

Bullying **Beyond the** **Schoolyard**

Preventing and
Responding
to
Cyberbullying

Sameer **Hinduja**
Justin W. **Patchin**



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Box 1.3 Recent High-Profile Examples of Cyberbullying

In 2002, 17-year-old David Knight, a Canadian high school senior, became aware of a defamatory Web site that had been online for months. It accused him of being a pedophile and labeled him gay, dirty, immature, and strongly disliked by everyone. He became isolated and withdrawn and could not return to school due to the humiliation and embarrassment he experienced (Leishman, 2005).

In 2003, 13-year-old Ryan Halligan committed suicide after months of torment from classmates. Ryan's father John is clear about the causes of his son's untimely death: "We have no doubt that bullying and cyber bullying were significant environmental factors that triggered Ryan's depression" (Halligan, 2006, ¶ 22).

In 2004, a hate-filled Web site was created by students naming an Allendale, New Jersey, school's "top five biggest homosexuals" and the "top 20 gayest guys and gayest girls" (Cooper, 2004, ¶ 4).

In 2005, 15-year-old Jeff Johnston committed suicide after "relentless bullying that followed him home from the classroom and onto his computer" (Apollo, 2007, ¶ 6). As Jeff's mom, Debra Johnston, pointed out before the Florida senate committee, "Young children are killing themselves because taking their own lives is preferable to the pain of continuing" (Carson, 2007, ¶ 13).

In 2006, a 12-year-old seventh grader and her older sisters received hateful and threatening e-mails referencing their race and the KKK and threatening physical violence against them. One line from an e-mail stated, "All I got to say is that you better watch every move you make N***** and you can tell all of your older sister(s) the KKK will be after them (too) B*****" (D. Williams, 2006, ¶ 4). According to the family, the youngest daughter has been in counseling, dislikes school, has suffered from a great deal of emotional stress, and wishes she could just disappear (D. Williams).

In 2007, national and international news covered the story of Megan Meier. The 13-year-old eighth grader from a small town in Missouri committed suicide in 2006 after being harassed on MySpace by someone she thought was a 16-year-old boy named Josh Evans (Jones, 2008).

In 2008, six teenaged girls were arrested for kidnapping and assault after videotaping themselves beating a female classmate. They intended to upload the video to the Internet. Allegedly, the victim had made comments about the girls on MySpace ("Teens Arrested," 2008).

Despite these recent high-profile incidents, some still view cyberbullying among teens as inconsequential. They likely haven't experienced it on a personal level. And they likely haven't spoken to John Halligan, Debra Johnston, Mark Neblett, or Tina Meier, who each lost a child to suicide after the child was cyberbullied. Some other stories from youth who have contacted us emphasize similar devastating implications:

I get bullied every day and I just want to hang myself. . . . I'm thinking about it but I doubt I will. . . .

—Submitted anonymously

My friends don't want me around and I have invaded their privacy by Bebo and found out that they hate me but feel sorry for me and bitch about me. Everything I say to them goes around my school. They have taken over my Bebo account more than once and sent messages around saying that I had a sex change when I went on holidays. They are the only people in my class that I hang around with and I don't want to lose them but I have become depressed and suicidal and am afraid that if I'm pushed over the edge then it will be too late.

—Submitted anonymously

One of the reasons why cyberbullying is not taken seriously is that there remain a number of adults who continue to perceive traditional bullying as simply “a rite of passage among adolescents,” as “boys being boys,” or even as an inevitable and instructive element of growing up. If you experienced bullying during your formative years, perhaps you share those beliefs. However, we believe that if emotional, psychological, and potentially even physical harm stemming from online aggression can be reduced or prevented, it is definitely worth the effort. Our conversations with bullied youth around the world corroborate that sentiment. This book represents our effort to educate school personnel about cyberbullying so that they are better equipped to address, prevent, and respond to electronic harassment in meaningful and productive ways. Before delving deeper into how to identify, prevent, and respond to cyberbullying, it is important to understand its component parts: teens, technology, and bullying.

TEENS AND TECHNOLOGY

Just as the telephone revolutionized interpersonal interaction in the 20th century by enhancing our ability to “reach out and touch” others, and as the automobile provided us the means to transcend space and time constraints previously insurmountable, information technology has dramatically altered and expanded the way in which individuals communicate. According to market research, 1.26 billion people accessed the Internet in November 2007, accounting for just over 19 percent of the world’s population and a growth of 249.6 percent since 2000. Approximately 335 million of those are in North America (where Internet access has penetrated over 70 percent of the population, Miniwatts Marketing Group, 2008). These numbers will continue to grow as computer systems and telecommunications capabilities reach farther and deeper into the countries of the world.

