Cyberbullying among Students*

Cyberbullying is a complex and multi-determined phenomenon. As such, addressing the problem requires a comprehensive, multifaceted, and integrated approach. Such an approach combines the efforts of social media providers, families, schools, and community networks. For schools, the foundation for addressing cyberbullying and a myriad of other problems involves enhancing practices that promote a caring, socially supportive and mutually respectful climate, as well as assisting specific students and families.

Cyberbullying is among the many unintended consequences of the technological and social media revolution. With text, images, and videos, cyberbullying is taking place on all the major social media outlets (e.g., Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Tumblr, Instagram, SnapChat, and regular email). Those targeted are subjected to hurtful and harassing messages.

As with physical bullying, cyberbullying can significantly affect youngsters' mental and physical health and can become a barrier to school functioning. Researchers report a litany of problems (see the accompanying list of references). Among the many *correlational* findings are suggestions that cyberbullied students have higher levels of anxiety, lowered concentration, missed schooling, poorer grades, lowered self-esteem, emotional distress, depression, substance use, and suicidal behavior. Surveys also suggest that cyberbullied students are more likely to be physically bullied at school, and some also cyberbully others.

What is Cyberbullying?

Cyberbullying has been defined as "any behavior performed through electronic or digital media by individuals or groups that repeatedly communicates hostile or aggressive messages intended to inflict harm or discomfort on others" (Tokunaga, 2010). From this perspective, the following have been categorized as forms of cyberbullying (Cantone, Piras, Vellante, et al., 2015):

- Flaming (online fights with angry and vulgar language via electronic messages)
- Harassment (sending mean and insulting messages repeatedly)
- Cyberstalking (repeated, intense harassment and denigration, which includes threats or creates fear)
- Denigration (spreading rumors, spending or posting gossip about a person online, in order to damage his/her reputation or friendships)
- Impersonation (pretending to be someone else, then sending and posting material to get the victim in trouble or danger, or damage his/her reputation or friendships)
- Outing (sharing someone's secrets or embarrassing information or contents)
- Trickery (tricking someone's secrets or embarrassing information, then sharing it online)
- Exclusion (intentionally and cruelly excluding someone from an online group)

The Cyberbullying Research Center notes that the phenomenon is also known as "electronic bullying," "e-bullying," "sms bullying," "mobile bullying," "online bullying," "digital bullying," or "Internet bullying." That Center defines Cyberbulllying as "willful and repeated harm inflicted through the use of computers, cell phones, and other electronic devices."

While bullying and cyberbullying share common features, they also differ. Bullying definitions usually stress "power" differentials between those bullied and those victimized, as well as proactive targeting and ongoing aggression. Differentials such as size and popularity and proactive targeting do not necessarily apply online. Cyberbullying also allows for reaching a large audience and attacking anonymously, which reduces the likelihood of repercussions and the type of direct feedback that enhances awareness of impact. Finally, online any individual may at times be the perpetrator, the victim, or part of the audience.

Considerable speculation appears throughout the literature about the motivation for cyberbullying, but conceptual and empirical efforts to clarify the psychological processes underlying such behavior are just emerging. As formulated by Runions (2013), processes implicated include hostile schema activation, anger and fatigue effects on self-control, anger rumination, empathic failure, excitation transfer, and thrill-seeking. Research currently is exploring how these are activated by particular features of online social platforms.

How Big is the Problem Among Children and Adolescents?

Cyberbullying is growing among elementary students and is associated with their increased access to Smart-phones. The problem rises dramatically after elementary school and is most prevalent in middle schools. Data from 2009-10 comparing primary, middle, and high schoolers indicate 1.5% of primary school students reported being cyberbullied, middle schoolers reported 18.6%, high schoolers reported 17.6%. Increases are associated with enhanced use of electronic devices; 89% of 13 to 14 years olds used Internet on a mobile device (Lenhart, Duggan, Perrin, et al., 2015).

Most of the data on the problem comes from students 12 to 18 years of age. In 2011, over 70% in this age range reported being cyberbullied at least once or twice in the school year (Robers, Kemp, Rathbun, et al., 2014). Using the Internet for more than 3 hours a day is associated with increased likelihood of being cyberbullied (Juvonen & Gross, 2008). Nearly 20% of students surveyed state that they experienced cyberbullying once or twice every month. A relatively small proportion of those victimized are willing to report the event to an adult at school. According to Juvonen and Gross (2008), the main reason for not reporting is because teens think they need to learn to deal with it themselves. They also are concerned with parent reactions, especially fear that Internet access will be restricted.

