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Article 65

A School and Technology Based Program: Healing Families Affected by Cyberbullying

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Cyberbullying has become a major issue over the past few years and affects students, parents, and school systems. Up to half of all young people say they have been targets of digital bullying (Quaid, 2009). Many students are failing courses, attempting suicide, suffering from depression, anxiety, and even mental illness as a result of cyberbullying (Froeschle, Mayorga, Castillo, & Hargrave, 2008). Kowalski and Limber (2007) studied cyberbullying among 3,767 middle school students in United States and found that 11% were victims of cyberbullying, 7% were cyber-bullies and/or cyber-victims, and 4% were cyber-bullies at least once over the past couple of months. Thirty-six percent of adolescents claimed to have been a victim of embarrassing or threatening remarks via technology (Opinion Research Corp., 2006). Many believe this phenomenon to be a rite of passage. The severity of consequences (depression, hopelessness, withdrawal, low self-esteem, poor academic performance, and even suicide; Froeschle et al., 2008; Strom & Strom, 2005; Willard, 2006), however, demand cyberbullying be taken seriously.

These consequences affect the entire family. For example, Bateson's (1979) circular causality implies that events not be thought of as simple, single cause and effect relationships. Instead, events, behaviors, and interactions occur in a more complex way, as mutually influencing one another (Cottone & Greenwell, 1992). As a result, effective techniques might focus on improving cohesiveness and communication within the family system rather than focusing on cyberbullying as an individual student's concern.

Computer activities intend to build family cohesiveness and communication and may inoculate students and families from the effects of cyberbullying. Further, this infusion of technology offers a unique counseling approach that can be used to motivate participation and bridge the electronic generation gap. A rationale and description of a specific school-based family program utilizing technology and targeted to middle school aged students follows a brief overview of the literature on cyberbullying and a discussion of current technology being utilized in family and school-based counseling interventions.

Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying can be defined as harassment inflicted via electronic media (Froeschle et al., 2008). This type of bullying differs from traditional bullying in several ways. First, cyber-bullies attain anonymity by using fictitious screen names, stolen identities or passwords, polling sites, and/or use of another's cell phone to send threatening messages or embarrassing pictures. As a result, bullies are unlikely to be caught and do not fear punishment (Strom & Strom, 2005). Fear is exacerbated for victims who may not know the perpetrator's identity and presume harm may come at any time. Second, harmful comments, embarrassing pictures, acts of intentional exclusion, and rumors are instantly spread worldwide with the click of a key. Consequently, embarrassment and shame cannot be extinguished by moving a student to a new location or having them attend another school. Harm may be even more profound since adolescents who harass others via computers or cell phones often dissociate from the abuse (Froeschle et al., 2008). This dissociation may alleviate the perpetrator's guilt about the act and contribute to an increase in bullying incidents.

Not surprisingly, cyberbullying has often been touted as contributing to adolescent depression, hopelessness, withdrawal, low self-esteem, poor academic performance, and even suicide (Froeschle et al., 2008; Strom & Strom, 2005; Willard, 2006). As a result, it has been suggested that adults develop close relationships with adolescents in order to curb harassment and offer support should cyberbullying occur. Further, parents need to educate themselves about common internet sites and become knowledgeable regarding ways in which harm can occur (Froeschle et al., 2008; Keith & Martin, 2005; Li, 2006; Willard, 2006). This is especially important since adolescents may not disclose harassment for fear of further ostracism (Froeschle et al., 2008; Li, 2006; Strom & Strom, 2005; Willard, 2006). It seems clear that a school-based family program focused on strengthening parent and adolescent communication patterns, instilling trust among family members, and educating about technology could assist students suffering from cyberbullying.

Current Technology Used by Counselors

The literature indicates that the counseling profession has become increasingly reliant on technology (Berry, Srebalus, Cromer & Takacs, 2003; Cabaniss, 2002; Greenidge & Daire, 2005; Powell, 2008). For example, e-mentoring (Johnson & Daire, 2008), the use of handheld computers for assessment or video recall (McGlothlin, Jencius, & Page, 2008), and cyber-therapy (including e-mail counseling, computer videoconferencing, internet counseling, chat rooms, and self-help software; Cabiness,

2002) have been used in the school setting. In addition, child and family counselors advocate the effectiveness of online cinematherapy (Powell, 2008), and Virtual Reality Exposure Therapy gaming (Greenidge & Daire, 2005). Despite the aforementioned use of technology in the counseling setting, a dearth of sources exist demonstrating use of technology to curb cyberbullying. The following program advocates the use of motivating technology as a medium including the Wii, sites such as Facebook, Myspace, Youtube, and other video gaming mediums.