As a result of this rapid expansion of technology, kids are now being raised in an Internet-enabled world where blogs (Web logs), social networking Web sites, and instant messaging are competing with face-to-face and telephone communication as the dominant means and methods through which personal interaction takes place. Teenagers today have

Table 1.1 Teen Internet Activities (Online Teens; *N* = 886)

| <i>Do you ever . . .</i> | <i>Percent</i> |
|---|----------------|
| Go to Web sites about movies, TV shows, music groups, or sports stars | 81 |
| Get information about news and current events | 77 |
| Send or receive instant messages (IMs) | 68 |
| Watch video sharing sites | 57 |
| Use an online social networking site like MySpace or Facebook | 55 |
| Get information about a college or university you are thinking of attending | 55 |
| Play computer or console games online | 49 |
| Buy things online, such as books, clothes, and music | 38 |
| Look for health, dieting, or physical fitness information | 28 |
| Download a podcast | 19 |
| Visit chat rooms | 18 |

SOURCE: Pew Internet & American Life Project Survey of Parents and Teens, October–November 2006. Margin of error for teens is $\pm 4\%$.

the Internet immediately after returning home from school to check messages or comments left on their social networking profile page(s) (further discussed in Chapter 4) and use their cell phones to send text messages to friends at all hours of the day (including, in some cases, while at school).

Apart from the obvious benefits of information at one's fingertips, entertainment value, and speed of correspondence, online interaction can be very useful to teach youth various social and emotional skills that are essential to handling life. For example, cyberspace provides a venue to learn and refine one's ability to exercise self-control, to relate to others' viewpoints with tolerance and respect, to express sentiments in a healthy and normative manner, and to engage in critical thinking and decision making (I. R. Berson, Berson, & Ferron, 2002; M. J. Berson, 2000). In addition, adolescents are at a stage where they are negotiating beliefs, boundaries, roles, and goals as they discover, develop, and refine their self-identity (Calvert, 2002; Erikson, 1950; Turkle, 1995), and online socialization and interaction can assist tremendously in that regard.

Resource C

Cyberbullying Scenarios for Discussion

SCENARIO 1

James is frustrated and saddened by the comments his high school peers are making about his sexuality. Furthermore, it appears a group of male students is creating fake e-mail accounts at Yahoo.com and sending love notes to other male students as if they came from James—who is mortified at the thought of what is happening.

If you were a school guidance counselor or administrator within the school, what would you do if James approached you with the problem? What about if you were James's mom or dad? What can James do to deal with the embarrassment? What would be some incorrect and unacceptable ways that James might try to deal with this problem?

SCENARIO 2

Two female sixth graders, Katie and Sarah, are exchanging malicious instant messages back and forth because of a misunderstanding involving a boy named Jacob. The statements escalate in viciousness from trivial name-calling to very vicious and inflammatory statements, including death threats.

Internet Use Contract

Child Expectations

I understand that using the family computer is a privilege that is subject to the following rules:

1. I will respect the privacy of others who use this computer. I will not open, move, or delete files that are not in my personal directory.
2. I understand that Mom and Dad may access and look at my files at any time.
3. I will not download anything or install programs without first asking Mom or Dad.
4. I will never give out private information while online. At no time will I ever give out my last name, phone number, address, or school name—even if I know the person with whom I am communicating. My screen name will be:_____.
5. I understand that I can use the computer for approved purposes only.
6. I will never write or post anything online that I would not want Mom or Dad to see. I will not use profanity or otherwise offensive language. If I receive messages or view content with offensive language, I will report it to Mom and Dad immediately.
7. I will never agree to meet an online friend in person without first asking Mom or Dad. Dangerous people may try to trick me into meeting up with them.
8. If I ever feel uncomfortable about an experience online, I will immediately tell mom or dad. I understand that Mom and Dad are willing to help me and will not punish me as long as these rules are followed.

Parent Expectations

I understand that it is my responsibility to protect my family and to help them receive the best of what the Internet has to offer. In that spirit, I agree to the following:

1. I will listen calmly. If my child comes to me with a problem related to online experiences, I promise not to get angry but to do my best to help my child resolve the situation.
2. I will be reasonable. I will set reasonable rules and expectations for Internet usage. I will establish reasonable consequences for lapses in judgment on the part of my child.
3. I will treat my child with dignity. I will respect the friendships that my child may make online as I would offline friends.
4. I will not unnecessarily invade my child's privacy. I promise not to go further than necessary to ensure my child's safety. I will not read diaries or journals, nor will I inspect e-mails or computer files unless there is a serious concern.
5. I will not take drastic measures. No matter what happens, I understand that the Internet is an important tool that is essential to my child's success in school or business, and I promise not to ban it entirely.
6. I will be involved. I will spend time with my child and be a positive part of my child's online activities and relationships—just as I am offline.

List of prohibited Web sites and software applications:

Signed:

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