

Article 63

Counselors and Cyberbullying: Guidelines for Prevention, Intervention, and Counseling

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Due to technology, the consequences of bullying are more severe and are increasingly leading to death and violence. With the widespread use of social media and other forms of technology, bullying in the form of cyberbullying can now reach thousands of children. "Bullying is commonly defined as repeated aggressive behavior in which there is an imbalance of power between the parties" (Kowalski & Limber, 2007, p. S22). Traditional bullying is categorized as indirect and direct bullying (Quiroz, Arnett, & Stephens, 2006). Direct bullying consists of hitting, shoving, pinching, verbal threats, name calling, demanding money, property, or service; stabbing, choking, burning, and shooting (Quiroz et. al, 2006). Indirect bullying consists of rejecting, isolating, humiliating, rating or ranking, manipulating friends and relationships, blackmailing, terrorizing, and proposing dangerous dares (Quiroz et al., 2006).

Cyberbullying is using technology aggressively to cause harm to others through the use of internet web sites, chat rooms, instant messaging, text and picture messaging on phones, and blogs (Erb, 2008). The consequences of cyberbullying are increasing daily with children dropping out of school, physical and emotional illnesses, suicide, homicide and other acts of violence. According to Hinduja and Patchin (2010), approximately 20% of students from 11-18 years old reported that they were both a cyberbully and a victim at some point in their lifetime. The social and emotional problems that arise from cyberbullying are issues that can be addressed through counseling. Thus, counselors, whose duties are to advocate on the behalf of society, have a responsibility to help society with this growing issue. This article will address the forms, means, frequency, and consequences of cyberbullying. Then it will provide information on the anonymity of the cyberbully, cyberbullying legislation, and characteristics of cyberbullies and victims. Finally, it will discuss counselors' role in prevention and intervention methods, as well as helping the victim and the cyberbully.

Forms of Cyberbullying

There are several forms of cyberbullying that are frequently used. Williard (2010) describes several forms of cyberbullying including flaming, cyberharassment, denigration, impersonation, outing and trickery, exclusion/ostracism, and cyberstalking. Flaming is a brief, heated exchange between individuals through communication technology in chat rooms or discussion groups. Cyberharassment involves offensive messages repeatedly sent to an individual via e-mail or text messages. Denigration is false and derogatory information or pictures about an individual disseminated via web page, e-mail, or instant messaging that is used to damage the victim's reputation. With impersonation, the bully poses as the victim, and then communicates harmful, malicious, harsh information with others. Outing occurs when an individual shares someone else's personal information. Trickery occurs when an individual tricks someone else into revealing personal information and then shares that information with other people. Exclusion/ostracism transpires when a person is excluded from password-protected media, deleted from buddy lists, or friend requests are denied. Finally, cyberstalking is the "use of electronic communications to stalk another person through repetitive forms" (Williard, 2010).

Means of Cyberbullying

The means of cyberbullying include cell phones, pagers, web sites, blogs, chat rooms, instant messages, and e-mails (Diamanduros, Downs, & Jenkins, 2008). With these methods of social media, children and adults are able to go to sites to bully their victim. Cyberbullies are able to create web pages that seems as if it belong to their victim, but are filled with false as well as malicious information (Diamanduros et al., 2008). They are able to post embarrassing pictures or adjust pictures to make it look differently through cell phones or the computers. Additionally, they are able to falsify an e-mail address to have their victim spammed or to send false e-mails to others with damaging or untrue information (Diamanduros et al., 2008).

Anonymity of the Cyberbully

With technology, there are a variety of ways that people can be anonymously harassed. One of the main reasons for continued occurrence and widespread use of cyberbullying is due to the anonymous nature of cyberbullying. The appeal of the anonymity of cyberbullying entails the following: Cyberbullies are easily able to hide behind the forms of technology that they abuse (Strom & Strom, 2005). Many believe that they are invisible or cannot be caught when using technology (Williard, 2004). Anonymity also makes it easier to be vicious to someone who is physically located somewhere else (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010). Because they do not receive tangible feedback, they are unable to recognize the harm they cause and lack remorse (Williard, 2004). Many victims often do not know who or why they are being cyberbullied (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010). Finally, many adults lack the technological know-how to monitor today's youths' online activities, which makes cyberbullies' behavior and victims' experiences undetected (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010).

