Abstract

A new threat has arisen for which teachers, administrators, and parents admit they are poorly prepared. Cyberbullying—electronic forms of peer harassment—is becoming increasingly prevalent and often originates beyond the legal reach of the school. This presentation describes how cyberbullying differs from other forms of mistreatment, cites examples of Internet intimidation, identifies procedures for responding to electronic threats, explores implications for teachers and parents, recommends questions for initial research, and presents a poll for schools to use in assessing student experience with cyberbullying.

Public concern about unfair treatment is expressed more often now than in the past. Americans are resolved to decrease the number of people suffering from child abuse, spousal abuse, coercion in the workplace, exploitation by religious leaders, favoritism by government officials, and intimidation by police officers. Denunciation of these types of offenses and demands that misconduct must result in punishment are evidence of progress toward becoming a civil society. To effect change, schools and families must collaborate in educating adolescents to develop self-control and concern for the welfare of others (Peterson and Seligman 2004).

Uniqueness of Digital Bullying

Cyber harassment involves using an electronic medium to threaten or harm others. E-mail, chat rooms, cell phones, instant messaging, pagers, text messaging, and online voting booths are tools used to inflict humiliation, fear, and a sense of helplessness. This type of intimidation differs from traditional bullying in several important ways. Unlike the incidents that most adults recall from their youth, where the threatening party is physically bigger and more powerful than the victim, cyber-
bullies can be physically weaker than the persons they attempt to frighten. Cyberbullies typically hide behind the mask of anonymity that the Internet provides by using fictitious screen names. Because abusers may lack face-to-face contact with the individuals being persecuted, they may not know the level of duress that is produced by their misconduct. Therefore, they are unlikely to experience feelings of regret, sympathy, or compassion toward the victim (Schneier 2003).

Harmful messages intended to undermine the reputation of a victim can be far more damaging than face-to-face altercations. Instead of remaining a private matter or event known by only a small group, text or photographs can be communicated to a large audience in a short time. Whereas bullies at school usually can be identified easily by mistreated individuals, cyberbullies typically are difficult to trace. Consequently, cyberbullies can avoid responsibility for their misconduct, thereby reducing the fear of getting caught and being punished (Cooper 2005).

Cyberspace represents new territory for peer mistreatment, often leaving school administrators with doubts about the boundaries of their jurisdiction. School leaders may be unable to respond when unknown parties have sent hate messages from a location outside the school, such as from a home-based computer or mobile phone (Belsey 2005). Some students are reluctant to tell adults about the anxiety they endure at the hands of cyber enemies, fearing that parents may overreact by taking away their computer, Internet access, or cell phone. Many teenagers are unwilling to risk having parents choose such extreme forms of protection because, without technology tools, they would feel socially isolated and less able to stay in immediate contact with their friends (Cottle 2001).

A misconception about cyber abuse is that nothing can be done about it. In reality, cyber harassment is a crime that resembles other forms of unlawful behavior and is subject to prosecution. The University of Dayton School of Law (2001) offers numerous resources for understanding the legal issues related to cyberbullying. The Web site www.cybercrimes.net describes cyber stalking and cyber intimidation, identifies agencies to contact for help in dealing with cyber mistreatment, offers guidelines for reporting abuse, and presents articles explaining legal processes and penalties related to a wide range of cyber crimes.

Examples of Cyber Intimidation

Until recently, victims of bullying considered their homes a place of safety, a sanctuary from abusive peers. This is no longer the case in an era of instant, electronic communications. Most secondary-level students go online soon after they return home from school (Roberts and Foehr 2004). Some discover that they are the target of threats, rumors, and lies without knowing the identity of the persons creating fear and frustration, and most
don’t know how to stop the damage. The following examples of adolescent cyberbullying in several countries reveal the range and complexity of the issues.

Shinobu is a high school freshman in Osaka, Japan. When his gym period was over, Shinobu got dressed in what he believed was the privacy of the school changing room. However, a classmate who wanted to ridicule Shinobu for being overweight secretly used a cell phone to photograph him. Within seconds, the picture of the naked boy was sent wirelessly by instant messaging for many students to see. By the time Shinobu finished dressing and went to his next class, he had already become a laughing stock of the school (Paulson 2003).

