

Cyberbullying: the new form of bullying

Adolescent expressions of frustration and discontent that used to be whispered in hallways are now being graphically broadcast on Web pages, as well as much darker feelings that cannot be ignored by educators (Conn, 2001). Canadian Bill Belsey coined this as "Cyberbullying" (Belsey, 2004). There are reports of cyberbullying leading to suicide, school violence (including one school murder), school failure, and school avoidance (Willard, 2006). Cyberbullying is the new form of bullying that makes use of the diverse range of technology now available. The National Children's Home says that this phenomenon which includes using email, text, chat rooms, mobile phones, mobile phone cameras and web sites to harass or bully others is being used by children and adolescents world wide. The Internet is unique in that it is a person-to-person communication and it can also be used as a mass medium, like the radio or television (Campbell, 2005). Therefore when the Internet is used for something destructive such as bullying, the long-term effects can reach more people, resulting in more serious damage to a person's psyche. Online communication can be extremely vicious, students who normally wouldn't say such hurtful and outrageous things are empowered by the anonymity and the fact that their victim is not directly in front of them. The fact that there is no escape for those who are being cyberbullied-victimization can happen 24/7, distinguishes cyberbullying from traditional bullying. Willard also says the anonymity provided by the Internet can do more than just empower bullies; it can make it harder for victims to cope. "If you have no idea who is bullying you, it can damage your relationships with everybody (Willard, 2006).

Bullying; what it is and prevalence:

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) reports that bullying can be considered the most prevalent form of youth violence and may escalate into extremely serious forms of antisocial behavior. The surgeon general's task force on youth violence reports about 30 to 40 percent of male and 16 to 32 percent of female youths committed a serious violent offense by age 17 (DHHS, 2001).

According to Stephenson and Smith (as cited in Patchin & Hinduja, 2006), bullying is a form of social interaction in which a more dominant individual (the bully) exhibits aggressive behavior which is intended to and does, in fact, cause distress to a less dominant individual (the victim). The aggressive behavior may take the form of a direct physical and/or verbal attack or may be indirect as when the bully hides a possession that belongs to the victim or spreads false information about the victim.

According to research by Beal, bullying represents a significant problem in our nation's schools. The National School Safety Center (NSSC) called bullying the most enduring and underrated problem in U.S. schools (1995).

- In a recent national study, nearly 30 percent of the students surveyed reported being involved in bullying in the current term as either a perpetrator or a victim. According to Nansel et al, (2001) this translates to 3,708,284 students reporting bullying and 3,245,904 students reporting victimization.
- One in six children report being bullied at least once a week, although that figure was as high as 50% if the duration of bullying is taken as lasting only one week (Smith & Shu, 2000).

- In a study by Mynard, Joseph, & Alexander done in 2000 as many as 40% of adolescents reported having been bullied at some time during their schooling.
- Glew et al., reported that more than one in five middle school students said that they avoid restrooms at school out of fear of being bullied, and another study suggested that at least 20 percent of all students are frightened during much of their school day (2000).

Common Characteristics of Bullies and Victims

According to the National School Safety Center (NSSC), common characteristics of bullies are:

- Being overly aggressive, destructive, and enjoy dominating other children, they tend to be hot-tempered, impulsive and have a low tolerance for frustration (NSSC, 1995).).
- Family background is also a common factor shown among bullies according to some research. Generally bullies' parents are hostile, rejecting, and indifferent to their children. Parenting style is usually permissive and father figure is weak if present at all. Discipline is usually inconsistent, physical, and emotional. This teaches these children that aggression is a solution to problems that arise. (Smokowski & Kopasz, 2005).
- According to Roberts, studies show that by age 30 bullies were likely to have more criminal convictions and traffic violations than their less-aggressive peers (2000).
- The majorities of victims, who are the recipients of bullying, are passive or submissive
- usually small in stature, weak, and frail compared with bullies
- often unable to protect themselves (Smokowski & Kopasz, 2005)
- They tend to be quiet, cautious, anxious, insecure, and sensitive.
- They tend to have poor communication and problem-solving skills. (Smokowski & Kopasz, 2005).
- Victims tend to be sad & prefer to stay alone (V.Y. Kshirsagar, Rajiv Agarwal & Sandeep B. Bavdekar, 2007).
- More likely to report symptoms such as school phobia, vomiting and sleep disturbances.
- Recommend that healthcare professionals be aware of these symptoms, as well as school absenteeism, that are associated with frequent bullying (Kshirsagar, et al., 2007).