The Intervention

Rationale for Program

While many of the aforementioned techniques are interesting and touted as effective, few involve the entire family in a school-based program and even less have been used within the context of cyberbullying. The *ASCA National Model* (2005) stresses the importance of collaborative relationships between school counselors and families to sustain adolescents' development and achievement. The following program can establish this important connection between the school and family while also building trust within the family itself.

Computer activities intend to build family cohesiveness and communication and may inoculate students and families from the effects of cyberbullying. This is especially important for victims of cyberbullying since students who perceive parental support report less suicide ideation and may be more likely to seek parental assistance than students describing a lack of family cohesion (Council of Economic Advisors, 2000; Lyon et al., 2000). Activities such as creating family internet pages, designing videos, and playing computer games offer an appealing and motivating format for all ages. Further, these activities offer a forum where families can learn to positively communicate and establish trust in a natural setting.

The nature of cyberbullying can create technological fear among parents and students (Froeschle et al., 2008). Although this fear may have substance, abstinence from the use of electronic devices can be counterproductive. This program intends to illustrate the positive side of technology such that students view bullying and aggression as the problems to overcome and view technology as simply a medium. This outlook is crucial since technology is a positive educational and work related component and its elimination would be detrimental to a student's education and future career goals.

Technological education for parents has been touted as an effective deterrent for cyberbullying (Froeschle et al., 2008). Knowledge of forums such as Facebook, Myspace, and YouTube make parents better able to monitor children's' internet communications. As such, training in these mediums is an important facet of the program.

Program Selection

Middle school students suffering from the effects of cyberbullying are selected for the program through self, teacher, parent, administrator, or counselor selection. Participating students must attain parent permission as well as both self and family commitment to the program. Parents must be willing to learn how to create Myspace and/or Facebook pages, play computer games, and design family videos. A maximum of three families and nine group members participate in the program concurrently.

The inclusion of up to three families in sessions offers opportunities for acceptance, altruism, universalization, intellectualization, reality testing, transference, interaction, and ventilation (Corsini & Rosenberg, 1955). Parents grow through spectator therapy or through observations and imitations of other adults in the group while adolescents may benefit from catharsis, feelings of belonging, insight, and socialization (Hill, 1957). In general, the group setting helps participants recognize they are not alone in their victimization; feel positive regard, acceptance, and importance; learn the importance of assertiveness when facing bullying; witness honesty, courage, and other emotions exhibited by other families; experience warmth and closeness in the group; and feel responded to by others (Berzon, Pious, & Farson, 1963). Further, families are offered an opportunity to vent emotions related to student victimization through cyberbullying.

Program Goals

Several goals are evident in the program as follows:

1. Families learn positive communication patterns.
2. Families develop trust such that adolescents feel comfortable talking to parents about the effects of cyberbullying and other issues.
3. Families learn to use current technology.
4. Families view technology as a positive rather than negative medium.
5. Families gain support from others in the community suffering from the effects of cyberbullying.
6. Connection between the school and family is enhanced.
7. School counselors learn about and apply knowledge of various forms of technology.

Program Description

Prior to program implementation, school counselors seek assistance and training from technology teachers in the school. School counselors meet with technology teachers until they feel proficient using a computer gaming system, are able to create avatars as well as Facebook, Myspace, and other pages commonly used online. Finally, school counselors must understand technology involved in the creation and internet posting of videos. Once school counselors feel confident in technological use, students and parents are screened for program inclusion.

Upon program acceptance, parents are asked to attend a total of five hour long weekly meetings at the school. Each meeting is broken into three 20 minute phases: an instructional phase, a task phase, and finally, processing the experience. Each session begins with instruction for the technological task to be completed. Once the technology and assignment have been explained, families work collaboratively on the weekly project. At the end of each meeting, family members process what they learned in three areas: technology, family dynamics, and family communication patterns. Counselors listen to communication between family members and offer support, empathy, confrontation, and interpretations as necessary.

Each weekly meeting is described as follows.

