

How School Personnel Can Respond to Cyberbullying

How cyberbullying differs from traditional bullying

1. The most popular online activity of boys is gaming and the most popular online activity of girls is communication. Girls are three times more likely to cyberbully than boys.
2. The cyberbully has his or her target on an electronic tether. There is 24/7 access to the target through computers and cell phones with limited opportunity for escape.
3. The number of individuals who have access to the target's humiliation increases exponentially when it is online.
4. The severity and duration of the incidences are greater with cyber-bullying. Students are likely to be more vicious online than they are face-to-face. Once words or pictures are electronically recorded, they can be downloaded for years.
5. Unlike traditional bullying, there is a lack of quality academic research about cyberbullying. Most of what we know is based on informal qualitative analysis of news reports, visits to online communities, and consultation with Internet use professionals.
6. Unlike traditional bullying, online bullying is often done by a less powerful person to a more powerful person. Reduction of social cues related to social status in online communication environments appears to lead to greater participation by those who are at a lower level in the social hierarchy. Students who are disinclined to speak up in the real world may feel more comfortable in communicating online. The online communication may be retaliation for in-school bullying or an effort to stop the bullying at school.
7. Reported incidence rates for cyberbullying are higher than for traditional bullying.
8. Social climbers and popular students tend to be actively involved in cyberbullying. These include students in the "in crowd," "queen bees," "jocks," and "preps." They are most likely to pick on "wannabes" and "isolates" who are fearful of reporting. Research on the social hierarchies of schools find the following: "popular" kids make up 30 percent of the population and are the group that tend to control and manipulate the other groups; "wannabes" make up 10 percent of the population and have their own circle of friends but really want to be in the popular group; 50 percent of the students are in the "middle group"

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who generally accept others and don't want to be in the popular group, but are critical of the "wannabes"; 10 percent of the students are "isolates" who lack social support and tend to even reject each other.

9. In one study, 65 percent of parents and 64 percent of teens stated that teens do things online that they would not want their parents to know about. 62 percent of parents say they check on their teen's Internet activity after they have been online. Only 33 percent of teens said their parents monitor their activity occasionally.
10. Unlike traditional bullying, there is a strong online social norm that students have free speech to say whatever they want without regard for the harm it can cause another. This social norm leads to the assumption that nothing can be done to stop cyberbullying. Related to this, there is also a strong social norm among users that "What happens online, should stay online." Online activities are considered separate from the "real world."

General suggestions for schools

1. It is essential that schools establish an online anonymous/confidential reporting mechanism through the Internet. The student cyberbully will be hard-pressed to find out who reported the behavior. This provides a measure of safety for the target or bystander.
2. At school, students should know that routine technical monitoring is occurring, and that individualized investigations may occur if there is reasonable suspicion that misuse has occurred. Placing the following notice on all computer log-in screens can have an important deterrent effect: "The district's computer and Internet system is to be used for educational purposes. Users are reminded that the district monitors all Internet use. An individual search of usage and files may occur if there is reasonable suspicion of misuse. Users are reminded that the Student Disciplinary Code, including policies against bullying and harassment, governs all communications sent through the District's Internet system." Routine monitoring may include: staff monitoring, use of technical monitoring tools, or asking students to print their browser history at the end of a computer lab session. Staff should monitor individualized on-campus Internet use if there is an instance of off-campus cyberbullying.

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3. Law enforcement should get involved in cases of serious threats of violence, cyberbullying that may violate criminal law, and reports of a student who has become involved with an online sexual predator. If the online material appears to present a legitimate imminent threat of violence, initiate a protective response in accordance with the school's crisis response plan. A lower level threat may not justify immediate law enforcement involvement, but still may require a risk assessment and getting additional information.
4. Many administrators believe that responding to cyberbullying with formal discipline is critical. This is not the case. There are many effective steps an administrator can follow to address on-campus or off-campus cyberbullying that do not require a formal disciplinary response. These strategies will be discussed below.

