Cyberbullying: From Playground to Computer

By Tara Anderson and Brian Sturm

While bullying may affect anyone in any situation, childhood and school are the prevailing age and context for bullying, as children interact with peers and struggle to assert their identity and understand appropriate social behavior. Schoolyard bullying has received considerable attention in psychological journals and child behavior manuals, which suggest that bigger children (typically boys) resort to physical violence and threats against younger or smaller children at school. Society is moving away from the attitude that bullying is just a part of growing up, to understanding the deep, emotional damage it can cause. The recent rash of violence in schools has highlighted just how angry and helpless children can feel. Many schools have begun awareness programs promoting anti-violence and an end to bullying.

The definition of bullying is slowly expanding. In the past three or four years, nonphysical aggression has been highlighted in the world of female bullying. Girls will often use rumors, social exclusion, and other forms of quiet aggression to attack other girls. This form of bullying falls beneath the typical teacher’s and parent’s radar, and can continue for years without intervention. It is this quiet, psychological aggression that has migrated to the digital world to become “cyberbullying,” as bullies of all ages and genders have taken advantage of the anonymity and accessibility of digital technology to harass their victims.

What is Cyberbullying?
According to Bill Belsey,

Cyberbullying involves the use of information and communication technologies such as e-mail, cell phone and pager text messages, instant messaging, defamatory personal Web sites, and defamatory online personal polling Web sites, to support deliberate, repeated, and hostile behavior by an individual or group that is intended to harm others.

Cyberbullying is the newest form of bullying, emerging as children become more adept at using computers and cell phones for communication and socialization, but the topics of abuse are the same in cyberspace as in face-to-face communication. Bullies can harass victims about their appearance, sexual promiscuity, poverty, grades, diseases, or disabilities. Bullying can also be based on “others’ perceptions of a student’s value based on gender, race/ethnicity, color, religion, ancestry, sexual orientation or ability level (mental/physical/sensory).”

There are several types of cyberbullying, depending on the available technology. Instant messaging (IM) services such as AOL Instant Messenger (AIM) or Yahoo! Messenger allow children to have private conversations with friends, or “buddies,” in real time. These services combine the instant communication style of the chat room with the personal style of e-mail, creating an arena where youth can establish social networks. This type of communication has provided fertile ground for the

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bully to send mean or obscene messages to others. Children may be bullied by a friend on their buddy list or by peers with anonymous screen names. Added features, such as buddy profiles, allow buddies to insert derogatory or slanderous remarks about peers for anyone to read, and buddies can also create false personal profiles of their targets that insult or ridicule them. Children can also block other children from—or refuse to add them to—a buddy list, creating an effect called relational aggression, in which children engage in “the hurtful manipulation of peer relationships/ friendships that inflicts harm on others through behaviours such as social exclusion” and “malicious rumour spreading.”

Similar to the harassment done through instant messenger services, bullying can also occur through text messaging. Cell phones are one of the newer tools put into the hands of children, and they provide an extremely mobile method for bullying other children. All the bully needs is the target's phone number, and a message or threat can be sent anywhere, anytime. E-mail bullying works in a similar fashion, and while the originating account can be traced, it is often impossible to prove who actually wrote the message. Mobile phones and e-mail can be used by the bully to transmit unflattering photos, such as pictures of the victim dressing in the locker room, wearing the wrong outfit, or eating a large lunch. Digital technology facilitates capturing unprotected moments that can be used as weapons in the wrong hands.

Web sites and message boards are another avenue for cyberbullying. A bully can very easily create a free Web site or message board devoted to the ridicule of another child. This form of cyberbullying creates the feeling of group bullying, where multiple students post hateful thoughts on a message board or the Web site is written as a club that is against the victim. Lists can be posted on Web sites and message boards of reasons the victim is inferior to others in some way, as well as pictures—often digitally altered—that support the prejudice. The link to the Web site or message board is then sent anonymously to other children as well as to the victim with a message that will convince them all to visit the site.

Blogs are online journals where a reader can comment on other users’ entries. A bully can use a blog to write derogatory thoughts about a victim (a “dashboard”), similar to the thoughts posted on a bullying Web site. If the victim has a blog, a bully could either read the entries as an anonymous guest and post mean comments about the victim's personal thoughts, or take the victim’s blog comments out of context, quoting the victim’s personal thoughts in the bully's own blog, Web site, or message board.

Who Is Involved?

Older children are the largest group using computers and experiencing cyberbullying. Younger kids may not be able to use services like e-mail and IM programs without their parents’ help, but young adults are often left alone at the computer. Privacy is a huge concern for teens, and parents often try to respect this privacy when it comes to e-mail and instant messaging. Young adults have a strong desire for social acceptance as they shift their dependence from family to peers, so they may be unable to resist responding to mean or threatening messages, and they may give into the temptation of looking at a bullying Web site link they’ve received. As teens increasingly rely on computers and cell phones for their social networking, they become more susceptible to cyberbullying.

Cyberbullying can happen to anyone. Both the bully and the victim can be very quiet and subtle about the abuse, and most adults in the children’s lives may not know that anything untoward is happening. In fact, a bully may be devious enough to convince adults that he or she is the victim, getting the actual victim in trouble. It is a myth that victims of bullying are weak or wimpy; in fact, people who are targeted by bullies are sensitive, respectful, honest, creative, have high emotional intelligence, a strong sense of fair play and high integrity with a low propensity to violence.” These qualities are exactly what makes it easy for a bully to hurt a target. Victims will respond to bullying with dialogue and a sense of fairness, which the bully then exploits.