1. Introduction activity/Week 1- Families get to know each other by creating avatars (computer cartoon depictions available online or via Wii or other computer gaming systems). First, instruction is given for each family to collaboratively

- create a separate avatar depicting each individual family member. Once complete, avatars are shown to the entire group (all three families) on a large screen. As each avatar is shown, other members within that particular family introduce the family member shown. The family member being introduced tells how they believe the avatar is an accurate and/or inaccurate depiction. After all introductions, each family shares what they learned from the activity and about their family.
2. Week 2- Each family is given instruction on the use of a video camera and asked to create a family video depicting something that has gone well during the last week. After 20 minutes, families share videos with the other two families and describe the experience of making the aforementioned video. Next (within the multifamily group), each family describes the positive event that inspired the video. The counselor asks families to detail things they did to make the positive event occur. Finally, families share past negative experiences with videos (i.e., cyberbullying using video postings if applicable) and ways to prevent future harm. The session ends as parents and children discuss positive feelings and events associated with videos (i.e. memories).
 3. Week 3- Instruction is given to aid families in the creation of Facebook and/or Myspace pages as well as how to post videos on Youtube. Families are asked to create a family page on one of the aforementioned communication forums. Working collaboratively, families create a profile, post a song, and if desired, attach the video used the previous week. Families discuss the positive aspects of using these pages as well as precautions that can be taken. Within the multifamily group forum, each family member discusses personal feelings and reactions to this assignment. The session closes with the use of a round. Each participant fills in the blank: "Online forums such as Myspace or Facebook can be used to help _____ and I will prevent harm by _____."
 4. Week 4- Families are shown how to request friends and share messages on Facebook and/or Myspace forums. Each family is asked to find and post a positive comment on the pages of the other two families in the group. Next, each family member shares fears concerning these and other internet forums. The counselor observes interactions within each family and rotates from group to group. Finally, all families converge and members share discussions including what they learned from this week's activity and about their family thus far. The session closes with each family member describing positive traits they and other family members possess that will keep them from internet harm.
 5. Week 5- Participants are taught how to play a competitive computer game. Any three gaming systems (one per family) easily attained by the school can be used. Each family is divided into dyads (parent/child). First, the parent competes against their child. Next, parent/child dyads from different families compete against one another. After playing the games, the school counselor asks the multifamily group, "How was it different competing against your child and working collaboratively together? Did it remind you of your family's interactions? How has your family changed since joining this group? Describe your family's growth since joining this group? In what ways are you less fearful of

cyberbullying?” The counselor points out strengths witnessed throughout the group process.

Ethical Considerations

Several ethical considerations must be made when using technology to facilitate counseling. First, clients posting information on mediums such as Facebook should be informed as to the universal and non-confidential nature of such postings. The client’s right to confidentiality must be regarded even when using electronic media (Cottone & Tarvydas, 2007). Counselors must also inform clients that social media and postings will not be used to communicate with the counseling professional. This ensures that proper boundaries are established between counselor and client while also maintaining counselor-client confidentiality (Cottone & Tarvydas, 2007).

Summary and Conclusion

Cyberbullying has become a major concern for many students and their families. School counselors are in optimal positions to implement school-based family counseling programs that build family cohesion while healing the mental anguish caused by cyberbullying. The multifamily and technological components of the program are unique and offer many benefits.

In order to deter avoidance of technology, this medium becomes an important component in the aforementioned school-based family program. Fear of bullying via the computer may cause students to avoid use, thus decreasing skills needed for future careers and success. As a result, technology is imbedded into the program and illustrates a positive aspect that may have been overlooked. Further, technology can be a non-threatening medium whereby families can gradually create lasting bonds and strengthen communication patterns.

Group communications are also important facets of the program. Family communication patterns can be enhanced as all family members are motivated to participate in computer games, the creation of avatars, and pages designed as internet forums. Multifamily communications as utilized in the program increase spectator awareness, universality, altruism, and reality testing (Corsini & Rosenberg, 1955).

The aforementioned school and technology based family counseling program intends to bridge the technological gap between generations, foster healthy communication patterns, and protect middle school aged children from cyberbullying. This program helps create a shared knowledge of technology between generations thus leading to tools needed to protect children from cyberbullying.

Further, the program adheres to guidelines detailed within the *ASCA National Model* (2005). It actively engages families, creates better relationships with parents, teaches better communication patterns and builds a cohesive generational bridge via technology. As a result, students may perceive parents as allies in the battle against victimization and exhibit better coping skills when faced with various developmental challenges including cyberbullying.

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