The Dangerous World of Cyberbullying: What Can We Do About It?

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Abstract

Cyberbullying is one of America's largest issues today, although it is often overlooked. The effects that cyberbullying has on today's youth can be more harmful, in many ways, than the effects of physical bullying. Because of the spread and growth of technology, it is easier for today's youth to hide behind the mask of a computer screen and harm others. Cyberbullying has led to countless suicides, depression, and other disorders throughout the past ten years. The cruel words can stay with victims longer because they are able to read them over and over again, and the bullying is becoming harder to escape. Today, verbal bullying does not end when students walk away from each other after school; it continues into the home, via computers, cell phones, or other electronic devices. A study done at Pembroke Academy is also explained, where 72 students were anonymously surveyed about cyberbullying. Furthermore, an interview with Nicole Moore, a guidance counselor in Virginia, helps to bring cyberbullying into the light regarding the younger student population. In this paper, solutions to cyberbullying are identified and explained. Solutions begin right from the home, and continue onto school grounds. It is more important than ever before that parents and educators be involved in their child's life, because they may just save their child's life.

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"Bullying is a normal part of childhood."

"Fighting people will only make you tougher."

These are some typical responses to bullying that one may have heard in the past when bullying was not seen as a serious issue. Physical bullying is something that has existed for many years, but over time we have come up with strategies to stop it. However, a new type of bullying, done through technology, has emerged over the past decade: cyberbullying. Technology is our schools, in our homes, and usually in our hands walking down the street. Everywhere we turn, cell phones, computers, and social media is in our faces. Technology is not something we can very simply walk away from or forget about. Because of technology, people are no longer talking face-to-face; they are hiding behind a screen. Behind this digital mask, it is easy to say whatever we feel like saying. It is easy to blurt out cruel words to others without feeling bad about it. It is easier to *bully* others. As a result, cyberbullying is becoming something that students cannot escape. In 2008, 94% of teenagers in the United States were using the Internet, and this number has continued to grow (Bendel, Sydney 2009). Unlike physical bullying, cruel words can stay with the victim for a lot longer and cause them to act very drastically, sometimes to the point of taking their own life. Teens can be relentless in their pursuit of cyberbullying, and do not truly realize how badly they are hurting the victim before it is too late. In addition, since cyberbullying can be done anonymously, it is becoming increasingly difficult to pinpoint who is doing it. However, putting an end to cyberbullying is not impossible. Today's parents and educators are needed more than ever to help end the malicious cycle of cyber-crime. With the right prevention, education and support in place, cyber-bullying can begin to be eliminated from today's society.

Up until around the year 2000, bullying itself was not being recognized as a serious issue in most of America's schools. It was the incident at Columbine High School that changed this, and bullying was finally being taken seriously (Bendel, Sydney 2009). Anti-bullying programs began to emerge following the shootings, and for the first time it seemed as though bullying was being brought to an end. However, nobody anticipated that a more digital generation of students was about to emerge, and along with it would come an entirely new and more vicious kind of bullying. By 2007, teens' access to the Internet increased to 77 million. Then, by 2008, 94% of teens were using the Internet (Bendel, Sydney 2009). The term cyberbullying is defined as "the act of sending or posting harmful or cruel text or images using the internet or other communication devices." (Bendel, Syndey 2009). This can be done through email, text messaging, social media, blogs, and many other formats. Although Internet chat sites such as AOL are not as common anymore, cyberbullying does occur there as well. Anonymous questioning websites, such as Formspring, have also been a popular site for cyber-crime. To see how these questioning websites have affected students in the past, I interviewed a student who has experienced this type of bullying. Karleigh Wickens, a sophomore at Keene State College in New Hampshire, says, "I had been cyberbullied back in high school on Formspring. To make it stop, I just deleted my account so that I would stop getting those anonymous messages." She adds that this type of anonymous bullying affects students more, because it is harder to stop. "With traditional bullying, you know exactly who it is and it is easier to get help," she says (Wickens 2013).