Sixteen-year-old Denise is a high school junior in Los Angeles, California. Denise had an argument with her boyfriend and broke up with him. The rejected young man was angry and decided that he would get even. The devious method that he chose was to post Denise’s contact numbers, including her e-mail address, cell phone number, and street address on several sex-oriented Web sites and blogs. Denise was hounded for months by instant messages, prank callers, and car horns of insensitive people who drove by her house to see whether or not they could catch a glimpse of her. In this case, the identity of the cyberbully, her former boyfriend, was detected quickly. However, his apprehension did not eliminate the sustained sense of helplessness and embarrassment Denise experienced (Rachlin 2000).

Jealousy is a common motive for cyber abuse. Fourteen-year-old Amy lives in Montgomery, Alabama. She is enrolled in a home school curriculum and plans to earn a high school diploma by age 16 so that she can start college early. Darin, a neighbor who attends public school, is Amy’s friend. Darin’s girlfriend began sending Amy e-mail messages threatening to cut herself if Amy did not stop talking to Darin. The guilt that someone might do herself bodily harm because of her led Amy to tell Darin about the e-mails. Darin confessed that his girlfriend had cut herself once before. Amy wanted to do the right thing, but did not know who to contact. She told her mother, and the police were called to investigate (Joinson 2003).

Donna attends eighth grade at a parochial school in Montreal, Canada. She and her mother traveled to Toronto for a week to visit her grandmother, who was recuperating from cancer surgery. When Donna returned to school, a cyberbully circulated a rumor alleging that Donna had contracted SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) during her stay in Toronto. Donna’s girlfriends were scared and unwilling to be around her or even talk over the phone. Without exception, her classmates moved away from Donna whenever she went near them (Wendland 2003).
Some cases may involve more than one bully and a single victim. Others could involve a gang of bullies that persecute multiple parties. The latter occurs when students respond to online trash polling sites. These Web sites, which are growing in number, invite students to identify individuals by unflattering characteristics, such as the most obese person at their school, the boys mostly likely to be gay, and the girls who have slept with the most boys. The predictable consequences for students subjected to this shameful treatment are depression, hopelessness, and withdrawal (Assuras 2004).

Students are not the only people at school who are bullied. Teachers often are targets too. When students make disrespectful comments to a teacher or challenge the authority of the school to govern their behavior on campus, they usually are sent to the office where an administrator examines the situation and determines a suitable course of disciplinary action. The limitations of this practice in preventing student harassment of faculty members are illustrated by the experience of Joseph, a high school teacher in Phoenix, Arizona. He offered computer classes to juniors and seniors and consistently received high ratings from students for his instruction. He was known for preparing students to obtain a good paying job immediately after graduation. Joseph felt disappointment and shock when told of a Web site on which he was the focus of messages on “What I hate about my teacher, Mr. . . .” The Web site contained statements that Joseph recognized as characteristic of a particular student and comments he recalled saying to the student. Joseph related, “I taught this young man how to apply a technological tool for constructive purposes, and he decided to use it against me.”

Some sophisticated adolescent cyberbullies target schools or other institutions by releasing worms that can compromise the integrity of computers or make them unavailable. The result is often disruption leading to significant loss of time and money. The U.S. Department of Justice (2005) Web site www.cybercrime.gov lists prosecuted criminals and a summary of computer intrusion cases, including the juvenile or adult status of perpetrators, type of harm done, estimated dollar loss, target group, geography, and punishment. That list includes one hacker who directed worm-infected computers to launch a distributed denial of service attack against the Microsoft® main Web site, causing a shutdown and making it inaccessible to the public for four hours. The hacker was 14 years old and pleaded guilty in 2004 for intentionally causing damage and attempting to disable protected computers.

Solutions for Cyberbullying
What actions should be taken to reduce the scale of cyberbullying? State departments of education have begun to provide training for administrators in middle and high schools.
to build awareness of available options in confronting such problems. Other individuals at schools also should assume responsibility for prevention. The district’s information technology staff members could be given the task of designing and delivering K–12 curriculum to acquaint students, teachers, and parents with etiquette on the Internet, methods of self-protection, and ways of responding to persecution. A related initiative would be to help the adult public recognize that adolescents interact with technology differently than older people. Most grown-ups think of computers as practical tools that can be used to locate information and send electronic mail without the expense of postage stamps. In contrast, teenagers consider instant messaging and chat rooms to be an essential aspect of their social lives—a vital connection with peers. Chat is the number one online activity among teenagers (Roberts and Foehr 2004).

These generational differences account for why few adults are able to provide wise counsel on dealing with cyberbullies. The solutions most often proposed are simplistic and result in minimal protection. For example, purchasing or setting online filters would appear to be suitable solutions because these preventive measures block reception of unwanted messages. However, by altering their screen names, bullies can override these obstructions easily. Responding to bullies online in an attempt to persuade them to stop the harassment also might seem to be a reasonable counter. Yet, student experience shows that this approach can motivate a bully to apply even more severe methods of intimidation (Cooper 2005).

