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Helping Kids and Families Stay Safe: Workshops on Cyberbullying and On- Line Safety

Kelly Duncan

University of South Dakota

Holly Nikels

Western Illinois University

Michele Aurand

Western Illinois University

Gerta Bardhoshi,

George Washington University

Duncan, Kelly is an assistant professor in the Department of Counseling at The University of South Dakota, Vermillion, SD. Her areas of research interest include bullying, comprehensive school counseling programs, ethics, supervision of school counselors, and parent education.

Nikels, Holly is an associate professor in the Department of Counselor Education at Western Illinois University. Her areas of research interest include cyberbullying, multiculturalism, program evaluation and school mentoring programs.

Aurand, Michele is a masters level student at Western Illinois University studying school counseling. Her primary research interests are cyberbullying and school counseling.

Bardhoshi, Gerta is a doctoral student in counseling at the George Washington University in Washington, DC. Her research interests include bullying, school counselor role and identity, and ethics.

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Imagine having a difficult day at work: you get berated by the company CEO, your supervisor tells you that your request for a raise has not been granted because you are undeserving, and you overhear one of your co-workers describing to another the great levels of your ineptness. At a standstill in rush hour traffic after work, you begin to daydream about arriving home, your sanctuary, and putting this miserable day behind you. However, as soon as you walk in the front door, you begin getting nasty text messages from the co-worker you overheard this afternoon. You log on to the internet to check your email account and find that you have received a number of hurtful emails from your colleagues pointing out all of your inadequacies. As you are surfing the web, you find a website created by another colleague that asks employees to vote for the “worst co-worker”. You are horrified to find that you have received 50 votes so far. While checking your personal webpage, you see that a different co-worker has posted a message that details why she wishes you would quit your job.

While this scenario may seem over-the-top and a bit ridiculous to adults, many youth around the world are facing this reality every day with the increasing occurrences of cyberbullying (Hinduja & Patchin, 2005; Sabella, 2006). Emotional scars left by these instances leave today’s youth feeling vulnerable.

Cyberbullying: Definition and Prevalence

Although bullying behavior is not a new phenomenon, the explosion of technology among the world’s population has spawned a new form of bullying, known as cyberbullying. Belsey (2004), a nationally recognized educator and founder of www.cyberbullying.us defines cyberbullying as:

“...the use of electronic devices and communication technologies such as e-mail, cell phones, pagers, text messages, instant messaging, defamatory personal web sites, and defamatory online personal polling web sites, to support deliberate, repeated, and hostile behavior by an individual or group, that is intended to harm others” (Belsey,

2004, as cited in Keith & Martin, 2005).

Cyberbullying is becoming increasingly prevalent in the youth culture and can occur both on and off school property. Instant messaging networks, blog sites, private web sites, and online social networks are all potential grounds for cyberbullying (Stover, 2006). Hinduja & Patchin's 2006 study on the topic indicated that almost 80% of cyberbullying occurs online. Children are the largest group using computers and experiencing cyberbullying as they are frequently left unsupervised at the computer and their privacy concerns are accepted by parents (Anderson & Strum, 2007). Some research indicates that fifty-five percent of cyberbullying experiences occur in chat rooms. Twenty-eight percent of students surveyed reported being bullied via email (Hinduja & Patchin, 2006a).

In a national study of 1,566 students ranging in age from fourth to eighth grades, 57% of students stated that someone had said hurtful or angry things to them online and 13% of those students stated it occurred "quite often" (National i-SAFE Survey, 2004). Additionally, 53% of students admitted saying mean or hurtful things to someone online and 7% admitted to doing it "quite often". Thirty-five percent of students reported being threatened online. Forty-two percent had been bullied online. Twenty percent stated they had received mean or threatening emails. An astonishing 58% stated they had not told their parents or another adult about their experiences with cyberbullying (National i-SAFE Survey, 2004).

Hinduja & Patchin (2007) completed a similar study with approximately 1500 adolescents who regularly used the internet and engaged in interactions with other users via email, blogs, chat rooms, and other interactive sites. Over one third of the participants reported being victimized online. Sixteen percent reported they had engaged in bullying behavior towards another person. Twelve percent of cyberbullying victims reported they were threatened with physical harm; about 5% were fearful for their safety. Less than 15% of victims told an adult about cyberbullying incidents.

