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Cyberbullying and *Cyberbalance*: Cultivating a Respect for Technology

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While much attention has been paid to educating our youth of today to such things as ‘stranger danger’, and just saying ‘no’ to drugs, cautions and limits associated with the use of technology are just beginning to be addressed. This paper will address the misuse of such technology, followed by a discussion of the need for preventative, developmental measures in regard to its proper use.

Cyberbullying

Most of the research has focused on the phenomena of *cyberbullying*, the use of technological means to send hurtful, cruel or even harmful messages to others. Also known as ‘electronic bullying’ or ‘on-line social cruelty’ (<http://stopbullyingnow.hrsa.gov/indexAdult.asp?Area=cyberbullying>), many modalities can be utilized, including instant messaging, e-mail correspondence, blogs, on-line personal polling web sites and cell phone pictures (Belsey, n.d.). Originally seen to occur more in the middle school aged group, with the growth of *MySpace*, and *Facebook*, both high school and college aged youth are now among its victims. Elementary school aged children are also not immune to this problem as they are more frequently introduced to technology at younger ages with the introduction of *WebKinz*, *Club Penguin*, and a gamut of additional technologically based toys and learning tools. Children and youth of all ages are bombarded with a gamut of television advertisements related to the newest cell phones, blackberries, and computers. It is no wonder that estimated technology use has risen from 2 million youth in 1995 to 77 million in 2005 (http://www.criminaljustice.state.ny.us/missing/i_safety/i_intro.htm), with 15,000,000 of these young people utilizing instant messaging and 4,000,000 of these youth posting messages daily to the web (<http://www.netlingo.com/statistics.cfm>). Furthermore, it is estimated that over a third of youth have been cyberbullied (Patchin & Hinduja, 2006, 2008). And, more than half of the youth in another study have reported knowing someone that was cyberbullied (http://www.ucalgary.ca/~qinli/publication/cyberbully_aera05%20.html). While some studies indicate girls tend to be more frequent victims and bullies than boys on-line (Kowalski, Limber, & Agatston, 2007), both genders are involved.

When considering these statistics, it is important to address potential reasons for such use and misuse. Parry Aftab’s work, as cited in Kennedy (2005), in terms of types of ‘cyberbullies’ may shed light on possible motivations for cyberbullying events. In considering the categories of “Power Hungry” and “Revenge of The Nerds”, the abuse of

technology can be a means of usurping power and imposing intimidation. “Mean girls” can find comfort in numbers in their harassment of others, as well as a vehicle of entertainment. “Vengeful angels” may be trying to right a wrong done themselves or others, and may find strength to confront through the anonymity of the response.

Lastly, those in the “Inadvertent” category may simply not know that they have done something wrong. They could easily be responding to someone’s message, role playing a different persona or repeating the lyrics of a song. In addition to understanding the different types of cyberbullies (keeping in mind that single profiles of a particular category do not exist), it may be of value to also look at the categories of cyberbullying proposed by Willard (2007). Cyberbullying may be conveyed in the form of ‘flaming’ (vulgar or coarse messages), ‘denigration’ (‘dissing’ someone on-line), ‘harassment’ (repeatedly sending offensive messages), ‘cyberstalking’ (repeatedly sending messages that make victims concerned for their own safety), ‘outing and trickery’ (sharing someone’s personal information), ‘impersonation’ (pretending to be someone else) or ‘exclusion’ (intentionally leaving someone out of on-line activities).

While typical schoolyard bullies are sometimes easier to spot, cyberbullies can come in all shapes and sizes. According to Bargh and McKenna (2004), and Ybarra and Mitchell (2004), schoolyard bullies tend to be more direct, often have poor relationships with teachers, do their bullying on school property, and fear physical, verbal and non-verbal retribution. In contrast, cyberbullies tend to be more anonymous, may have strong relationships with their educators, ‘bully’ at home and at friends’ houses, and fear losing computer privileges. Numerous signs may exist which can help detect that cyberbullying is occurring (<http://www.cyberbullying.us>). For victims, mood changes while using the computer may occur, such as agitation, anger or anxiety, and they may actually stop using it. The cyberbullies may also avoid discussions about the computer, as do the victims. In addition, they tend to excessively use the computer, close the windows down if someone walks by, have multiple accounts, and become agitated if computer use denied.