Parents and teachers can follow some practical guidelines to minimize the likelihood of cyberbullying (Strom and Strom 2005):

- Adults should develop close communications with adolescents and encourage them to relate problems such as episodes of digital harassment.
- Students should be told not to share personal information, such as their e-mail password, with anyone except a parent.
- Students, parents, educators, and law enforcement personnel should know where to go for information about online abuses, such as cyber intimidation, con artists, identity thieves, predators, stalkers, criminal hackers, financial fraud, security, and privacy problems. WiredSafety, http://wiredsafety.org, is an organization that provides assistance in this area (Aftab 2005). The U.S. Department of Justice (2005), www.cybercrime.gov, offers guidelines on cyber ethics for students, parents, and teachers and identifies government contacts for reporting Internet crimes. Bill Belsey (2005), recipient of the Canadian Prime Minister’s Award for Teaching Excellence in Science, Mathematics, and Technology, maintains www.cyberbullying.ca, a Web site for students, parents, and the public that describes the emotional costs of cyberbullying, forms of mistreatment, and prevention strategies.
Adults should ensure that students realize that people may not be who they say they are in a chat room. For example, someone could claim to be a 14-year-old female, but in actuality be a 50-year-old male predator seeking to take advantage of a vulnerable adolescent.

Teenagers never should agree to meet someone they have chatted with online unless their parents go with them and the meeting is in a public place.

People should avoid sending impulse messages or staying online when angry. Wait until self-control and a sense of calm is restored so that the message is more sensibly written and excludes hostility. People typically regret sending a “flame” (angry) message that could motivate someone to become a cyberbully as an act of revenge. Keep in mind that messages written in capital letters are interpreted as shouting by some recipients (Olund 2004).

When adolescents tell teachers or parents about cyber harassment, the cooperating adults immediately should inform the police and the Internet instant messaging or mobile phone service provider.

Victims never should respond to cyberbullies, but always should keep messages as evidence, including the text and source of information detailing the originating address of the e-mail. Whether or not they are read, messages should not be erased. The police, Internet service provider, or the telephone company often can use the narratives for tracking purposes. Those who are persecuted might notice words used by certain people they know. Most cyberbullies who post anonymous messages are not as anonymous as they may think. If a legitimate threat exists, law enforcement officials can subpoena records of all Web users for a particular Web site. From there, users can be tracked to their individual computers (Schneier 2003).

The mission of Channel One, a broadcast network viewed daily in 400,000 American classrooms, is to keep secondary school students informed of current events and teach them how the media works. Channel One’s Web site presents an interactive quiz that adolescents, parents, and teachers can complete to check their knowledge about coping with bullies in cyberspace. The quiz includes questions on instant messaging, threatening e-mails, revealing photographs, personal information, screen name selection, cell phone flames, chat room conflicts, blocking options, and group persecution. Immediate feedback is provided for every response, along with an explanation of the correct answers and a final score. Channel One’s Web site, www.channelone.com/news/2004/01/30/cyberbullies/index.html, provides complete information on this interactive quiz (Olund 2004).

Many parents misinterpret adolescents’ time on the Internet as learning rather than considering that it might be related to peer abuse.
**Implications for Research**

Schools are expected to provide an environment where everyone feels safe. Fulfilling this responsibility is becoming more difficult as advances in technology present new dangers. Current efforts encourage the adoption of civil communication online, including providing counseling for students exposed to threats and offering rehabilitation programs for those who threaten or harm their peers. In addition to these strategies, novel approaches could emerge from insights based on research findings. The following questions are recommended to guide future research about cyberbullying (Strom and Strom 2005).

**1) To what extent are the students at this school exposed to cyberbullying behavior?** Most opinion polls that solicit adolescents’ feelings and attitudes are administered by businesses that regard the youths as an important consumer market. Media outlets such as VH1® and Nickelodeon™ are popular forums that invite teens to phone in or log on to a Web site and state their preferences along with personal demographics. Within a short time, the poll results are tallied and feedback is provided on the air. This practice enables viewers to see how personal opinions match or deviate from their own.

Educators tend to overlook the potential of polling as an assessment tool in determining how adolescents perceive school and how they think the learning environment could be improved. Schools should solicit adolescent impressions when considering changes to instruction or policy. Without adolescents’ input, adults must speculate about how students interpret events that affect their lives. Asking teenagers is the best way to become informed about their thinking, as well as an excellent way to model democratic practices (Peterson and Seligman 2004).