Specific Steps for Schools in Addressing Cyberbullying

1. Determine whether the school can respond directly by taking formal disciplinary action. Schools can take formal disciplinary action if:
 - the speech collides with the rights of other students to be secure and left alone (reports from a counselor, psychologist, physician, attendance records, school performance, and involvement in school-based activities that speak to emotional, mental, or physical impact can be documented as proof of this collision);
 - there is a school "nexus" – substantial and material interference with the target's ability to fully participate in school activities (a nexus can be established if the cyberbully engaged in any on-campus bullying, even extremely subtle bullying);
 - the material was posted or sent using the district's Internet system;
 - laptops provided to students by the district were used to post or send materials even if used from home;
 - students used cell phones while in the school building to send material;
 - The creator of the offending material accessed it at school, showed it to others at school, or encouraged others to access the material online at school;
 - The posted material originated on-campus (e.g., harmful digital image taken on-campus and later posted on Internet or sent via cell phone);

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- There have been incidents of in-school bullying by the same individual(s) and there seems to be a relationship to the off-campus material.
2. Evaluate the relationship between those involved. Differentiate between “put down” speech and “get back at” speech. “Put down” material is created by a higher social status bully and “get back at” material is created by a lower social status target. Closely evaluate the substance of the online material. Is there strength and power reflected in the comments or is there emotional anguish and distress? Put down speech should get more serious consequences. Too often, students who are being cruelly tormented at school, and who finally retaliate in an angry way online, are treated as the cause of the problem. In fact, they are the victims in the overall situation. If the speech is of the “get back at” variety, the material must be removed, but the on-campus bullying must be stopped as well.
 3. Make a preliminary assessment of potential criminal law violation or civil infractions. If the speech has targeted a student, the parents make the decision about criminal prosecution or civil litigation. If the speech has targeted a staff member, the district’s legal council should be consulted. If the school has a resource officer, he/she should be involved in the analysis and decision-making regarding the next steps. In some cases, the mere threat of the potential for referral for criminal prosecution or a home visit by the school resource officer may be sufficient to stop the cyberbullying activities. If the online material appears to involve defamation of character (libel), invasion of privacy, or intentional infliction of emotional distress, school officials may want to suggest to parents that contacting an attorney for civil litigation may be appropriate. If the online material appears to violate criminal law (e.g., harassment, stalking, hate crime, creating/sending sexually explicit pictures, taking a picture of someone in a private place like a bathroom) school officials can refer the incident to law enforcement, or recommend this as a course of action for the target’s parents.
 4. After, or along with a formal disciplinary action, ensure that the harmful online material is removed. Be sure that the cyberbully knows that any revenge or retaliation (including cyberbullying by proxy where the bully’s friends or online connections begin to harass the target), will be reported and addressed immediately. Stop any in-school bullying that may be occurring as well. Help the parents of the targets assess their most appropriate actions. Check periodically with the target to ensure that the cyberbullying has stopped.

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5. If formal disciplinary action is not advised, administrators should still address the behavior informally by (a) meeting with the parents of the target and offering support and education; and (b) meeting with the parents of the cyberbully to enlist their help in stopping it, including warning about the potential for civil litigation and financial liability. Suggestions for addressing the behavior informally are delineated below.

