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Cyberbullying: What It Is and What We Can Do About It

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The advent of computerized technologies has provided unparalleled access to information, entertainment, and communication. Children and youth are regularly among the first to understand and embrace its potential. Cell phones, Palm Pilots, and personal computers have opened the door to an alphabet soup of communication technologies— listservs, e-mail, blogs, chat rooms, online social communities (e.g., MySpace), and Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPGs). The information superhighway has resulted in clear benefits for learning and engagement. However, it has also provided a venue for harm (Li, 2005). Cyberbullying represents one way that young people can misuse or abuse computerized technology to inflict harm on others.

Definition

What is cyberbullying? “Cyber” is a prefix meaning of or related to the computer. Cybercrime, for example, is used to denote crime committed via the computer. “Bullying” commonly refers to acts of aggressive behavior that cause physical or psychological harm or discomfort to another person perpetrated in the context of a perceived or actual power imbalance (Olweus, 1993; Orpinas & Horne, 2006). Such aggressive behavior may directly target a specific person or group of persons, or it may be more indirect, such as spreading rumors or lies about the targeted person or group. Cyberbullying, then, is defined as the willful use of computers or computerized machines as tools to intentionally and repeatedly cause harm or discomfort through verbal or relational aggression that targets a specific person or group of persons. Belsey (2006) defined cyberbullying as using information and communication technologies (e.g., e-mail, cell phone, personal web sites) to engage in deliberate, repeated, and hostile behavior intended to harm others.

Cyberbullying can be viewed as two distinct types. The first type, the use of computerized technology as a tool or mechanism to bully others in the real world, includes disseminating unflattering video footage or pictures, text messaging or e-mailing threats or pranks, and communicating harmful information via technology. The “Star Wars Kid,” who was admitted to a psychiatric facility for treatment as a result of the ridicule he received from a video uploaded by peers, and the website maintained by Eric Harris prior to the Columbine shootings are some examples. This form of cyberbullying provides students with anonymity, freeing them from responsibility or accountability for their behaviors (Herring, 2001) and allowing them to be impervious to the feelings of the bullied that might otherwise restrain their behavior.

The second type, bullying others within cyberspace itself, is perhaps more pervasive and less understood in terms of real-world consequences. The Internet provides people with numerous outlets to interact with others in cyber-communities. Generally, in these cyber-communities individuals have an avatar (i.e., character or alias) that goes online, often in a game environment, and interacts with others. Although many individuals do not have negative experiences when participating in cyber-communities, some become the focus of indirect bullying, such as isolation, or direct bullying, through the use of derogatory verbal attacks and threats, stalking, and aggression towards the individual’s avatar in cyberspace (Kiesler & Sproull, 1992; Nelson 2003; Thompsen, 1994).

Scope of the Problem

The Internet has revolutionized the way people access and share information—a shift that is particularly noteworthy among children and youth. A recent study by the U.S. Department of Education found that 90% of children ages 5 to 17 use computers, and 59% (31 million) have access to the Internet (DeBell & Chapman, 2003). Of the children and youth who use the Internet, 72% use it for schoolwork, 65% for e-mailing or instant messaging, and 62% to play games. In addition to the Internet, nearly 80% of adolescent-aged students own and operate a cell phone (USA Today, 2005), many of which have multi-media

capabilities. Technology has increasingly provided children and youth with the tools for cyberbullying.

Prevalence of the Problem

A recent poll conducted by the Fight Crime: Invest in Kids group found that more than 13 million children in the United States aged 6 to 17 were victims of cyberbullying. Further, approximately one-third of teens and one-sixth of primary school age children reported having been threatened, called names, or embarrassed by information shared about them on the Internet. A study by Ybarra and Mitchell (2004) found a slightly lower prevalence rate for cyberbullying, with approximately 19% of students aged 10 to 17 reporting either cyberbullying or victimization. Charlton (2002) reported that 11% of elementary school children who had cell phones admitted receiving either a derogatory message or a personal threat. In a larger study of over 3,000 5th, 8th, and 11th grade students, Williams and Guerra (2007) reported that, overall, 9.4% of students indicated that they had bullied others via e-mail or instant messaging. They found that a relatively small percentage of 5th grade students reported engaging in cyberbullying (4.5%), with the distribution peaking in middle school, where almost 13% of 8th grade students reported perpetrating bullying. The distribution decreased slightly in high school, with 10% of 11th grade students reporting that they bullied other students via the Internet.

