

Cyber Cruelty: Understanding and Preventing the New Bullying

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Abstract: As adolescents increasingly adopt cell phones, smart phones, and the Internet as tools for communication and social networking, they can become victims of the growing trend of cyberbullying – targeted harm inflicted through such technology. These forms of technology are often strange and unfamiliar to parents, teachers, and medical and mental health providers. This review article provides an introduction to cyberbullying, tools for screening, and opportunities for prevention.

Keywords: Bullying, Internet, adolescents, relational aggression.

A mother brings her middle school student to a therapist because he is skipping school and isolating himself in his room; on interview he reveals he has been receiving threatening text messages and insulting MySpace comments from peers at school. A high school girl has been cutting herself with a razor and purging, and reveals to the clinician that a year ago her ex-boyfriend circulated a naked photo of her throughout her school. A young client's mother asks the therapist how to confront racial slurs that the client's classmates are posting on his Facebook page. These case scenarios underscore the ways in which clinicians are increasingly confronted with cyberbullying. The rapid worldwide adoption of the Internet, cell phones, and other new technology in the past two decades has revolutionized business, education, and sharing of ideas, religious or political beliefs, or sexual identity. Young people have become the "Cyber Immersion Generation," as cyber technology becomes central to their daily life (Englander and Muldowney, 2007). The dark side of this useful technology is the rise of cyberbullying. Cyberbullying has been difficult to consistently define, due to constantly changing technology, but involves targeted harm inflicted through the use of text or images sent *via* the Internet, cell phones or other communication devices. It includes embarrassing or threatening text messages or instant messenger (IM) messages, electronic stalking, password theft or masquerading as another young person on social networking sites like MySpace or Facebook, distribution of embarrassing or sexual photographs or video (including sexting – sending sexually explicit photos *via* text message – and posting online footage of fights and assaults), creation of websites or Facebook pages devoted to criticizing one teen or to ranking the fattest or "sluttiest" kid in school, and even death threats delivered online. Teachers and administrators may even find themselves targets.

Popular and youth media have seized on the topic of cyberbullying in TV shows like "Gossip Girl," "90210" and "Degrassi", MTV educational campaigns, news- and talk-show discussions, and movies like *urFRENZ*. While there can inevitably be a sensationalized aspect to this coverage, the concern about cyberbullying is well-founded. Cyberbullying can be intensely shaming and nearly impossible to ignore or escape. The impact of cyberbullying can be seen in the tragic stories of Ryan Patrick Halligan, Megan Meier, Phoebe Prince, Hope Witsell, and Tyler Clemente, young people who died by suicide after experiencing cyberbullying. Though it is impossible to know in retrospect exactly how cyberbullying contributed to these young people's suicides, the connection seems striking, and is reflected in research literature suggesting an increased risk of suicidality after cyberbullying (discussion below). And while many of the details of these tragedies are confidential, those that are public information are nonetheless instructive about how cyberbullying can unfold, for example, with shaming IMs emailed throughout a peer group, Facebook insults, peers who created fake MySpace pages, sharing of private emails, or dissemination of topless photos.

These tragic stories underscore the fact that cyberbullying, often considered the sole purview of school administrators, goes far beyond the schoolyard in its occurrence and consequences. Ever-changing technology – cell phones, smart phones, Facebook, Twitter – may seem foreign and confusing to some parents and teachers, and this lack of understanding and guidance can leave young people particularly vulnerable. Clinicians working with adolescents can play a critical role in educating young people and families about safe use of new technology and the risks involved, and in screening for and detecting signs of victimization. In this paper we review the current research on cyberbullying, including risk factors for cyberbullying, its potential impact on youth, as well as opportunities for screening and prevention.