Cyberbullying can come in many forms: harassment, impersonation, trickery, exclusion, or even cyber-stalking. While the victim may not know the bully personally, the bully can also be the victim's acquaintance, or perhaps even someone they consider a "close friend" (Bendel,

Sydney 2009). Cyberbullies can come off as perfectly sweet human beings in real life, so it is

sometimes a shock to learn who is behind the screen (Campbell 2005). It is important to consider

that cyberbullying may be, in many ways, worse than physical bullying. Children and teens are

now able to hide behind a profile or a fake identity, making it easier than ever to get away with

bullying. In addition, victims are no longer able to simply "walk away" from the situation, and

they can read the hurtful words over and over again (Campbell 2005). These words stick with the

victim longer, and cause deeper pain. Children can be cyberbullied based off of racial biases,

religion, body appearance, or other factors. It can also serve as an outlet to them when

experiencing a breakup or other difficult life situation. When this happens, the bully experiences

what is called "disinhibition", which means they are more willing to say things online than they

would say face-to-face (Bendel, Sydney 2009).

   This "social terror through technology" (Kowalski 2012) can be an extension of bullying

on school grounds as well. A child may initially be bullied at school, but this bullying then

carries over to the home environment, where it can be more difficult to control or stop.

Furthermore, teenagers are developing their own secret languages on the Internet, ones that

parents and educators are finding increasingly difficult to decipher. This secret language includes

acronyms, abbreviations, and other code words that teens can effortlessly use to hurt each other,

without adults paying much notice (Bendel, Sydney 2009). Although it is easy to sympathize

with the victims of cyber-bullying, it is crucial to understand the bully's point of view as well,

and what caused them to rely on the internet as an instrument for hurting others.

   When most people think of a bully, they may think of a large, muscular, loud figure who

does poorly in school and has a rough home life. While this may be true, today's cyberbully can

be *any* typical young person, not necessarily one with behavior problems (Cassidy 2013). They

are just as likely to be a straight-A student as they are to be a failing student, and are just as likely to be male as they are to be female (Cassidy 2013). Usually though, a cyberbully is someone who has daily access to the internet (Feinberg 2008). This makes it very easy to consistently terrorize the victim, especially if the parent is not monitoring the bully's internet use. Even though some bullies may be high academic achievers, there are others who may be completely the opposite. These bullies have less of a commitment to school, lack positive peer groups, and exhibit aggressive, rule-breaking behaviors (Cassidy 2013). When cyberbullies choose who they want to bully, they may feel justified in choosing someone who is weaker than them, because this person is defenseless. In these situations, the bullies typically are girls (Cassidy 2013). Other characteristics of a cyberbully may be those with higher rates of stress, depression, and anxiety.

Ultimately, what parents and educators need to ask is: Why do cyberbullies choose to bully? Unfortunately, these individuals do not know how to effectively deal with their negative thoughts, so they lash out at others. Some see themselves as "protecting a friend", and they know they have power through anonymity (Feinberg 2008). A common response from a bully might be, "I didn't think my behavior would affect the victim," (Cassidy 2013). A victim who is cyberbullied will not walk away with cuts or bruises, but rather with emotional scarring that may even cause them to take their own life. The bully, however, does not realize this before it is too late. While most people assume that a bully would feel happy and pleased with their behavior, some cyberbullies actually do feel guilty and regretful. Parents and educators must realize that it is just as important to intervene in the bully's life as it is to worry about the victim. It is easy to simply hand out punishments and not look further into *why* the bully is lashing out online, but just punishing them will not truly solve the problem.