Despite the attention cyberbullying has gained in the media, there has been little empirical research on the correlates and causes of cyberbullying. The limited evidence available suggests that it is unlikely that there is a unique group of students who bully others exclusively through the use of computerized technology (Campbell, 2005). Rather, cyberbullying is simply another venue for bullying. Therefore, research on the correlates of and preventive interventions for bullying in general are likely to be applicable to cyberbullying (Williams & Guerra, 2007).

The literature on bullying suggests the primary characteristic that differentiates bullies from victims is that bullies have externalizing behavior patterns (i.e., under-controlled behaviors such as aggression and defiance; Smith, Talamelli, Cowie, Naylor, & Chauhan, 2004), whereas victims have internalizing behavior patterns (i.e., overcontrolled behaviors such as fearfulness and depressive symptoms; Swearer, Song, Cary, Eagle, & Mickelson, 2001). Research also indicates that victims tend to be rejected and excluded by their peers more so than bullies (Hawker & Boulton, 2000; Juvonen, Graham, & Schuster, 2003).

The literature also suggests that negative social contexts are significant contributing factors to bullying and victimization. Indeed, Williams and Guerra (2007) reported that cyberbullying was significantly related to perceived school climate and peer support, and these relationships were similar to those of physical and verbal bullying. In addition, students coming from family environments characterized by limited parental monitoring and harsh discipline practices are more likely to be bullies and/or victims when compared to students coming from more carefully monitored family environments (Olweus, 1980, 1993).

Intervention Strategies for Cyberbullying

If cyberbullying is simply another form of bullying, interventions that address bullying broadly should also be effective for preventing cyberbullying. One preventive intervention is for schools to develop school-wide anti-bullying policies that encourage and reward students for respecting each other and for recognizing the right of each student to be free from bullying. The anti-bullying policies should be translated into rules that are posted in every school setting as reminders to students and staff of the behavioral expectations. The influence of peers is also particularly important from an intervention standpoint. Research has shown that peers can escalate bullying through mutual encouragement and validation (Espelage & Holt, 2001; Salmivalli, Huttunen, & Lagerspetz, 1997); however, peers can also provide a supportive social context that discourages bullying (Baldry & Farrington, 2005). Therefore, one of the best school-wide strategies to prevent bullying is to create a climate of fairness and trust, where others actively intervene rather than act as bystanders, and provide mutual support through positive peer support systems. These recommendations are consistent with the school-level components of the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program, one of the most widely-supported bullying prevention programs available (Olweus, Limber, & Mihalic, 1999).

A particular challenge for prevention of cyberbullying is that it occurs largely in the private, virtual worlds of children and youth. Therefore, in addition to regular bullying prevention strategies and seminars, schools should institute specific policies that target cyberbullying. Most schools have computers equipped with multi-media technology that can be used to bully others; therefore, it is important to maintain strict oversight of computer use at school through close monitoring. Schools can also block access to particular websites that can be used for uploading and sharing information that is intended to inflict harm on other students. Seminars and trainings for parents can address bullying, the misuse of home computers and cell phones, and suggestions for parental monitoring of their children's use of these technologies. Faculty and staff should also be trained in early warning signs that identify victims of cyberbullying, including rejection or isolation from their peers and being the focus of other more traditional forms of bullying. Staff should

also be vigilant about looking for the circulation of pictures, video clips, and/or sound-bytes used to ridicule and defame the character of particular students.

Conclusion

Technology has provided children and youth with a new and expanding venue for bullying. As technology becomes less costly, more efficient, and more accessible, there is likely to be a concomitant increase in cyberbullying. School psychologists can educate other school personnel about the general causes of bullying and cyberbullying in particular and assist in developing and implementing school-wide bullying prevention programs with specific strategies to prevent cyberbullying. These interventions should promote school norms and the rejection of bullying, enhance school climate, encourage positive peer support, discourage negative bystander behaviors, and educate school personnel and families to identify warning signs and develop intervention strategies. To address cyberbullying in particular, school personnel should carefully monitor computer use at school, block access to certain websites, and provide specific trainings on cyberbullying for all school staff and parents.

Useful Resources for Practitioners:

- Fight Crime: Invest in Kids - <http://www.fightcrime.org/cyberbullying/index.php>
- Olweus Bullying Prevention Program - <http://www.clemson.edu/olweus/evidence.html>
- Bill Besley's cyberbullying website - <http://www.cyberbullying.com>
- Stop Cyberbullying - <http://www.stopcyberbullying.org>

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