According to an article by Nancy Willard (2006), executive director of the Center for Safe and Responsible Internet Use in Eugene, Ore., there are different forms of cyberbullying, which include:

- Flaming. Online fights using electronic messages with angry and vulgar language.
- Harassment. Repeatedly sending nasty, mean, and insulting messages.
- Denigration. "Dissing" someone online. Sending or posting gossip or rumors about a person to damage his or her reputation or friendships.
- Impersonation. Pretending to be someone else and sending or posting material to get that person in trouble or danger or damage that person's reputation or friendships.
- Outing. Sharing someone's secrets or embarrassing information or images online.
- Trickery. Tricking someone into revealing secrets or embarrassing information, then sharing it online.
- Exclusion. Intentionally and cruelly excluding someone from an online group.

- Cyberstalking. Repeated, intense harassment and denigration that includes threats or creates significant fear.
- Cyberthreats. Cyberthreats are either threats or “distressing material” general statements that make it sound like the writer is emotionally upset and may be considering harming someone else, harming himself or herself, or committing suicide (Willard, 2006).

Other related concerns about youth online behavior, related to cyberbullying cited in the article by Willard (2006), are;

- Disclosing massive amounts of personal information, through profiles, web pages, blogs and other forms of Internet communication.
- Internet addiction, defined as being an excessive amount of time using the Internet, resulting in lack of healthy engagement in areas of life.
- Suicide and Self-harm communities, such as the one Ryan Halligan accessed in order to commit suicide, are readily available to depressed youths which provide information on suicide and self-harm methods, along with encouragement for these activities (Willard, 2006).

Nancy Willard also talks about the relationship between brain development and how harmful online behavior can impact that development. According to Willard, teens are in process of developing frontal lobes that allow for reasoned and ethical decision-making. Learning to make reasoned and ethical decisions requires attention to the connection between actions and consequences. Use of technologies can interfere with the recognition of the connection between an action and a harmful consequence (Willard, 2006). Teens are also going through a period of intense emotional and social development. This includes exploration of personal identity, emerging sexuality, social status, and their relations with others. Teens are using social networking to establish their place within their social community, which equates their social status. These social status issues underlie much of in-school, and on-line bullying behavior (Willard, 2006).

Cyberbullying in Schools

Nancy Willard said “cyberbullying is becoming more common in schools, and districts need to start addressing it. Anyone who is at all involved with middle school and high school kids recognizes that this is a growing problem.” (Santos & Nyhan, 2007). Preliminary research discloses that:

- 99% of teens use the Internet regularly
- 74% of girls aged 12-18 spend more time on chat rooms or instant messaging than doing homework
- One in every seventeen children is threatened on the Internet; and one in four youth aged 11-19 is threatened via computer or cell phone (Leishman, 2002; Michell, 2004; Cyber-libel website, 2004).
- A recent survey of 3700 middle school students in the U.S. disclosed that 18% experienced cyberbullying (Chu, 2005).
- According to the National Conference of State Legislatures, about 30 percent of students nationwide from grades six through eight have been on the receiving or giving end of cyber-bullying.
- About one-third of kids ages 12-17 have experienced it as well, according to a national poll released last August by Fight Crime: Invest in Kids, a law-enforcement group based in Washington, D.C (Thomas, 2007).

- According to an article by Beckerman & Nocero, (2003), the growth of cyberspace harassment has been recognized as far back as 1999 in a report from the United States Attorney General to the Vice President Al Gore that suggested that incidents of this were an increasing problem for law enforcement officials.
- The immediacy of access, the ease of creating and posting to Web sites, and the illusion of anonymity have made the Internet the forum of choice for angry, frustrated, discontented, or just plain nasty students (Conn, 2001).
- Public health researcher Michele Ybarra, PhD, of Internet Solutions for Kids Inc., and psychologist Kimberly Mitchell, PhD, of the University of New Hampshire's Crimes Against Children Research Center, (2004), reports that cyberbullying among teens and preteens has increased by 50 percent in the last five years (2004). The increase is attributed to the increase of youths who chronicle their lives on Web logs, and socialize online through chat rooms, instant-messaging and Web sites.