Female students are victimized (i.e., harassed, denigrated, excluded) more than males (11.2% vs. 6.9%). However, the frequency is higher for males (e.g., ranging from once or twice a week to once or twice a month). Females commonly report being made fun of, called names, insulted; made the subject of rumors; and excluded from activities. They indicate greater willingness (32% vs. 16%) to report to an adult (Robers et al., 2014).

Not surprisingly, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students (LGBT) students are frequent targets. Compared to other teenagers, LGBT youth report experiencing more cyberbullying online (42% vs. 15%) or through text messages (27% vs. 13%).

Prevention and Corrective Intervention

The impact of cyberbullying on students not only can affect school performance, it can be a life shaping for those victimized, perpetrators, and "witnesses". As noted at the outset, the complexity of the problem requires comprehensive, multifaceted, and integrated approaches to address it. This includes the combined efforts of social media providers and other internet sites, families, schools, and community networks. Schools must move from just reacting to specific incidents to focusing on how to embed the matter into the curriculum and as part of a unified system to address barriers to learning and teaching.

What are Social Media Providers Doing to Counter Cyberbullying?

In addressing the problem, social networking sites are creating cyberbullying online reporting systems. For example, Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook have set up cyberbullying informational pages, providing instructions for reporting a violation. See:

>Twitter - https://support.twitter.com/articles/15794-online-abuse
>Facebook - https://www.facebook.com/help/420576171311103/
>Instagram - https://help.instagram.com/527320407282978/

Google Voice provides a no cost reporting system involving a simple text report of an incident. (http://cyberbullying.us/setting-up-a-free-bullying-and-cyberbullying-reporting-system-with-google-voice/).

General Internet Information Resources

An ever expanding set of sites focuses on countering cyberbullying and keeping youngsters safe online. They provide information about cyberbullying and other dangers, promote *digital citizenship* (i.e., responsible and appropriate use of online media), stress privacy, and discuss monitoring what youngsters see and do online and how to deal with incidents when they occur.

For example, see the cyberbullying resources the Educational Development Center (EDC) has put online. Besides addressing the above matters, the site provides six interactive scenarios illustrating different situations involving real-life conversations between parents and youth as they choose what to do. One scenario covers a student-led marketing campaign against cyberbullying (at http://preventingbullying.promoteprevent.org/cyberbullying).

Some sites are totally devoted to the topic. One such site created by the Cyberbullying Research Center contains resources for educators, parents, and teens, highlights research, offers presentations, and more (http://cyberbullying.us/).

A few other Internet examples are:

>Stopbullying.gov -- http://www.stopbullying.gov/cyberbullying/what-is-it/index.html
>Delete Cyberbullying -- http://www.deletecyberbullying.org/
>National Bullying Prevention Center -- http://www.pacer.org/bullying/
>wikiHow's How to Stop Cyber Bullying -- http://www.wikihow.com/Stop-Cyber-Bullying

School Efforts to Counter the Problem

Because cyberbullying has become a hot political topic, there is a risk that efforts by schools to address the problem will be just one more project-of-the-year. If project thinking prevails, another golden opportunity to improve student support systems will be lost.

As part of the districts' development of a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports, the focus on cyberbullying focuses first on policy, then on creating what often is referred to as an early warning process. Such a process is not meant to just "warn."

It is about early identification and rapid response to a problem. The idea is to provide ways to invite confidential reporting of problems and then intervene quickly. Note that the focus is on all problems that concern schools and students, not just cyberbullying.

There is a downside to early identification that must be acknowledged (e.g., such screening often is difficult, can produce false positives, and sometimes is inappropriately motivated; students and staff often are reluctant reporters; students who are identified may be stigmatized). Schools must address the potential costs to those identified as cyberbullies and victims, not the least of which is stereotyping. Stigmatizing stereotypes are damaging, especially when they are invalid. For example, without evidence from appropriate assessments, it is commonplace for bullies to be labeled as power seekers and as having low self-esteem; those victimized often are described as having victim personalities and mental health problems.