Hinduja & Patchin (2006a) found that being a victim of online bullying created problem behaviors off-line in the real world, including stress, running away, skipping school, and using alcohol and drugs. Willard (2006) also reported low self-esteem, poor academic performance, depression and in some cases, violence. In extreme cases, victims were taunted to kill themselves. For some youth, suicide was viewed as the only way to escape cyberbullying and end its torment (Li, 2007).

The Bullies

Blair (2003) indicated that cyberbullying can begin as early as age nine and often reaches its peak in middle school. This researcher reported evidence suggesting that cyberbullying is a growing problem in middle and upper-middle-class communities, especially in grades six, seven and eight. Cyberbullying is considered to be as hurtful as more traditional types of bullying, yet is less likely to be detected or prevented by adults

(Blair, 2003).

Cyberbullies have a sense of anonymity online, which can result in a lack of inhibition (Franek, 2006). Because the cyberbully does not physically see the victim in cyberspace, the act of bullying is made easier. With no boundaries or consequences, youth are able to use technology to vent frustrations in ways that can be destructive (Keith & Martin, 2005). A cyberbully may not know the level of distress produced by their behavior because of the lack of face-to-face contact with the victim. As such, a cyberbully may not experience feelings of empathy, regret, sympathy, remorse, or compassion toward the victim (Strom & Strom, 2005). Cyberbullies can harass, intimidate, bully, or terrorize another person twenty-four hours a day wherever the technologies are present. Unlike more traditional forms of bullying, tormentors can now abuse their victims without the limits of time or physical proximity.

Education: The Solution for Kids and Families

Thirty-three states require or recommend that school districts implement anti-bullying programs (Blair, 2003). Generally adopted anti-bullying policies cover all forms of cyber harassment (Blair, 2003) and there have even been suggestions of addressing cyberbullying as a school violence issue (Stover, 2006). Consequently, it is important for educators and mental health professionals to address cyberbullying directly with children and their parents.

Issues of respect and equality in relation to cyberspace as well as the establishment of clear sets of rules governing the use of technology at home and school are considered to be vital components to a cyberbullying prevention and education curriculum (Franek, 2006). Educating students about the damaging effects of cyberbullying (Stover, 2006) and raising empathic recognition that an action has caused harm can lead to remorse and promote responsible behaviors when using technology in the future (Willard, 2004). Anti-cyberbullying campaigns that focus on cyberbullying as leading to escalating conflicts in schools have also been proposed. Additionally, the development of on-line responsibility and safety contracts between parents and students are useful in opening the lines of communication about this issue (Stover, 2006).

As advocates for children and families, school personnel and community mental health professionals have an obligation to educate students and parents on how to keep themselves safe in cyberspace. Parents and school officials have been reported ineffective against cyberbullying in part because of their limited knowledge of new technologies (Anderson & Strum, 2007). Professionals in the mental health and education field need to become comfortable using new technology not only so they can teach young people how to positively navigate through the World Wide Web, but also teach parents to monitor what their children are doing online (Franek, 2006). Keith and Martin (2005) support the importance of adult awareness and comfort level with advanced technologies as a

prerequisite for understanding their children's technology use.

Professional counselors can be leaders in implementing educational programming in both the school and community settings and helping youth gain a greater understanding of appropriate technology use and how to keep themselves safe. Some of the specific topics suggested for coverage in a workshop for parents or students include:

- Awareness of cyberbullying and legal and personal consequences.
- Monitoring computer usage and training on checking the usage history, utilizing Internet Service Provider controls, informing cell phone providers of abuse, or using blocking software
- Responsible online use including proper and respectful electronic communication methods—email, blogs, chat rooms, instant messaging, and etc.
- Online and chat room safety
- Peer mediation and social problem solving skills
- How to deal with cyberbullying

There are many other ways parents can be proactive in diminishing the threat of cyberbullying. Placing the computer in a central area of the house and enforcing time limits for computer use decreases the likelihood of a child engaging in cyberbullying behavior and increases adult awareness of the child's online activity. Password protected computers also decrease the possibility of cyberbullying occurring, as access is permitted only to those who know the password. Additionally, parents can purchase software designed to track and monitor internet access (Sabella, 2006). Teachers can also address cyberbullying by monitoring children's online behavior at school, helping them set up online accounts, asking them about their online friends, and watching for abrupt changes in the child's attitude toward the internet (Anderson & Strum, 2007).

Wolfsberg (2006) proposes 10 steps for children, parents and educators to prevent cyberbullying from becoming recurrent. These include the following.