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THE CONTEXT: TRADITIONAL BULLYING AND RELATIONAL AGGRESSION

Cyberbullying, as suggested by the scenarios described above, is in many ways an extension of older forms of bullying. Traditional bullying is defined as intentional, repetitive abuse or aggression used to reinforce an imbalance of power (Olweus, 1993), and has occurred for generations. Up to 70% of young people experience traditional bullying (Beaty and Alexeyev, 2008), with experiences ranging from physical aggression (hitting, punching, kicking, or destroying the victim's belongings) and threats of violence, to verbal bullying (insults, teasing, name-calling), to what has been called relational aggression, a form of indirect (not face-to-face) bullying which involves social shaming, rumors, and exclusion (Young, Boye and Nelson, 2006; Crick and Nelson, 2002). Physical aggression is more common among boys and younger students, while girls and older youth engage more in relational aggression (Olweus, 1993; Wang *et al.*, 2009; Young, Boye and Nelson, 2006; Crick and Nelson, 2002). Bullying often focuses on appearance or behavior; youth with disabilities, special needs youth, ethnic and sexual minorities are disproportionately targeted (Berlan *et al.*, 2010; Beaty and Alexeyev, 2008; Davis, unpublished data).

Cyberbullying dovetails with physical and verbal bullying and relational aggression in complicated and sometimes surprising ways. Most often, the same youth who are bullies at school act aggressively online, and the same students are victimized in both places (Juvonen and Gross, 2008; Raskauskas and Stoltz, 2007). In some studies, however, youth bullied at school may become aggressors online to retaliate (Ybarra and Mitchell, 2004; Smith *et al.*, 2008), and students who are aggressors at school may be victims online (Raskauskas and Stoltz, 2007). It is also apparent that students not involved in traditional bullying at all can become cyberbullies (Englander, personal communication). Compared to traditional bullying, cyberbullying is easy, anonymous, and requires little by way of planning, skill, physical size or social finesse. It can be extremely hurtful, and teens report it is "easier to be cruel" when they do not see the victim, so they may say things (including racial epithets) that they would never say in person (Englander, personal communication). As young people spend more and more of their time online, cyberbullying may outpace traditional bullying as the most common form of aggression among youth.

INCIDENCE AND RISK FACTORS

Because of the wide variety of ways in which cyberbullying occurs, the speed with which new technologies have been adopted and modified, and its ever-changing nature, cyberbullying is difficult to study. Estimates of its incidence vary greatly, ranging from as low as 5% to as much as 73% of youth reporting having experienced cyberbullying (Slonje & Smith, 2008; Smith *et al.*, 2008; Englander, 2008; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004; Ybarra, Mitchell, Wolak, & Finkelhor, 2006; Finkelhor, Mitchell & Wolak, 2000; Juvonen & Gross, 2008; Dehue, Bolman & Vollink, 2008; Vandebosch & Van Cleemput, 2008; Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2007; Lenhart, 2009). As might

be expected, a major risk factor for being bullied online is spending more time online (Juvonen & Gross, 2008; Lenhart, 2009). Young people spend an average of 53 hours a week on electronic media (including computers, phones, video games, music/audio, and television, often simultaneously; Kaiser Family Foundation, 2010), this suggests pervasive risk. Some evidence suggests that parental support may be protective against online victimization (Wang, Iannotti & Nansel, 2009). The influence of gender on risk of involvement in cyberbullying is complex. Boys may be more likely to be bullies and girls more likely to be victims (Dehue, Bolman & Vollink, 2008; Li, 2005; Wang *et al.*, 2009), though this finding has not been found consistently (Finkelhor *et al.*, 2000; Slonje and Smith, 2008). Further complicating the picture, the lines between bullies and victims are often blurred, with some of the same youth (particularly girls) engaging in cyberbullying behaviors and simultaneously finding themselves victims of hurtful texts, gossip blasts or websites (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004; Ybarra *et al.*, 2006; Englander & Muldowney, 2007; Englander, 2008; Mesch, 2009).