To improve student reporting, researchers at the Cyberbullying Research Center stress use of an anonymous reporting system. They found, however, that physical "Bully Report" drop boxes were ineffective. To enhance student comfort in reporting, they now suggest a simple online form on the school website. As an alternative, they suggest schools set up no cost reporting through Google Voice. (http://cyberbullying.us/setting-up-a-free-bullying-and-cyberbullying-reporting-system-with-google-voice/). This system allows students simply to text report an incident. Schools where the system is in place indicate the majority of the reports have been legitimate and the real-time reporting enables them to act rapidly.

With the above in place, greater attention can be directed at prevention. Preventing cyberbullying calls for more than school policies and providing didactic information to students and families. It requires a consistent focus on promoting student social emotional development, developing a unified student/learning support system, and promoting a positive school climate. Schools will find relevant resources on the following sites:

>Cyberbullying Research Center -- http://cyberbullying.us/
>Education.com -- http://www.education.com/topic/school-bullying-teasing/
>CASEL -- http://www.casel.org/
>Center for Mental Health in Schools -- http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/
>About policies and laws -- http://www.stopbullying.gov/laws/index.html

At Home

Those in the home who can play a role in addressing cyberbullying include parents and other child caretakers and siblings. Note that while the emphasis usually is on parents, available resources can be adapted to include influential others in the home in preventing and responding to cyberbullying and other Internet dangers. For example, it is important to mobilize siblings as positive influences (e.g., they can add their voices of caution and help guide and montor use of social media; they can provide support for those victimized).

A cautionary note: No one should underestimate the damage cyberbullying can make on a youngster. At the same time, parents are advised against over-protectiveness in the form of restricting use and intrusive monitoring (e.g., see the documentary "Growing Up Online" and the related discussion online at http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/kidsonline/). Rather, what is commonly suggested is a family conversation about Internet and social media use that emphasizes digital safety, privacy, and personal and social responsibility.

>Guidelines for parents concerned with preventing cyberbullying are plentiful online. See for example: *Parenting Suggestions Regarding Technology -* http://www.ryanpatrickhalligan.org/documents/TipsforParentsRev13.pdf

>More generally, see resources on the Cyberbullying Research Center site -- http://cyberbullying.us/

The Community of Witnesses and Community Agencies and Organizations

In addition to the efforts described above, witnesses and community agencies and organizations can play a role in addressing cyberbullying. Particularly important are audience members who are peers of those committing the acts.

Cyberbullies generally want an audience. That audience often is referred to as "witnesses" or "bystanders." The audience represents a loose knit community whose actions can either exacerbate or alleviate cyberbullying and its impact. From an intervention perspective, the problem is how to convince those in the audience to avoid colluding with cyberbullying (e.g., not passing things on), support and defend the victims, and take an active stand in denouncing cyberbullying. One focus has been on mobilizing teens to devote themselves to addressing the problem – see

>Teens Against Cyberbullying -- http://www.pacerteensagainstbullying.org/tab/
>Teenangels -- http://teenangels.org/internet_safety/cyberbullying.html
>Peer campaign -- http://preventingbullying.promoteprevent.org/cyberbullying

Any number of community organizations can sponsor teen groups dedicated to countering bullying and cyberbullying and can host events (e.g., a "Wired Kids Summit"). Links to examples can be accessed at http://stopcyberbullying.org/educators/communityprograms.html.

More generally, community agencies and organizations have established anti-bullying task forces, developed community-wide campaigns, and collaborated with school programs. Many are in a position through their relationships with businesses and corporations, schools, health and social service agencies, and so forth to leverage and influence action by social media providers. The federal website for *stopbullying.gov* has a section discussing community-wide strategies at http://www.stopbullying.gov/prevention/in-the-community/index.html.

Concluding Comments

Cyberbullying represents one more problem that can be a barrier to learning and teaching. Clearly, the school can play a role in countering the problem. However, as we always caution, it is essential not to do so as yet one more discrete intervention.

Schools need to address all problems experienced by students as part of the ongoing challenge of transforming current student and learning supports into a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system that enables each school in a district to address barriers to learning and teaching effectively (Adelman & Taylor, 2015). Such a transformation is a fundamental facet of the school improvement goal to ensure all students have an equal opportunity to succeed at school and beyond.

For more links to matters related to bullying and cyberbullying, see the following Center's Quick Finds and documents:
>*Bullying* – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/bully.htm
>*Social networks and social emotional development* – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/socialnetworks.html
>*Youth and Socially Interactive Technologies* – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/youth/socint.pdf
>*Social networking and peer relationships* -- http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/socialnet.pdf

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