Working with the parents of a “put down” cyberbully

1. Parents are likely to be totally unaware of their child’s online activities. Send a certified letter with hard evidence (a copy) of their child’s online activities. The letter should assure parents that the school recognizes that they probably didn’t know this was happening and would not allow it to happen if they did know. Also, provide assurance that the school will provide them with some assistance on how they can better manage their child’s harmful Internet use. Request a meeting the next day. Sending the letter home allows parents to work through their shock, anger, and embarrassment in private. Unless it is an emergency, it is not advisable to call the parents for a meeting, hand them the documentation, and expect them to engage in effective problem solving. The “drop it on the table” approach would likely lead to anger and defensiveness that would interfere with ultimate resolution.
2. At the meeting, the school official should seek parental commitment to remove all material and to ward against their child’s possible retaliation. A plan of action to better monitor their child’s Internet use is also recommended. Home computers should be kept in a public place, rather than in the child’s bedroom. There are inexpensive keystroke monitoring technologies that parents can install on home computers that allow parents to monitor every online action, including private communications. At a minimum, if a young person has acted in an inappropriate manner online, parents should regularly check the history file, and should know and monitor all the public locations where their children are posting information. Young people might object that this is an invasion of privacy, but any material posted in a public online site is just that -- PUBLIC. Parents can then advise their children about the circumstances that could lead to investigating more private online activity (reasonable suspicion of continuing online inappropriate behavior, emotional distress or risk of suicide, clues detailed in a review of public postings that reveal the high potential for cyberbullying in private postings, etc.).

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3. Parents need to firmly communicate to their child that any possible retaliation by proxy – getting IM buddies or other online friends to attack the target – will not be tolerated.
4. If it is discovered in the meeting that the cyberbully is actually a target at school and was retaliating online, efforts must be made to stop the in-school bullying.
5. Parents need to be tactfully informed that if the harmful material isn't removed or retaliation occurs, the parents are opening themselves up for civil litigation and financial liability. In most states, parents can be held liable for the intentional or negligent actions of their child because of a lack of supervision, particularly if the cyberbullying or retaliation continues after the parent was warned about their child's actions.

Working with the parents of the target

1. If the school becomes aware of cyberbullying or distressing material through a source other than the parent of the target, officials will need to contact the parents of the at-risk student. Prior to contacting the parent, the situation should be reviewed and a preliminary plan of action should be developed. If the child seems to be emotionally at-risk (e.g., suicidal or homicidal) have support services available.
2. Ask the parents to come to school. During the meeting, provide documentation of the cyberbullying. The parents may need emotional support, so the counselor /psychologist must be present. Parents will have significant concern for the safety and well-being of their child.
3. If the parent of the target is bringing the complaint, the review and plan of action will be accomplished in cooperation with the parents and possibly the target.
4. If the situation involves a "get back at" response from the target, the school must assure parents that they will make every effort to stop the bullying at school. Parents in this scenario also must monitor their child's Internet use. If their child crossed the line and made threatening statements, there could be criminal charges, so it is important to get the situation under control.
5. Parents of targets should also be told to closely monitor any online retaliation directed at their child and report this to the school immediately.

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6. Parents of targets can be informed of their rights to civil litigation. A certified letter from an attorney might be enough to get the behavior to stop without pursuit of any further legal action.

Assessing and responding to cyberthreats

There are two types of cyberthreats: a) direct threats to hurt someone or commit suicide that contain information about an actual planned event, and b) distressing material that provides clues that the person is potentially suicidal or homicidal. What appears to be an online threat can be any of the following: a joke, parody, or game; a rumor that has grown and spread; the final salvos of a “flame war” that has gotten out of hand and will unlikely result in any real violence; material posted by someone impersonating someone else for the purpose of getting someone in trouble; distressing material by a depressed or angry young person that could foretell a violent or suicidal intention, but does not represent an imminent threat; a legitimate imminent threat.

School officials and law enforcement are put in the difficult position of rapidly determine the legitimacy of a threat. Just because a threat is disseminated online, does not make it more real. However, students need to understand the potential consequences of posting a threat online, even if they don't perceive it as serious. An adult could perceive it as serious, resulting in suspension, expulsion, or arrest.

