preventing instances of cyber bullying. To keep youth safe and so that parents can monitor

their child's online behavior, parents should keep computers in a communal area, such as living/family room or kitchen (Feinberg and Robey, 2009). As with many other situations and activities, parents need to talk with children about their online activities, emphasize expectations for responsible online behavior and proper internet etiquette, and make clear the consequences for violations of internet etiquette. They should also discuss with their children the importance of keeping their personal information (name, address, phone number, etc.) confidential (The Washington Times, 2007). To help control children's online activities, parents may want to consider installing parental control filtering software and/or tracking programs (Feinberg and Robey, 2009). It is important for parents to beware of warning signs that might indicate the child is being bullied, such as reluctance to use the computer, a change in the child's behavior and mood, and/or reluctance to go to school. This information is not new to parents but it is definitely worth repeating.

Cyber bullying is also very much a school problem. It produces anxiety and anger that effects youth and the school. Students who have been victims of cyber bullying live in fear of the next cyber bullying attempt and can have difficulty focusing on academics or participating in school activities. One issue that faces schools in the matter of cyber bullying, is that students remain silent. According to Campbell (2005), there are various reasons why youth do not report cyber bullying. Among those reasons, they feel embarrassed, they feel their concerns will not be taking seriously by adults, or that they may be blamed for the cyber bullying. School administrators, psychologists, and educators are in a unique position to have a vital role in addressing the problem of cyber bullying in the schools. School personnel need to raise awareness of cyber bullying and determine the prevalence (Campbell 2005). To determine the

prevalence of cyber bullying, a threat assessment needs to be conducted to determine the severity of the problem, and aid in developing programs, guidelines, and training to help prevent and stop cyber bullying in school. This can be accomplished through a survey and distributing it to teachers, administrators, and parents for their thoughts on the prevalence of cyber bullying in their school. The results of the assessment can be analyzed and used to ascertain areas of concern. Schools can deal with cyber bullying three ways: through prevention, through counseling, and through discipline. Prevention can include promoting awareness of cyber bullying and its psychological impact on children. The school can bring awareness to the issue in its comprehensive anti-bullying program which will help educate students and school personnel to ensure that all respond appropriately when cyber bullying is reported and the consequences of their actions. It helps promote anti-cyber bullying in the school, it can be advantageous in educating students about cyber bullying. There are various strategies schools can use to educate their students and school personnel including workshops, online training, and lesson plans. School personnel can help victims of cyber bullying by creating counseling groups to help students talk about what happened to them and work through issues they now face.

Cyber bullying is a matter that needs serious attention from youths, parents and school professionals. Youths can take a stand against the bullies by not staying quiet and speaking out against bullying. By reaching out to parents or school professionals, its stating that bullying will not be tolerated and is wrong. Parents can have an open relationship to show that when youths feel threatened, they will help resolve the issue. Prevention needs to be even more successful in schools because this is where youths come in contact with one another.

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