IMPACT OF CYBERBULLYING

Adults are often incredulous that cyberbullying can have serious consequences for young people; they may confuse it with simple "teasing" or suggest that youth should just "turn the darn thing off" (Englander and Muldowney, 2007). But evidence is mounting that cyberbullying can have serious sequelae. In the Youth Internet Safety Survey, young people described feeling upset, embarrassed, or afraid as a result of being bullied on the Internet; cyber-victims experienced twice as many depressive symptoms as youth who were not cyber-bullied, and were at increased risk for using alcohol or cigarettes (Finkelhor *et al.*, 2000; Ybarra *et al.*, 2006; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2001). In a similar study that queried both Internet and cell phone bullying (the latter was not included in the Youth Internet Safety Survey), 93% of cyber-bullied youth reported the harassment made them feel sad or made them afraid to go to school (Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2007). Victims of cyberbullying may also be at increased risk of suicide, even more than victims of traditional bullying (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010). Youth who are bullies online have also been found to have higher levels of mood disturbance and substance use (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004). This may reflect the overlap between cyber-bullies and -victims, or it is possible that youth suffering from depression and substance abuse are more likely to go online and thus more likely to be involved with cyberbullying. In this way cyberbullying may be an independent risk factor for depression and substance abuse, or may be a marker of risk mediated by other factors such as lack of parental supervision or involvement. In either case, involvement in cyberbullying should be a red flag for concern on the part of parents and clinicians.

It is also important to note that different forms of cyberbullying can have differential impact on the victims. When asked about the impact of cyberbullying, young people ranked bullying involving photos or video clips as more harmful than bullying over text messages or email (Slonje & Smith, 2008). The potential anonymity of online bullying and its capacity to reach a vast audience (entire

classrooms, schools, communities and beyond) can make it more difficult to bear than traditional bullying (Englander & Muldowney, 2007; Dehue *et al.*, 2008; Campbell, 2005; Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2007). Furthermore, as cyberbullying can occur at school or at home, victims can feel it is impossible to escape. While young people can access online tools such as blocking emails or IM user names, they frequently do not, possibly due to lack of education on safe Internet use (Willard, 2006). Even with education about such tools, however, youth may not utilize them because they feel they would rather know what others are saying even if it is hurtful (Jovoven & Gross, 2008); this impulse manifests in the popularity of Facebook polls in which youth can ask anonymously how many of their online friends see them as intelligent or stupid, overweight or promiscuous (Englander, personal communication).

SCREENING, PREVENTION, AND DEALING WITH CYBERBULLYING

Young people frequently fail to report experiences of bullying (traditional or cyber), due to shame, fear of reprisal, or concern that adults will intervene in a way that makes the bullying worse (Davis, 2010). When adults lack an understanding of social networking technology and its potential misuses, and fail to ask about it, youth can feel even more alone. Simply asking young people if they have experienced cyberbullying can be a critical step. Fig. (1) lists additional ways to inquire about cyberbullying. Such screening can be conducted as part of regular risk assessments, next to questions about other forms of victimization; as when asking about other forms of abuse, repeated queries about cyberbullying may be necessary before the young person feels comfortable reporting. The

way that questions are asked may be crucial to eliciting information, as shown in one study where almost three times as many young people reported having been victimized when asked about specific types of cyberbullying (over email, text message, phone call, photos or videos) than when asked more generally (Slonje & Smith, 2008). It is unclear if this specificity simply triggers better recall among adolescents or whether specific questioning demonstrates a knowledge of and openness to technology that encourages honest reporting. Should a young person report having been a victim of cyberbullying, the health provider's response should be similar to that for traditional bullying: provide support. That is, assess impact in terms of functioning and symptomatology, and contact parents or school officials, particularly if the young person's safety is a concern. Clinicians should also consider how the young person can utilize online tools, from blocking messages or screen names, to alerting MySpace or Facebook administrators to offensive material through "Contact MySpace/Report Abuse" (MySpace) and "Report/Block" (Facebook) functions.