Bullies see their victims as weaker than they are and will use any vulnerability against them. Bullies may have low self-esteem and act aggressively to overcompensate for their weaknesses, but often bullies are the socially dominant children who ensure their power by degrading others. They have bullied before and have gotten away with it, so they continue to do it. This is especially true of cyberbullying, where anonymity allows the bully protection from being caught.

Is Cyberbullying Worse than Face-to-Face Bullying?

Skeptics of cyberbullying say that victims are not hurt physically, so it is not as harmful as face-to-face bullying. These skeptics, however, overlook the psychological damage caused through online and mobile phone bullying. Recent
scrutiny of psychologically damaging bullying among girls suggests that such aggression is just as damaging as physical aggression. Victims may experience stress, tension, low self-esteem, and depression. 

Cyberbullying, like bullying in general, can also have extreme repercussions such as suicide and physical violence. Marr and Field refer to suicide brought on by bullying as "brylucide," and report that sixteen children commit suicide each year in the United Kingdom alone. People published a 2005 article on the effects of cyberbullying, telling the story of thirteen-year-old Alex from Virginia. Alex spent a lot of time on his computer, and a group of girls used an instant message service to tease him about his size and his physical ability. In June 2004, Alex committed suicide by shooting himself with his grandfather's gun. The suicide was linked to cyberbullying when Alex's suicide note was found on his computer. The computer was emptied of all files except a note stating, "The only way to get the respect you deserve is to die." 

Cyberbullying has the added effect of reaching victims in their own homes. Before computers, children could generally feel safe from other bullies in their own bedrooms, but now a bully can enter that sanctuary. While children can temporarily get rid of cyberbullies by changing screen names, going offline, or turning off the computer, it is unreasonable to ask victims never to use a computer again. Teens especially may feel alienated from their peers if they must refrain from IM, e-mail, and text messaging due to a fear of bullying. In the case of mobile phones, children need to keep them turned on in case a parent or guardian calls, so being victimized by phone bullying is a constant threat. Cyberbullying is much harder to escape or avoid than face-to-face bullying. 

The anonymity of cyberbullying is also damaging because kids don't know if the bully is a best friend or a complete stranger, or if there is more than one bully involved; they are left confused and distrustful of everyone, even the innocent. The faceless threat is often more frightening than the identified one. 

Victims often avoid telling adults about the abuse because they fear that nothing can be done to help. In the case of cyberbullying, schools have often been helpless due to the nature of the offense; schools feel they cannot take action on something that is occurring outside of school hours or off school property. Victims may feel as though adults will tell them to ignore the bullying or to stand up to the bully. Parents and school officials are often ineffective against cyberbullying, since children know more about new technologies than many adults. 

Bullying has spread to the computer because it provides a greater advantage for the bully. The bully can remain anonymous, inflict greater psychological harm, harass a victim at home, and rest easy knowing that most authority figures will be unable to trace or stop the harassment. A victim, on the other hand, feels more vulnerable and alone and experiences emotional damage that lasts longer than a black eye. 

What Can Be Done? 

One easy answer when it comes to any form of bullying is to tell victims just to ignore it. While this is easy to do by simply turning off the computer or phone, doing so deprives victims of their digital social network. Teens should continue to use these technologies but should not respond to the bully's advances, and they should take the time to document all communication made by the bully. Documenting can be used later when discussing the bullying with school officials or with the local police if the situation gets out of hand. If a cyberbully commits a serious offense, parents can try reporting the abuse to their Internet Service Provider (ISP). The ISP can take action against the bully if the actions are malicious and in violation of their privacy or Internet use policies. 

Before taking the situation to civil authorities, parents and children can block users or e-mail addresses attached to hurtful messages (AIM even offers the ability to block messages from users not on the child's personal buddy list). Children can change their screen names or e-mail addresses, controlling who receives their new contact information. Parents can also contact a mobile phone company to block certain numbers or turn off text messaging services. Higher quality message boards often have moderators who will take action against bullying. Contact information for the moderator is usually available.

As awareness of cyberbullying and its effects on children grows, more information is becoming available on the topic. Educating teens about cyberbullying can help victims realize that the aggression is not their fault. Future cyberbullying can be minimized if they learn how to recognize the attacks, how to deal with them, and how to stop the bully from contacting them in the future. As parents and teachers learn about the dangers of cyberbullying, they can reduce future problems by monitoring children's online behavior, helping them set up their online accounts, asking them about their online friends, and watching for sudden changes in their children's attitudes toward the Internet. Bullies need to be held accountable for their behavior whenever possible, and victims need to have the support of caring adults. Schools may need to extend their disciplinary purview beyond school walls to match the information services they provide, although this is currently a legal nightmare. Finally, ISPs need to continue to improve their methods of handling misuse of their services. 

If parents, caregivers, and technology experts work together, they can help children cope with this potentially devastating
form of abuse. Concurrently, we must also try to protect our children’s privacy, their freedom of expression, and their right to access these new communication and information technologies. It is a difficult balancing act, but as information professionals who work with children, it is our responsibility to accept this challenge, and to mentor children in socially beneficial ways. YALS

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