It is important to assess not only the motivation behind the cyberbullying, as discussed above, but also to assess all involved, as cyberbullying tends to be a circular event involving multiple offenders, and to assess the contextual factors influencing the misuse (Trolley, Hanel, & Shields, 2006, 2008). Were the cyberbullies being bullied elsewhere? Were their concerns heard? Were they responding to situations of being cyberbullied and happened to be the only ones caught? Understanding who was involved, what specifically happened, what was the motivation behind the acts, how often did the cyberbullying occur, and the content of the cyberbullying are all essential areas to be defined. When conducting such assessments, nuances of cyberbullying as addressed by Willard (2007) should be considered. Not all cyberbullying will reach a level of risk, threats can come from the victims as well as the cyberbullies, on-line language may be coarser (making the message seem more serious than it is), impersonation may be occurring on-line, and the internet may be used to try on different personalities.

Fundamental to the assessment and intervention process is the need for schools to have clearly stated “Acceptable Use Policies” (AUP’s) in regard to technology. Schools should have clearly written guidelines regarding student use of technology on site. Such

policies may help guide decisions and may also be beneficial to the prevention of technological abuse. It is also important for schools to be aware of emerging cyberbullying laws (Hinduja & Patchin, 2009). It is wise for schools to have legal consultation available to them which is grounded in such knowledge. While many schools have evoked ‘zero tolerance’ and ‘3 Strikes and You’re Out’ policies, especially in response to such tragedies as Columbine and Virginia Tech, evidence suggests that these policies are not effective (Fleming, Towey, Limber, Gross, Rubin, et al., 2002). There is a need for comprehensive assessments and proactive responses.

Trolley, Hanel, and Shields (2006) have developed incident reporting and intake assessment forms, as well as an assessment decision tree, all of which can be easily utilized in the school setting. These authors also emphasize the importance of psycho-educational-social responses to cyberbullying responses, not just disciplinary. It is common knowledge that punishment takes away an unwanted behavior but doesn’t teach the new, desired behavior. Consequences such as suspension, while possibly necessary, tend to only isolate the cyberbullies from the school site. While safety is certainly the utmost factor to be considered, more often than not, this is not the key issue. It is important to look at skills and abilities, such as communication, social, anger management and conflict resolution skills, as well as the need for improved self-esteem, and enhanced friendship building opportunities and competencies. The authors have proposed the “PEAS” (psycho-educational-social) intervention program as an important adjunct to typical disciplinary measures.

Cyberbalance

(Term coined by authors to describe the act of appropriately setting safe guidelines and boundaries for youth in regard to the type and amount of technological use).

It can be deduced from the aforementioned statistics that today’s youth are daily immersed in technology. These authors have created the term *Cyberkids* to describe this population. It is not uncommon to observe youth immersed in the world of technology. Teens in particular can be seen on a computer, instant messaging, searching websites, and responding to emails. This phenomenon of “media multitasking” is a common occurrence (Lenhart, Madden, & Hitlin, 2005; Lenhart, Rainie, & Lewis, 2001). According to the Kaiser Foundation (2004), young people spend about a quarter of their media time devoted to utilization of more than medium. (<http://www.kff.org/entmedia/upload/7592.pdf>). Very young children are not immune. It was found that children 6 and under spend about the same amount with screen media as playing outside (about 2 hours), which is more than double the time they engage in reading activities (<http://www.kff.org/entmedia/entmedia102803nr.cfm>).

Research continues to emerge as to the benefits and costs of the rampant technological growth. Clearly, it is essential that youth are computer literate for educational and employment purposes. For example, Smith (2004) describes the multiple benefits of using web based programs in academic courses: ease of access for geographically diverse students, ability to immediately update coursework material, and facilitation of test administration and immediate feedback. Furthermore, Tyler and

Sabella (2004) address the ability to reach a wider population of students through 'cybersupervision'. Employers also utilize the web to post potential positions and review applicant credentials such as e-folios. In addition, a plethora of travel and entertainment information may be obtained on-line. The days of looking at a map for directions and movie newspaper inserts are fast becoming obsolete.