Schools Updating Laws

- Students have constitutionally protected rights to express their opinions, just as adults do. In the school setting, that right is often overridden by the greater right and duty of the schools to maintain discipline and to educate all students (Conn, 2001). However under the free-speech rights, it is very difficult to take down a website.
- One principal at Calabasas High School did get involved after comments on a website caused many of his students to be depressed, angry or unable to focus in school (Li, 2006). He said quote "It might have been happening off campus....but the effects carry on into the school day... [However], the site has more than 30,000 members and any student can post a message... [further], getting the site stopped wasn't easy. Talking to law-enforcement officials led nowhere; there are few rules governing what can get posted on the Internet" (Li, 2006).
- In the absence of established legal precedents specifically relating to cyberbullying, it is important to identify the policy vacuum that leaves schools confused about their rights, obligations, and limitations, in regard to harassment by students in cyber-space (Shariff, 2005).
- Oregon legislators such as House Majority Leader Dave Hunt, is sponsoring HB 2637, which would mandate that all Oregon schools adopt a policy aimed at curbing electronic bullying (Thomas, 2007).
- At least two other states-Idaho and South Carolina-have adopted statewide anti-cyberbullying policies, including punishments as severe as expulsion. Oregon is one of eight states considering similar legislation. Hunt says his bill is designed to "catch up state law and district policy regulations with the 21st century" by giving Oregon's 198 public-school districts until July to update their policies. Otherwise the state could withhold funds for non-compliance (Thomas, 2007).
- A South Carolina law that took effect this year requires school district to define bullying and outline policies and repercussions for the behavior, including cyberbullying (States Pushing for Laws, 2007).
- Some of Oregon's most powerful lawmakers have lined up behind a proposed bill that would require all of the state's 198 school districts to adopt policies that prohibit cyberbullying (States Pushing for Laws, 2007).

- Ted Thonstad, superintendent of a rural school district stresses the importance of clarifying by policy, how to treat cyberbullying-now prohibited under strict hazing rules. In the past the school district had only outlined which Internet sites students could visit, but there was no specific policy that dealt with cyberbullying (States Pushing for Laws, 2007).
- If the district can show a direct link between the student expression and school disruption, and the disciplinary action imposed by the district is taken for the right reason, student speech originating outside of school can be actionable (Conn, 2001).
- School districts must be prepared to document a link between out-of-school, student-created Web sites and school activities (Conn, 2001).
- School districts must document material and any substantial disruption of day-to-day activities by the creation of the Web site.
- Educators should put in place a student code of conduct, like Bethlehem, that clearly and specifically puts students on notice both about acceptable behavioral expectations and about the consequences for failure to meet those expectations (Conn, 2001). Every term in the code should be very explicit, giving examples of the behavior and the consequences that will occur.

Bullying Prevention Programs

Numerous bullying programs have been put into place to address the problem of bullying in schools.

- One of the most widely recognized programs is *The Olweus Bullying Prevention Program*. This is a comprehensive intervention and it targets students in elementary and middle school, and relies on teachers and school staff for implementation. It has firm limits on unacceptable behavior, consistently applies non-hostile consequence to violations of rules, and allows adults to act as both authority figures and role models. It involves prompting school personnel to create a school environment that is characterized by warmth and involvement (Smokowskis & Kopasz, 2005). This program was created by D. Olweus and S. Limber and initially implemented in Norway. Their research reported that the program was associated with substantial reductions, by 50 percent or more, in the frequency with which students reported being bullied and bullying others (Olweus & Limber, 2000).
- *The Bullying Project* is based on the Olweus and Limber research in Norway. In addition to that program, students are taught how to stand up to bullies, how to get adult help, and how to reach out in friendship to students who may be involved in bullying situations. This project involves interventions for both the bully and the victim. Counseling sessions that focus on acknowledging actions and developing empathy are provided for the bully. Various forms of support suggested for the victims are; physical protection, support group participation with other victims or individual therapy. They are also encouraged to write, act out, draw or talk about their experiences through expressive therapy. (Olweus & Limber, 2000).
- *Bully Busters* is a program geared for elementary and middle school students. Students act out short skits about common bullying situations in order to stimulate discussion in classrooms about this topic. The principal of the school will then go on to explain how there is a zero tolerance policy for bullying, and asks the students to take responsibility of making positive steps to deter bullying. (Smokowski & Kapasz, 2005)

Prevention at Home

Nevada Family, a magazine published by CCSD, published the following tips for parents to prevent cyberbullying in the home:

- Move home computers into easily viewable areas of the house.
- Talk with your children regularly about their online activities.
- Encourage your child to tell if he/she is being bullied or knows of others who are.
- Consider installing parental control filtering software.
- Helpful cyber-safety Web sites include: StopCyberbullying.org; FBI.gov; WiredSafety.org and netsmartz.org. (2007)

Role and Function of the School Psychologist in School Violence Prevention

The role and function of School Psychologists seems to be a malleable profession based on the interests and specializations of each individual psychologist. According to the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP), there are some suggested guidelines for implementing school violence prevention programs. Recent surveys have obtained information on school violence prevention as a continuing education and pre-service training need (Larson, et al., 2005).