Every school has a responsibility to determine the extent to which students are exposed to cyberbullying. What are the prevalent forms of mistreatment? How do students respond to electronic threats intended to manipulate them? What are their perceptions of teachers as resources for helping them cope with cyberbullying? To help answer these questions, Strom and Strom (2005) have developed and field-tested a Cyberbully Poll (see page 33). Results of the poll should be disseminated to the school community to foster discussions about improving electronic safety for everyone.

**2) What are the long-term effects on adolescents who participate in cyberbullying?** Many adults suppose that bullying is normal—a stage some people go through, but are likely to outgrow as they mature and become adults. Researchers have arrived at an opposite conclusion, leading them to encourage the development of creative methods to rehabilitate bullies while they are still young. Psychologists at the University of Michigan (Huesmann, Eron et al. 1984; Huesmann, Moise-Titus et al. 2003) followed 500 students from the time they were 8 years old and in third grade until they reached age 30. The

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study showed that face-to-face bullies had greater adjustment problems over the years than their classmates. About 25 percent of those children who started fights over trivial matters in the elementary grades, i.e., pushed, shoved, and stole belongings of peers, had a criminal record by age 30, compared to less than 5 percent of students not identified as bullies. Furthermore, waiting longer to intervene seems to make matters worse (Sanders and Phye 2004).

Schoolyard bullies typically become adults with unstable relationships. As compared to the general population, males abuse their wives more often, drive more erratically on the highway, get fired from jobs more often, commit greater numbers of felonies, and achieve vocational success less frequently. Correspondingly, females who mistreat classmates in childhood are more inclined later to severely punish their own children. Male and female bullies record higher than average rates of alcoholism, more frequent personality disorders, and require greater use of mental health services than their non-bully peers (Sullivan 2000).

How will these profiles compare with future adults who are participating in cyberbullying as adolescents? Is cyberbullying just a short-term behavior that reflects foolish risk-taking, or is it an enduring pattern of misconduct with lifelong consequences? Do the ominous predictions about face-to-face bullies accurately describe the likely future of cyberbullies too? The answers must await long-term tracking.

Meanwhile, early detection of offenders warrants attention and priority. When teachers monitor student social conduct and share their observations with colleagues who have the same students in their classes, offenders can be detected more readily. This information can be communicated with a simple documentation code on the computer. This strategy offers greater promise than the prevailing practice of teachers independently making decisions about discipline without knowing how the student behaves in other classes. Teachers should no longer be expected to act as isolated professionals. Instead, a united effort can ensure consistency of corrective responses across multiple settings and a collective evaluation of results for common interventions. Determining methods of correction that are most effective can be empirically determined rather than ascertained without data (Strom and Strom 2003).

Some students are reluctant to tell adults about the anxiety they endure at the hands of cyber enemies, fearing that parents may overreact by taking away their computer, Internet access, or cell phone.

(3) In what ways are cyberbullies similar to and different from schoolyard bullies? Because the phenomenon of cyber harassment is of recent origin, not enough time has passed to gather data about how cyberbullies compare to other subpopulations. However, the behavior patterns of face-to-face bullies are well documented. Contrary
to popular assumptions, they often are intelligent, receive good grades, and usually express self-confidence. These assets can cause teachers to underestimate the possible dangers that might occur when these children grow up lacking a sense of empathy and are inclined to manipulate others (Espelage and Swearer 2004; Olweus 1993).

When students have reading problems, they are tutored and expected to improve. Similarly, Individualized Education Plans (IEP) for special education students are designed to help them achieve their potential. This same kind of accountability is needed to ensure that bullies receive the help they need to overcome the limitations that jeopardize their future. Devising a rehabilitation curriculum acknowledges that a school has not given up on bullies and perceives them as still capable of learning the social skills that are needed to get along with others (Sanders and Phye 2004).

Low self-esteem is sometimes given as an explanation for why bullies frighten or intimidate peers. However, research does not support this opinion. In fact, a strong relationship exists between inflated self-esteem and violence. Studies have determined that individuals with unrealistically high self-concepts often violently attack others who dare to challenge their self-impression. In addition to bullies, this troublesome group includes racists, gang members, persons with ties to organized crime, rapists, and psychopaths. Attacks on these individuals’ self-esteem can be counterproductive and even dangerous. Interventions that concentrate on self-control rather than self-esteem might prove successful (Baumeister and Vohs 2003).