Even though it is important to examine the bully themselves, considering the impact on the victim is equally significant. It is heartbreaking to imagine a child enduring hours of being teased in the lunch room, on the playground, and in the classroom. For some children, this is a reality, and when they come home, this reality continues on their computers. Eventually, the child may begin to avoid school, or bring home bad grades (Bendel, Sydney 2009). Some victims seem to be more susceptible than others, making them an easier target for a bully. Teens with good social skills, healthy peer relationships, and family support are more likely to make better decisions online, and as a result can usually cope better with being bullied (Feinberg 2008). Ultimately, they can either ignore the behavior or find a healthy solution. For those teens with poor social skills, however, bullying can be the one thing that means the difference between life and death for them. Victims should receive constant support through counseling and constant monitoring, and should be encouraged not to delete anything until an adult has read over it and documented it (Feinberg 2008). Sadly, most of the time, the victim is reluctant to report the cyberbullying for a few different reasons.

Since the victim usually does not know who is doing the bullying, they fear that their parents or teachers will not take it seriously, or that nothing can be done. Other fears they have are that they will be blamed for their *own* bad behavior online, or that they will be labeled as a "snitch", which could cause further problems (Cassidy 2013). If a victim does decide to take action, there are three main approaches that they can take, some being more effective than others. The first type of strategy they could use are called "passive strategies", which include doing nothing, ignoring the bully, or avoiding the website (Cassidy 2013). These strategies are the least effective, because they can often result in the student being socially excluded even more. Holly Schoeller, a freshman at Pembroke Academy, does not see this method as being very effective.

"Sure, you could just block people and defriend them," she says, "But I really don't think that solves the problem. It just covers it up, and blocks it out." (Schoeller 2013).

A second strategy that the victim could use is an "active strategy", such as actually confronting the bully or threatening to report them. In many cases, this can make the problem worse and only cause more anger between the two people involved. Technological solutions prove to be the most effective option, because they take action in a non-violent way to stop the bullying. This can include blocking the sender, changing your phone number, keeping a record of the bullying, or reporting the bullying to the website you are on (Cassidy 2013). Another strategy that victims can take advantage of is simply writing down their emotions (Feinberg 2008), but not sending it to anyone. Often times, writing the feelings down but not sending any messages will make the victim feel better, and will prevent them from becoming a cyberbully themselves.

It is also useful to see from the perspective of a guidance counselor into order to better understand how cyberbullying affects students. Nicole Moore, guidance counselor at Little River Elementary School in Virginia, has seen the long term effects of cyberbullying in her own school system. Moore has a master's degree in psychology, and pays close attention to how cyberbullying can affect students emotionally. "It can include anything from feelings of powerlessness, being absent from school, to eating disorders and depression," she says. "It's a very wide spectrum; you never know what can put the victim over the edge, (Moore 2013)." Although cyberbullying is most prevalent in upper teenage age groups, it can also be seen at the elementary and middle school levels, as Moore explains. Now that younger age groups are having more and more access to social media and getting cell phones at younger ages, cyberbullying is much more prevalent than it was even five years ago (Moore 2013). Moore also

explains that there has been a large jump in cyberbullying within girl groups specifically. Ultimately, cyberbullying can lead to suicide for some students, or "bully-cide" as it is more recently being referred to (Moore 2013). For example, in 2011, there were 123 cases of bully-cide. This year, in 2013, there have already been 34 documented cases of bully-cide, mostly with teens ages 14-16. In addition, Moore says that the younger generation are learning social media tricks from their older siblings, and becoming very devious and crafty bullies. "At the click of a device," Moore says, "you can spread things so much faster. Rumors, all kinds of things. And it's heartbreaking." In Moore's counseling office, she has had students as young as nine years old walk in with cyberbullying issues. "It is hard to stop," Moore says, "These kids would rather endure the bullying than give up their devices or their rights," (Moore 2013). However, she says educators have an important job to do when it comes to preventing and dealing with cyberbullying.