Occurrences of Cyberbullying

The frequency in which children are experiencing cyberbullying is astounding. Saddock and Saddock (2007) report that 1 in 17 children ages 10 to 17 reported being cyberbullied online in 2000. According to Kowalski and Limber (2007), among 3,767 middle school students from cities in the Southeastern and Southwestern United States, 18% of the students reported being cyberbullied at least once in the past two months, 53.2% reported being cyberbullied by a student at school, 37% reported being cyberbullied by their friend, 13% reported that they were cyberbullied by their sibling, and 48% reported that they did not know the identity of the person who bullied them. In addition to that, 11% reported that they had also cyberbullied someone at least once in the past two months.

Consequences of Cyberbullying

Similar to traditional bullying, there are several devastating consequences of cyberbullying. One of the most devastating consequences of traditional bullying has been violence at school. In many of the cases of violence, the attackers felt bullied, mistreated, or harmed by others prior to the attack (Morrison, 2009). Victims of cyberbullying experience depression, sadness, anger, and frustration and embarrassment (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010). Cyberbullying has also been linked to low self-esteem, family problems, academic problems, school violence, and delinquent behavior (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010). Victims of cyberbullying also report experiencing suicidal thoughts. Consequently, there have been several incidents in the United States where victims completed suicide (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010).

Cyberbullying Legislation

Because of the serious consequences and widespread phenomenon of cyberbullying, many states are passing laws against cyberbullying. According to Willard (2007), many courts have ruled on cases that involved online harmful speech which took place off campus. These courts applied the Tinker standard, which stated that school officials could respond with formal discipline in situations in which the off campus speech causes, or threatens to cause, a substantial and material disruption at school or interference with the rights of students to be secure (Willard, 2007). Willard (2007) asserts that, “the application of the Tinker standard to off-campus cases represents an appropriate balance between student free speech rights and the safety and security interests of schools” (p. 4). Willard (2007) offers the following recommendations for schools and laws to effectively address cyberbullying: “State statutes and school policies directed at cyberbullying must specifically allow school officials to respond to instances of off-campus online speech that meets the Tinker standard, as well as address the use of the district internet system and any personal digital devices used on campus” (p. 7). Additionally, Willard (2007) recommend that they include cyberbullying in the list of prohibited actions, “expansion of the decryption of the extent of authority to include use of the district internet system and on-campus use of personal digital devices and to

include off-campus behavior that meets the Tinker standard” (p. 8), as well as incorporate cyberbullying into their safe schools plans.

Characteristics of Cyberbullies and Victims

It is important that counselors utilize their knowledge of age appropriate behaviors to help identify the characteristics of children who bully as well as their victims. Counselors can then educate others including parents and school personnel on identifying cyberbullies and victims. Researchers have identified warning signs of victims and perpetrators of cyberbullying victims (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010). The victims of cyberbullying exhibit the following behaviors: experiences anxiety when e-mail or instant messages appear on the computer screen, appears upset or depressed after using computer, suddenly stops using computer, appears anxious about going out in public including school, tries not to engage in conversations about what he or she is doing on the computer, and seems withdrawn from social and family support systems (Hinduja & Patchin 2010). Additionally, Hinduja and Patchin (2010) identify warning signs of the cyberbully offender as follows: hides or closes computer screen from others, uses computer late at night, becomes agitated if they can not use the computer, displays excessive laughter while using computer, and does not discuss what he or she is doing on the computer. It is very important that others are made aware of the characteristics of victims and offenders to help with prevention and intervention.

Prevention Methods for Schools

After educating on the characteristics of the cyberbully and victim, counselors can then be instrumental in working with schools, parents, and communities in dealing with the widespread phenomenon of cyberbullying through leading the efforts for cyberbullying prevention. Various researchers have a variety of viewpoints of what should be included in prevention efforts. However, it is important that counselors assist in helping schools develop a plan that is tailored toward their needs. The Anti-Defamation League (2007) recommends the following components be included in a prevention plan for cyberbullying:

- Defining clear guidelines for Internet use
- Teaching students about ethical and legal standards for online activities
- Updating policies to include guidelines for internet and cell phone use, and consequences for cyberbullying and online cruelty
- Make reporting of cyberbullying and online hate incidents a requirement
- Establish confidential reporting mechanisms
- Devise supervision and monitoring practices of students’ Internet use on school computers
- Educate students about cyberbullying and discuss strategies for reacting to cyberbullying as targets and as bystanders
- Promote empathy, ethical decision-making skills, and respect among students
- Increase awareness of Internet safety strategies among students and their families

It is important that everyone be involved in efforts to decrease cyberbullying including counselors, school officials, parents, and most importantly, the students themselves. Counselors can educate school officials on ways to develop and implement prevention plans, monitor the plan's usage, and assess its effectiveness. This process may have to be revised if it is not working.