In contrast, concerns are arising as to the potential negative impact of such technological use, not the least of which are potential impaired social and communication skills. Case, Bauder, and Simmons (2001) delineate the potential for misinterpretation as to instructor emphasis and a lack of sensitivity to multicultural cues in doing supervision on-line with students. There is also a lack of empathic awareness due to absence of visual cues on-line. How can empathy and appropriate guilt be developed if the response to on-line content cannot be ascertained? Even day to day interactions whereby youth are plugged into their iPods on school buses, instead of conversing, lend support to the social and communication skill concern. Similarly, there is a legitimate question regarding the future of our youth's writing ability when they are exposed to habitual text messaging abbreviations. Physical concerns may also exist in regard to continued technological use such as carpal tunnel syndrome from excessive text messaging. In addition, numerous studies have linked the rise to childhood obesity due to inactivity associated with technology use (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2004). And while some research suggests that the human brain is able to adapt to this technological multitasking (Seligman, 2006), the verdict is still out on the long term cognitive impact of such behaviors. The ultimate risk of technological misuse has been seen in car crashes resulting in death, due to driving inattention while text messaging. This hazard is implicit in the development of laws forbidding use of cell phones while driving. Even those walking while simultaneously talking on a cell phone can be putting them in a dangerous position.

Clearly, there is a need for parents to look at computer use in their homes in terms of guidelines and amount. 'Internet Safety Agreements' may be utilized by youth and adults to review responsibilities and safeguards associated with computer use. This is a key factor in prevention as it has been estimated that up to 75% of parents do not have rules for computer use with their children (<http://www.netlingo.com/statistics.cfm>). Just as youth are taught from an early age the rules about visiting friends, avoidance of substance abuse, and staying safe from strangers, so too must parents educate their children about technology safety. Simplistic instructions such as not responding to computer surveys requesting personal information, not leaving cell phones unattended, and not sharing passwords with others can help protect children from cyberbullying. In addition, having computers located in a family area whereby parents monitor such use can be of benefit. In addition, just as there is a plan in advance of what to do should a fire start in the home, there needs to be a plan in place in families as to what to do should cyberbullying occur. Internet Safety Agreements, previously mentioned, are essential. At the foundation of this plan is STOP SAVE and SHARE, also coined by these authors. *STOP SAVE & SHARE* indicates that if youth receive inappropriate material on-line, they should stop working on the computer, save the material which was sent, and share the information with an adult. On the flip side, if parents become aware that their children are

cyberbullying, they need to be vigilant in stopping computer use, implement appropriate consequences, and try to ascertain triggers of such behavior. Similar to the PEAS program previously discussed, Williams (2006) suggests that parents re-evaluate discipline techniques with cyber bullies, using more logical and non-violent means; identifying the triggers of the child's aggression; and suggesting ways they can join in with others. In dealing with these guidelines, it would be a 'word to the wise' to parents to stay current in terms of technological advances and terms. This may take some work as most parents were not raised in such technologically sophisticated environments. Taking advantage of workshops provided by computer retailers, exploring websites such as *Netlingo* to understand text language, connecting with their Internet Service providers regarding rules and regulations, and simply asking their children are all avenues of education.

A final key component to setting guidelines is the amount of acceptable technology use within families. Do parents have to text their children to connect with them? Are the youth sedentary for hours each day? How much actual in person social interaction do youth have on the average? What level of social and communication skills do they possess? Can they respond empathically to others and have a health, not inflated sense of empowerment? What is their youth's response to denial of use? All of these questions may give families some direction as to setting guidelines for daily technological usage.

Summary

It is crucial that incidents of cyberbullying be taken seriously and proactively responding to all parties involved, not just the victims. If one looks at the research of Heath and Sheen (2005) in regard to traditional bullying that 75% of those bullied or harassed will go on to do the same to others, then it is common sense to also provide intervention to the cyberbullies. In doing so, future events of such incidents may be reduced, and considering that many (cyber) bullies were once victims themselves, another pool of stronger survivors may be assisted. In addition to interventions, it is crucial that prevention, and education of our youth in a developmentally appropriate fashion, be simultaneously achieved. In terms of *cyberbalance*, it is essential that youth of today are taught from an early age the benefits and cautions associated with technological use, and to use it responsibly. *Cyberbalance* may be one of the greatest gifts given to children today. The ability to raise youth to use technology for growth, knowledge and a broader understanding of and connection to the world, while protecting them, keeping their social skills and physical health intact, and ensuring their empathic radar, is a challenge worth taking for parents and schools alike.

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