Schools themselves hold a substantial amount of authority when it comes to ending cyberbullying. Nevertheless, they have to ensure that the entire school is on the same page with putting a plan into action. The first step is to create both an internet contract and bullying contract that the school can integrate into their daily curriculum and school environment. This begins with educating the staff as a whole, and making sure that educators have a clear understanding of what media students are using. The more educated the staff members are on today's technology, the more efficient they can be with catching cyberbullying early on. (Bendel, Sydney 2009). Computer teachers can design their curriculum to promote what is called "cyber-ethics", a set of rules and guidelines for students to follow when using the Internet (Bendel, Sydney 2009). Staff members should always be looking for ways to collaborate and form these new policies together, as well as attending as many conferences as they can about bullying

(Campbell 2005). The school bullying policy itself must be individualized and specific to that school's needs (Campbell 2005). In Moore's school, the school uses common language that all students and staff can understand. An example of this is the "RIP Bullying" campaign, which is symbolized by a tombstone. The letters also act as an acronym for defining what bullying is. The R stands for "repetitive in nature", the I stands for "intentional", and the P stands for "power differential" (Moore 2013). With common language such as this, it is easier for an entire school to begin to stop the bullying. Furthermore, if it is discovered that a school computer is helping a student to cyberbully, school officials should contact police in serious situations. This could include when death threats are made, or if there is sexual exploitation or stalking (Bendel, Sydney 2009). They can also intervene when there is threatening language or if the entire school is disrupted in some way from the bullying (Kowalski 2012, pg. 221).

In addition, it is shocking to think that less than ¼ of students actually tell their teacher that they are being cyberbullied (Campbell 2005). This is a true fact, and overall students feel that when they report information, they will not be believed or taken seriously. This misconception is one that educators must gradually work to change, so that students can feel comfortable approaching any staff member and knowing that their information will be kept confidential. Teachers must also encourage bystanders to speak out against cyberbullying; a bystander is anybody who is witnessing the bullying, but not doing anything about it (Campbell 2005). According to Moore, the bystander can be the most powerful person in a bullying situation, especially when the victim is not able to stand up for themselves. Educators must also determine how severe cyberbullying is in their individual school community before deciding how to deal with it. This can be done through surveys or just having one-on-one discussions with students (Feinberg, Robey 2008). Finally, schools need to encourage parents to work alongside

them in preventing cyberbullying, because most of cyberbullying does seem to begin in the home environment.

Parents themselves hold a lot of power when it comes to keeping their children safe on the internet. However, this is becoming increasingly difficult due to the "generation gap" between parents and their children (Campbell 2005). Many parents do not have the technological skills needed to effectively monitor their children's online activity. Within this generational gap comes two very different views of the Internet. Parents view the internet as a tool, while their children view it as a lifeline (Campbell 2005). Instead of simply taking away their child's "lifeline", parents must know how to keep their children safe on the Internet and constantly monitor their activity online. While it is important to give teens their space and allow them to grow, there are a couple basic precautions that can be put into place to keep them safer. First, parents need to pay attention to the computer location in their household. The best way to do this is to have one family computer, in which the parents can monitor the sites their children visit, as well as blocking inappropriate sites (Campbell 2005). The computer should be kept in a place that is easily-viewable, and laptop use should be restricted in bedrooms if you you're your teen is on the Internet too often (Fienberg, Robey 2008). Another effective prevention strategy is to keep in contact with the school and make sure your child is having generally good relationships with their peers (Kowalski 2012, pg. 140). Developing a strong parent-child relationship is also essential, so that the child will feel like they can confide in their parent with any cyberbullying issues. If a parent knows that their child *is* the bully, they should not be in denial about it (Kowalski 2012, pg. 141). They must listen carefully to both the viewpoints of the victim and the bully, and encourage their child to write an apology letter and make amends with that person.

While the parent may feel like they are invading their child's space by intervening, they could be saving their child's life, or the life of someone else's child.