- Not engaging the person by replying
- Printing all online communications so that cyberbullying is documented
- Changing screen names and sharing them with selected friends and family only
- Not sharing personal information in chat rooms
- Contacting service providers to identify where negative emails originate
- Thinking before sending a reply
- Increasing parental awareness of online tools, applications, games, and other online materials used by their children
- Involving teachers of children that are being cyberbullied
- Initiating comprehensive action by teachers, other school staff, students, parents, and community members

Today's youth view technology very differently than adults. While young people tend to

see the internet and cell phones as an extension of themselves, and as an important part of their social lives, adults often look at technology as a life convenience (Strom & Strom, 2005). A common, and ineffective, response for parents who are unsure of what to do when faced with a cyberbully harassing their child is to limit their child's internet use or take away their cell phone. This can be perceived by the young person as punishment when they are already feeling vulnerable from the bullying they are experiencing. As such, many youth will choose to not seek their parent's help in fighting cyberbullying for fear that their lifelines might be taken away. Parents must learn to find the balance between protecting their children and not severing their child's ties to their social circle and support networks (Snider & Borel 2004).

It is also important for mental health professionals to help parents become aware of and recognize warning signs that indicate a child may be a victim of cyberbullying or is engaging in cyberbullying behavior. A child who is being cyberbullied may stop using the computer suddenly, have negative reactions to Instant Messages or emails, may be uneasy about going to school, or become uncharacteristically withdrawn (Hinduja & Patchin, 2006b). Secretive behavior, new friends unfamiliar to the parents, excessive time on the computer, and hidden disks or files are warning signs of inappropriate computer use (Nevada State Attorney General's Office, 1999). A child who quickly closes or switches screens, uses the computer during the night, gets upset when computer use is restricted, laughs excessively when using the computer, avoids discussing what they are doing, or has multiple accounts may be involved in cyberbullying (Hinduja & Patchin, 2006b). Counseling and support should be provided to both the victim and the cyberbully. Training to address issues such as positive self concept, assertiveness skills and practicing positive behaviors could also be provided by counselors for both parties (Chibbaro, 2007).

Many children relinquish their personal boundaries in an online environment. The anonymity of the e-world may allow them to feel a false sense of confidence thus making it less threatening to take on different personas while online. This sense of anonymity emboldens many individuals to transmit messages they would not feel comfortable relaying in a face-to-face setting (Beckerman & Nocero, 2002). Mental health professionals in the school and community setting can assist young people in processing the potential dangers of these types of interactions. By instructing students to not say anything online that they would not be willing to say to someone in person and reporting any incidents that feel threatening to an adult, counselors can help youth reduce the risk of cyberbullying.

Although individuals may feel a sense of safety due to this anonymity, many share personal and identifying information with strangers. Helping children understand the dangers of sharing personal information with strangers is essential. Children may not always recognize that the identities of individuals on the internet could be fabricated. The dangers of meeting someone face to face they have become acquainted with online need

to be stressed.

It is also important that young people be taught “netiquette” or proper etiquette online (Campbell, 2005). Strom and Strom (2005) suggested that the lack of facial expressions and body language present in e-communication methods make it difficult for the receiver to identify the message being sent. Additionally, it is difficult for the sender to determine if the message was received and understood as intended. Helping young people and their families understand the magnitude of this type of communication barrier is vital to the process of educating them about on-line safety (Franek, 2006).

Finally, it is important for young people and their families to understand the ramifications psychologically, socially and vocationally of inappropriate internet use and other forms of e-communication. Often, students think that they are anonymous online and their identity and actions cannot be traced. However, that is not the case (Franek, 2006). It is important for parents and families to recognize e-mails and instant messages can be traced back to an IP (internet protocol) address and eventually tracked to the computer from which they originated (Franek, 2006). Additionally, prospective employers, college and high school personnel and countless others have access to much of what is or has been posted on personal websites. As a general rule, what happens in cyberspace does not necessarily stay in cyberspace.

Conclusion

Incidences of cyberbullying are becoming more prevalent as technology is more available to children and adolescents. Cyberbullying victims often experience problematic behaviors that impact their personal, social and emotional lives. Due to the lack of personal contact in the exchange, cyberbullies frequently lack empathy, regret, or remorse. Parents, educators and mental health professionals have a responsibility to protect students from bullying of any form. As such, it is imperative that schools and families be educated in developing and implementing policies and curriculum to address cyberbullying and the negative impact it has on students. Making available programming for children and parents allows counselors to not only provide information but more importantly, to help all parties discuss and process how to handle the cyberbullying situations in which they may become involved.

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