Everyone should experience a positive self-concept, but sometimes it is in a person’s best interest to be ashamed of his or her behavior, even if the misconduct did not result in disapproval from others. Self-evaluation is a key factor in developing maturity, yet students rarely get to practice self-assessment in school or receive healthy criteria that they can apply. Middle and high school students identified as cyberbullies might benefit from being part of cooperative learning teams in which peer and self-evaluation are applied to provide anonymous feedback about social skills. The Interpersonal Intelligence Inventory (III) provides individual student profiles of feedback from peers and compares team observations of performance with self-impressions (Strom and Strom 2002).

(4) What changes occur as a result of participation in rehabilitation programs? Students who abuse peers are not making satisfactory progress in their social develop-
ment. Therefore, rehabilitation programs for these students should be field-tested to ensure that they provide participants with:

- opportunities to practice self-evaluation skills and get anonymous peer feedback;
- empathy-building exercises to find out how others feel, and training in how to respect others’ feelings;
- examples of civil ways to cope with frustration and conflict that result from everyday relations;
- activities that require patience, self-restraint, and nonviolent anger expression;
- self-direction by setting goals with reasonable criteria for evaluating improvement;
- awareness of how social and emotional growth impact adjustment and satisfaction;
- realization that getting good grades cannot make up for social relations that fail because of mistreatment of others; and
- acceptance of responsibility for personal misconduct instead of blaming others.

Skeptics may doubt that classes are the best method for helping cyberbullies. Those who oppose classes argue that singling out students for remedial instruction is degrading and might lead to lawsuits from parents. The concept of rehabilitation, however, calls for improving behavior by applying corrective instruction. Helping adolescents to overcome social skill deficiencies and emotional immaturity is likely to become a more prominent expectation in the mission of secondary schools. This is more developmentally appropriate than only imposing punishment (Strom and Strom 2003).

(5) How do the family relationships of cyberbullies compare with other populations? What family dynamics typify the home environment of cyberbullies? Are their interactions with parents similar to non-bullies, or do they resemble the patterns that have been found to characterize face-to-face schoolyard bullies? In the latter case, classes for the parents of bullies are viewed as essential because students who mistreat classmates frequently are victims themselves within their own home. Espelage and Swearer (2004) reported that the conversations parents of face-to-face bullies have with their children differ significantly from those of families with nonviolent children. Parents of bullies do not use even a fraction of the praise, encouragement, or good humor that other parents use in communicating with daughters and sons. Instead, put-downs, sarcasm, and excessive criticism are the dominant responses to which face-to-face bullies are exposed in their families. The punishment of a young bully often depends more on the mood of a parent than on the gravity of misconduct. When the parent is angry, harsh punishment is probable. At other times, when the parent is in good spirits, the child may get away with almost anything (Helfer, Kempe, and Krugman 1997; Peterson and Skiba 2000).

Are the parents of cyberbullies aware of the vindictive behavior of their adolescent? How involved are the parents in supervising Internet activity? Schools should be granted authority to provide dysfunctional families with curriculum that can meet the learning needs of parents, as well as reduce the social deficits of their children. Systems
theory and counseling practice have confirmed that helping one member of a family frequently requires involving other relatives before the support provided is effective (Wagner 2003).

How can the privacy needs of adolescents be reconciled with the need for parents to monitor online activities as part of their guidance role? Parents are ultimately accountable for their children’s activities and should be aware of their behavior when using electronic tools. Many parents misinterpret adolescents’ time on the Internet as learning rather than considering that it might be related to peer abuse.

Conclusion

Cyberbullying is of such recent origin that current understanding is limited. Nevertheless, a preliminary assessment is warranted to begin conversations and encourage studies on ways to confront this new form of abuse. Some challenges include the identification of cyberbullies, encouragement for victims to report abuse, access to counseling for those who suffer persecution, curriculum to guide civil behavior online, rehabilitation programs to help dysfunctional youngsters, parent education to improve their monitoring and guidance functions, and the linkage of institutions for cooperation across jurisdictions.

In fiction, Harry Potter possessed magical powers that he relied on to silence his bully, the abominable Dudley Dursley. In real life, however, adolescents, parents, teachers, and principals do not have such magic at their disposal. Creativity and persistence are powerful resources that can be applied. Effective methods must be developed for protecting students from being bullied and preventing others from becoming tyrants on the cyber stage. Dumbledore, the Headmaster of Hogwarts School, urged the young wizard Harry to remember, “It is our choices, Harry, that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities” (Rowling 1999, 333).

References

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