Although there are not nearly as many laws against cyberbullying as there could be, the U.S. is certainly making progress. As of today, 46 states have bullying laws (Kowalski 2012, pg. 195). Unfortunately, 22 of these states do not use the term "cyberbullying" specifically in the law, making it somewhat unclear. They do mention that electronics *could* potentially play a part in bullying (196). Behavior that occurs on school grounds does not have very clear laws being implemented yet, because there are still grey areas, and it is such a new issue. However, teachers and other school officials do hold a legal responsibility to ensure that all students are safe and secure (205), and by now they need to be able to see that technology could be used to put this safety in jeopardy. Principals in particular must be able to recognize that a cyberbullying issue at home could be brought onto school grounds, and may result in physical/verbal fighting (211). Finally, the U.S. Department of Justice has a "Model Acceptable Use Policy" for school computers, which requires that students "communicate only in ways that are kind and respectful" and report any threatening messages to a teacher (212). As progress with cyberbullying laws continues to be made across the country, lawmakers must keep in mind that cyberbullying is not a broad issue; it is rather very specific. Cyberbullying can take many different forms, and laws must be made to specifically address each one of them. Otherwise, students will continue to get away with cyberbullying without much consequence.

Overall, there is something tempting to humans about bullying online, something too convenient and inhuman. They can never be caught, and they can never be blamed. Since they are doing it behind a screen, they can also never truly see the victim's pain. When we see sadness and hurt on someone's face, most of us have the capacity to feel at least some empathy for them.

When we read a typed message, emotion is almost impossible to detect. For this reason, we are never fully aware of how much we could be hurting someone. What we truly need to do is make cyberbullying visible, and make the effects of cyberbullying well-known to a widespread population. Educators and parents need to continue to advocate for their children, and to teach them that hiding behind a screen is not going to solve their real-life issues with people. We cannot escape technology, but we *can* teach future generations to use it appropriately and constructively.

Appendix

In addition to researching this topic through scholarly articles and book sources, I have conducted a bit of my own research on cyberbullying. To begin, I put together a survey about cyberbullying which was passed out to students at Pembroke Academy in Pembroke, New Hampshire. The survey was anonymous, and students ages 14 to 18 were surveyed. From this survey, I gained valuable insight into the following questions:

1) Have you witnessed cyberbullying on social media sites (Facebook, Twitter, etc.)?

   Y   N

2) Have you participated in cyberbullying yourself / been the bully?

   Y   N

3) Which do you think is worst out of the three choices given? (circle one):

   cyberbullying   physical bullying   verbal bullying

   Why? (optional)

4) Do you think cyberbullying has gotten worse over the past 4-5 years?

   Y   N

5) Are you male or female? (optional)

   Female   Male

6) Do you think males or females are more likely to be a cyberbully? (circle one)

   Males   Females   Neither

7) What do you think is the *most* effective way for parents/teachers to prevent cyberbullying? (circle one)

   Blocking websites   Educating youth   Severe punishments

8) Do you think cyberbullying is becoming a problem for the younger age groups (ages 5-10?)

   Y   N

Background Info:
-This survey was distributed to high school students at Pembroke Academy in Pembroke, NH in November 2013.
-72 students took this survey, but some skipped a question or two while taking the survey. This has been taken into account when arriving at my conclusions/calculations.
-38 females and 33 males took this survey, ages 14-18; one participant did not disclose their gender.

Student Totals: (questions had 2 or three possible answers, see questions above to see how answers correspond)

	Answer#1	Answer#2	Answer#3
1)	54/71	18/72	
2)	14/66	52/66	
3)	37/69	12/69	20/69
4)	61/71	10/71	
5)	38/71	33/71	
6)	5/71	55/71	11/71
7)	7/72	29/72	36/72
8)	32/72	40/72	

Conclusions:
-**77%** of students have witnessed cyberbullying on social media sites.
-Only **21%** of students admitted to being involved in the bullying.
-Students thought cyberbullying (**54%**) and verbal bullying (**29%**) were the worst kinds of bullying.
-**86%** of students thought that cyberbullying has gotten worse over the past 4-5 years.
-**77%** of students thought that FEMALES were the most likely to cyberbully.
-Students thought overall that education (**40%**) and severe punishments (**50%**) were the best ways to deal with cyberbullying.

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