Clinicians can also offer essential guidance for youth who have not been victims of cyberbullying. This can involve discussion of how the young person comports him or herself online, the risks of sharing too much information, as well as of venting or engaging in conflicts online. A therapist might even review during a therapy session what the young person has posted on social networking sites. Clinicians can also provide anticipatory guidance about the risks of sexting, since as many as one in 25 online youth have been asked to send sexual pictures of themselves (Mitchell, Finkelhor & Wolak, 2007). Should youth report that they are themselves cyberbullies, clinicians should encourage youth to consider

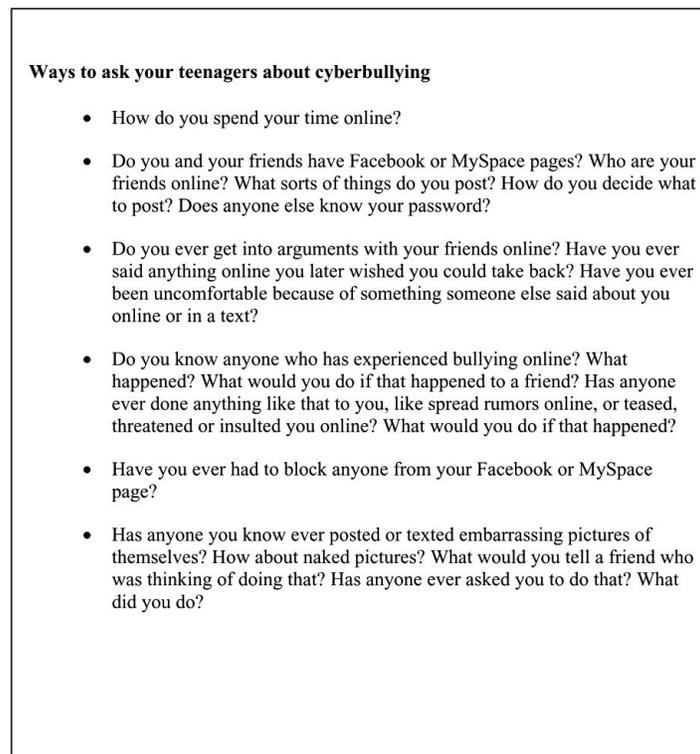


Fig. (1). Ways to ask your patients about cyberbullying.

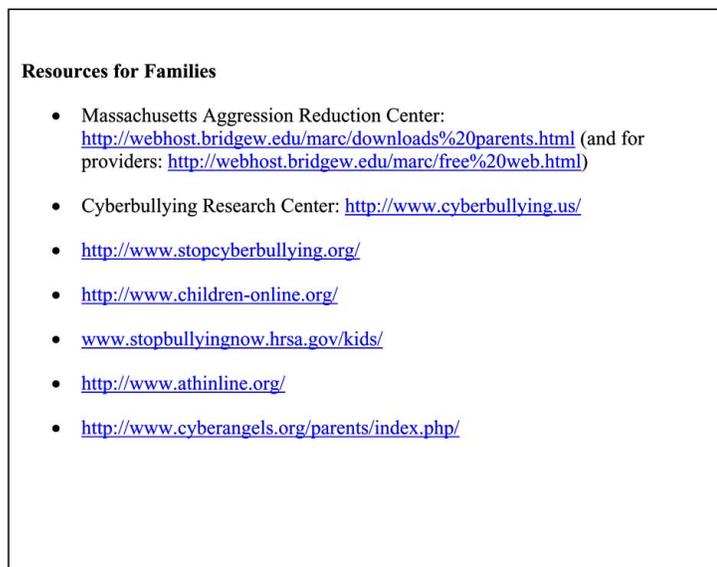


Fig. (2). Resources for families.

the impact of their behavior, and remember potential academic or legal consequences of bullying (see below). Youth often engage in cyberbullying “as a joke” or when angry at a friend (Englander and Muldowney, 2008), and underestimate the negative consequences it can have.