Several steps should be taken to assess the seriousness of a cyberthreat:

- Preserve the evidence electronically and in hard copy. If the online incident happened at home, instruct parents and students to preserve the evidence.
- Seek to identify the creator(s) of the threat. There are relatively inexpensive services available on the Internet that parents can use to identify anonymous e-mails and instant messages. The Internet Service Provider may be able to provide assistance as well. If the situation appears to be criminal, law enforcement can subpoena a reluctant Internet company to obtain identifying information.
- Conduct an interview with the target to determine his or her relationships with students at school that could reveal clues to other students' possible involvement.
- Search for additional material. An online search can be made of the school's Internet use by all students for whom there is a reasonable suspicion of

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involvement. Be aware of the online communities in which students congregate and review these postings for any online commentary.

- If the preliminary review raises any concerns about the possibility of violence or suicide, a threat or suicide assessment and intervention process should occur.

Advice for Students Who are being Cyberbullied

1. If you are being attacked online, do not respond until you have calmed down and can figure out what to do from a position of strength. If the attack happens through IM or a chat room, exit until you can prepare an effective response – strong, assertive, and unemotional.
2. When you are ready, send a clear, unemotional message demanding that the cyberbullying stop, and warn that if it does not stop, other actions will be taken.
3. All messages sent or received should be electronically saved.
4. If you decide to ignore the cyberbully, you can block all further communication from this individual through e-mail, IM, and text messaging. Avoid going to the site or group where you were attacked. Change your e-mail address, password, username, account, or phone number if necessary.
5. File a complaint with the Internet Service Provider. Cyberbullying is almost always a violation of the Terms of Use Agreement of most web sites, Internet Service Providers, and cell phone companies. You or your parent can provide the harmful messages or a link to the harmful material to the company and ask that the account of the cyberbully be terminated and any harmful material removed. If the cyberbully is using e-mail, contact the Internet Service Provider of the cyberbully (which is part of the e-mail address). If the material appears on a third-party website, go to the site's home page and file a complaint through the "Contact Us" e-mail address. If the material is on a website with its own domain name, go to the host company's website and file a complaint through the "Contact Us" e-mail address. If the cyberbully is using a cell phone, trace the number and contact his or her phone company.
6. Report any online threats or distressing material (person is threatening suicide or homicide of others) to an adult immediately. Adults have been able to effectively intervene in many potentially dangerous situations.
7. If you don't know who is sending you the distressing material (e.g., an anonymous e-mail), it is important to know that in most cases, people leave

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“cyberfootprints” wherever they go on the Internet. Every computer that uses the Internet can generally be identified by its Internet Provider address. Students have the perception of invisibility and anonymity, and believe they can’t be caught. They usually can be caught.

8. If the cyberbully is from your school, a hard copy of the communication could be made, and brought to school. The school can take steps to help ensure that the cyberbullying stops and that retaliation does not occur. If the cyberbully is not from your school, your parents can send a letter to the cyberbully’s parents requesting that he/she stops and all harmful material is removed. An attorney can also send this letter. If the cyberbullying is a crime (e.g., harassment, stalking, hate crime, creating/sending sexually explicit pictures, taking a picture of you in a private place like a bathroom), your parents can contact the police.