Prevention Methods for Parents

It is also important for counselors to educate parents on the necessity of discussing internet and cell phone safety with their children. Parents should provide information specifically on safe and respectful uses of technology, as well as give examples of consequences of negative use. Children can be informed of the dangers some of which include: sexual predators, pornography, sexting, giving out personal information, and the devastating effects of cyberbullying. Additionally, encourage parents to keep computers in common areas of the house and monitor children's internet and cell phone use (Diamanduros et al., 2008). Also, instruct parents to encourage their children to tell their parents or another adult about any incidences of cyberbullying or solicitations by predators and to save the evidence. Finally, encourage parents to urge their children not to respond to cyberbullying (Diamanduros et al., 2008). Counselors should also provide parents with resources to assist them with cyberbullying prevention. Because children are a part of the larger community and have access to technology outside of school and home, community programs and agencies should be included in these efforts as well.

Intervention Methods

Despite the many efforts that are put into cyberbullying prevention, incidents of cyberbullying may continue to occur. Because of this, counselors should assist schools, parents, and the community in intervention efforts. The Anti-Defamation League (2007) makes the following recommendations for intervention strategies for schools:

- Immediately responding when cyberbullying takes place
- Saving the evidence
- Assessing the problem
- Determining consequences in accordance with school policies
- Reporting to the police harmful online speech, harassment, stalking or violent threats
- Informing the perpetrators' family to establish consistency in home and school expectations
- Providing social skills counseling to perpetrators
- Informing mental health professionals to assist the victims and their families in coping with the incident.

The intervention strategies recommended for families by The Anti-Defamation League (2007) include the following:

- Saving the evidence
- Blocking offending e-mail addresses and cell phone numbers

- Changing children's e-mail address and cell phone numbers
- Reporting cyberbullying incidents to school officials and police if extremely harmful
- Reporting incidents to e-mail services, internet service providers, web sites, cell phone companies, etc.
- Canceling services if providers do not respond to complaints.

Again, these methods must be specifically designed to meet the needs of the school, organization, or family. Everyone should know what to do when an incident occurs. For the most optimal results, intervention methods should be implemented within a reasonable amount of time after the incident occurs. It is important to check with your state regarding the laws for the amount of time counselors and schools are given to respond to reports of cyberbullying.

Counseling the Victim and the Cyberbully

Finally, counseling should be provided to the victim and the cyberbully. The goals of counseling should be to help the victim cope with the trauma of cyberbullying and to rehabilitate the cyberbully. It is important that the cyberbully be educated regarding the serious consequences of cyberbullying. The counselor will then work with the cyberbully on increasing self esteem and social skills. Counselors can also teach impulse control skills, anger management skills, and ways to appropriately express feelings. Additionally, counselors may assess for underlying issues that may have lead to bullying behaviors. Victims should be offered counseling on assertiveness skills, socialization skills, and improving self concept. Sessions with the victim and the cyberbully can be offered via individual, group, or family sessions (Harris & Petrie, 2003).

Recommendations and Conclusions

Most of the research on ways to combat bullying and cyberbullying address the role of school counselors and psychologists because of its profound impact on schools. However, because of the widespread use of technology and the fact that you can access it everywhere, all counselors should be involved in efforts to reduce cyberbullying. Utilization of counselors in other settings including mental health centers, correctional facilities, nonprofit agencies, mental health centers, colleges and universities, and private practices, are essential. Specifically, I make the following recommendations to address cyberbullying in multiple settings. To address prevention and intervention, counselors in correctional facilities and short term treatment facilities can conduct group sessions with parents and youth to educate them on cyberbullying. Counselors can make presentations and provide literature at various community events such as health fairs, back to school programs, and church programs. They can also speak at various organizations such as boys and girls club, boy scouts, and girl scouts. Additionally, school based therapists can work together with school counselors to have school wide rallies or programs to educate the entire school on cyberbullying. In addition, they can conduct workshops/presentations to other community partners that they collaborate with who work with children and adults. Counselors in college and university settings can have various informational events and provide literature to reach their population since cyberbullying is also a

problem with this population. Counselor educators can also assist in prevention and intervention efforts through teaching and workshops as well. It is imperative to reach as many people in as many forums as possible and community counselors/licensed professional counselors are in a position to do this type of outreach. In essence, as helping professionals who embrace the responsibility of being advocates for all humans, professional counselors should unite with school counselors and psychologists to help alleviate the emotional trauma that results from cyberbullying.

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