Clinicians working with adolescents can also play a critical role in educating parents about cyberbullying. Much of cyberbullying occurs at home (often when the young person is using the computer under the guise of “doing homework”), and most parents whose children are being victimized or bullying others online are not aware it is happening (Dehue *et al.*, 2008). Young people may not tell their parents about involvement in cyberbullying because they fear parents will restrict their Internet or phone use (Smith *et al.*, 2008; Jovoven & Gross, 2008). Clinicians can educate parents about online safety, invite parents to ask how their children are using cell phones and the Internet (e.g., emailing, texting, gaming, or chat rooms) and to discuss ways to maintain safety and privacy without cutting off use altogether. Parents should be encouraged to monitor their child’s phone and Internet use and educated about use of blocking and monitoring software, which appear to be more effective in preventing cyberbullying than simply monitoring or restricting time of Internet use (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004; Mesch, 2009). If their child is already being bullied online, parents can encourage their child to use Facebook or MySpace blocking tools (as described above) and can contact web content service providers and cell phone companies for information or intervention, though unfortunately these companies are often slow to respond. Numerous online resources provide guidance in using online tools and in talking with and monitoring teens. Some helpful resources are shown in Fig. (2).

Parents should also be encouraged to talk to their children about being a cyberbully, and to set predictable, enforced consequences for inappropriate behavior online. Young people often believe that adults are unaware of cyberbullying and that it is thus without consequences. In

reality, however, online bullying may be easier to track than traditional bullying, as blogs and websites (and even some cell phone companies and IM platforms such as Gchat) can provide a permanent record of text and images. Colleges and employers are increasingly searching networking sites and may refuse or revoke acceptance or job offers because of students’ online behavior (though young people have worked around this by posting under pseudonyms). Serious legal consequences can also result from cyberbullying. Several young people have faced charges of child pornography after distributing “sexts” or naked photos of themselves or others, and three teens in Massachusetts were charged with identity theft for creating a Facebook page in another teen’s name (Abel, 2010). The U.S. Congress considered, but did not pass, the Megan Meier Cyberbullying Prevention Act (2009), which would have mandated fines or even up to two years jail time for youth convicted of cyberbullying.

Schools play a crucial role in prevention of and response to cyberbullying, though their capacity to intervene is limited as most cyberbullying occurs outside of school. Most youth being bullied online are also bullied at school, so some techniques used to address traditional bullying may also reduce cyberbullying. Such techniques are often complicated and multimodal, but often the first step is the school’s culture. An environment of warmth, where young people feel cared for and respected by accessible adults, is critical (Davis, 2008). Young people should be encouraged to notify teachers and administrators if they are experiencing cyberbullying, and teachers should be consistently responsive, supportive, and willing to intervene fairly. Schools should coordinate closely with parents to ensure no parent or child is told “there’s nothing we can do.” Schools should provide clear expectations for what is acceptable online, and peer monitoring may be effective as in the Teen Angels, a program that trains youth to teach their peers, parents and teaches about safe online behavior (www.teenangels.org). Schools should also provide explicit and consistent consequences for bullying behavior; these

should involve reflection on what the student did that was wrong, why it was wrong, what impact it had, and why they did it (Davis, 2008). This can be more effective than suspension, which for many youth can feel like a reward (Englander, personal communication). Since schools' influence and jurisdiction around cyberbullying that occurs outside of school can be quite limited, close coordination with parents and community groups (including law enforcement) is crucial.

CONCLUSION

Cyberbullying is a significant and growing problem for youth, with potentially severe consequences. With constantly changing technology, our understanding of who is at risk and how to prevent it remains limited. Significant further research is necessary to examine risk factors for cyberbullying, determine ideal screening tools and evaluate prevention programs. This research is urgently needed to inform legal proceedings and lawmaking; such research should use a broad definition of cyberbullying, as studies indicate that even one incident can lead to distress and psychological symptoms. It should also involve multimodal assessments including child, parent and teacher reports to reduce potential bias. Finally, more effort and support is needed to encourage clinicians and schools, who may lack time and training, to query and counsel youth about cyberbullying and work towards prevention.

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