Examples of Cyberbullying and Cyberthreats

1. Joanne reports to an administrator at school that some girls were bullying Sara at school. When Joanne gets home, she has 35 angry e-mails and nasty text messages on her cell phone. Many of these are anonymous and several are from people Jessica doesn't even know. Some of these strangers are from different parts of the country.
2. An unknown middle school student creates a web site entitled "All about Jeremy." On the site there are Jeremy jokes, Jeremy stories, and Jeremy cartoons. There is also a spot on the site where visitors can submit their own comments, and there is an e-mail link for people to send comments directly to Jeremy.
3. A group of high school boys, with the help of one of the boy's girlfriends, creates a web site which contains partially nude images of girls apparently taken in the girls' locker room. The site offers visitors to post comments about each girl. Many derogatory and sexually explicit comments have been posted.
4. Brad's blog is filled with racist profanity. Frequently, he targets African-American and Latino students and minority teachers in his angry verbal assaults.
5. Sara watches closely as Emma logs onto her school Internet account and is able to determine Emma's password. Later, Sara logs on to Emma's account and sends a scathingly cruel message to Emma's boyfriend Joe and Emma's girlfriend Mia.
6. Mary and Julie were good friends. They knew each others' passwords. When they got into a fight, Julie used Mary's password to create an e-mail supposedly from Mary telling 15 of Mary's friends that she had decided to "out" herself as a lesbian.
7. Greg, an obese high school student, was changing in the locker room after physical education class. Matt took a covert picture of Greg with his cell phone camera. Within seconds, Matt had sent it to classmates. Soon the picture was flying around to cell phones all over school. By the time Greg leaves to get to his next hour class, many students are laughing at him.
8. Judy starts IMing Sara, the target, at a sleepover with other girls. Judy asks Sara personal questions about who she likes best, Matt or Nathan. After much coaxing from Judy, Sara finally reveals that she has had a secret crush on Matt for a long time. The next Monday, the girls are passing Sara's IM all around school.

Examples of Cyberbullying and Cyberthreats

9. After Michael beats another guy in an online game, several of the guy's friends who also play, restrict Michael's activities so that he can't participate.
10. Millie recently got on the "outs" with a leader in her group. Now Millie has been taken from the IM buddy list of all the girls in her group (15 girls).
11. When Annie broke up with Sam, he sent her many angry, threatening, and pleading messages. When Annie blocked his e-mail account, Sam continued to send messages either by anonymous e-mail or text message. In addition, Sam sent messages to Annie's friends describing her in offensive language. Sam also posed as Annie in a sex-oriented discussion group and posted a sexually suggestive picture Annie had given him along with her e-mail address and cell phone number.
12. In a private chatroom, Andrew writes the following to Celia: "I can't imagine going through life without killing a few people – nothing wrong with killing – if u don't like it u die – if I don't like what u stand for, u die – if I don't like the way u look at me, u die. I choose who lives and who dies.
13. Jeff writes on his Xanga blog: "I'm a retarded (expletive) for ever believing that things would change. I'm regretting sticking around, I should've taken the razor blade express last time around. Well, whatever, man. Maybe they've got another shuttle comin' around sometime soon. Most people have never faced the kind of pain that makes you physically sick at times, makes you so depressed you can't function, makes you so sad and overwhelmed with grief that eating a bullet or sticking your head in a noose seems welcoming. It takes courage to turn the gun on your ownself, takes courage to face death. Knowing you're going to die and actually following through takes heart, I don't care who you are."

Internet Safety Corner – MySpace Safety

Sharing information on MySpace or Facebook is a normal part of life for most high school students. However, most teens are posting too much information – putting them at a potential risk. Teens should ask themselves these three questions when deciding if something should be posted on a site. 1) Could I share this with my parents or a teacher? 2) Would I want a college recruiter or job interviewer to see this? 3) Could this allow someone to find me and put me in danger? Other tips: Do not fill in all the blanks on the profile page. Do not post photos of yourself or your friends. And use a site's safety features to restrict access to you site to only invited friends. Finally – if you receive an e-mail invite to join a blog ring from someone you do not know, delete it without opening it. Parents -- check out this practical site focused on MySpace safety for teens: www.myspace-safety.org Andy Mann, Instructional Technologist, Ottawa Area ISD.

Internet Safety Corner - Safety Pledge

Do your children know your expectations when they are using the Internet? Have you discussed what they should do if they unexpectedly end up on an inappropriate site? I recommend your family uses an acceptable use policy or safety pledge. After reviewing it with your child, have them sign it and post it by the computer. Discussing your expectation when you children use the Internet, and providing clear consequences will reduce potential problems. Sample Internet Safety agreements can be found at: <http://wiredkids.org/parents/parentingonline/agreement.html> and www.netsmartz.org/resources/pledge.htm Andy Mann, Instructional Technologist, Ottawa Area ISD.