- Olsen, Larson, and Busse (2000), as cited in (Larson, et al., 2006), found that of 221 NASP members, 85% indicated that the issues of "verbal taunting, bullying, sexual and ethnic harassment, gun possession, and more serious forms of physical assault" had emerged as prevention/intervention needs in their district.
- In comparison Furlong et al.(1996), as cited in (Larson et al., 2006), found that 85.4% of school psychologists indicated that they had received no training in school violence and only 26.8% felt prepared to address the issues.

Some of the suggested pre-service training competencies are discussed as follows;

- First, the ability to incorporate data-based decision making and accountability into services. For example being able to construct, implement, assess and interpret local needs. Provide early screening for children at-risk, threat and suicide assessment and functional assessment of aggressive behavior (Larson, et al., 2005).
- Second, being skilled at interpersonal communication, collaboration, and consultation is imperative, third, having the ability to provide effective instruction and development of cognitive/academic skills. For example; providing methodologies to increase academic engaged time to reduce disruptive behavior problems, and design and monitor effective alternative instructional settings for high risk students.
- Third, school psychologists should be able to help students develop socialization skills and life competency skills, such as; teaching conflict resolution and social problem-solving techniques, providing small group and individual anger and aggression management skills training, and providing bully prevention methodologies (Larson, et al., 2006).

- The fourth suggested competency school psychologists should possess is being able to influence school and system structure, organization and climate, in order to facilitate development of safe schools policy (Larson, et al., 2005).

The last recommended skills all have to do with prevention and intervention in the home and community and providing mental health services in schools. Examples of these include; providing violence-related crisis management, including victim support, parent management training methodologies, community coalition models for violence prevention, evaluation of school violence prevention/intervention at system, school, group and individual levels, and, determining empirically supported prevention/intervention programs that could be implemented in schools (Larson, et al., 2005).

Best Practice

Practitioners seeking to address school violence issues are best served by linking service delivery in this newer area to the more familiar and well-established framework of collaborative problem solving (Larson, et al., 2005).

- The first step in any case is to identify the problem. Psychologists need to gather data on current climate and perceptions of school safety from multiple sources and settings and then utilize needs assessment surveys, focus groups, and extant discipline and police records (Larson, et al., 2005).
- The second step is to analyze the problem. This involves analyzing data and communicating the findings to all people involved, set priorities and goals based on the data, and come up with hypothesis to explain current problems. (Larson, et al., 2005).
- The third step is to determine primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention responses based on data and empirical research, match prevention needs with budget capacity, determine staff training requirements, and develop benchmarks for goal attainment. (Larson, et al., 2005).
- The fourth step is response implementation. This involves devising evaluation and progress monitoring protocols, implementing prevention strategies with treatment integrity, and monitoring and adjusting strategies for increased effectiveness. (Larson, et al., 2005).
- The fifth step is the evaluation of prevention strategies, which involves monitoring goal attainment benchmarks for change, assess social validity, i.e. how do those involved perceive the prevention effort, and continue, adjust, or discontinue prevention effort (Larson, et al., 2005).
- The most important role of the school psychologist is to use their training in collaborative and organizational consultation to bring order and focus to this process. This will help to prevent too many "floating" independent programs that create more of a patchwork effort rather than an effective solution that can be put in place (Larson, et al., 2005).

Summary

Cyberbullying is a growing problem in school-aged kids that can no longer be dismissed because it is happening off school grounds. Cyberbullying is harassment much like traditional bullying but it is taken further with the power of technology. Bullying can spread through an entire school overnight as opposed to one-on-one

or a few individuals against another. It is done through cell phones, websites, web logs, instant messaging and email. As the studies previously cited in this article, it is something that is directly affecting students in schools across the country. Certain cases such as Ryan Halligan's, brings home how serious and also how preventable cyberbullying can be.

The role and function of school psychologists in school violence prevention was discussed in terms of the gap that exists between what school psychologists are trained in and the services schools are in need of. There is a need for school psychologists to use their scientific, research-oriented approach and utilize those skills to help in solving practical problems such as school violence in order to produce solid, research-based plans that could be implemented in every school. Research, as well as the amount of bullying/violence that occurs in schools, proves that scientifically based plans with specific directives of what should be in place and proven successful outcomes, that could be replicated, are in high demand nationwide. If such a plan could be put in place, not only would many violent situations be prevented, there would be a better chance that some order could be brought in times of chaos.