

Cyberbullying: Identification, Prevention and Response

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This reference guide is designed to help teachers, counselors, administrators and other school professionals understand cyberbullying and what to do about it. Prevention ideas, as well strategies to respond to cyberbullying when it occurs, are presented. By addressing both the causes and consequences of this growing problem, those on the front lines of education can be better equipped to deal with it.

What is Cyberbullying?

Although students have been bullying each other for generations, today's youth are able to utilise technology to expand the reach and extent of their harm. This phenomenon, called cyberbullying, is defined as: "willful and repeated harm inflicted through the use of computers, mobile phones, and other electronic devices". It includes incidents where students use technology, usually computers or mobile phones, to harass, threaten, intimidate, humiliate or otherwise hassle their peers.

For example, students can send hurtful or intimidating messages to a classmate, or promote gossip and rumour-spreading by texting their entire peer group about someone. Teens also create web pages, videos and profiles on social networking sites (such as Facebook) that make fun of or ridicule others. They can also take pictures of others in a bedroom, a bathroom or another location where privacy is expected, and then post or distribute them online or through their mobile phones. More recently, some students are recording unauthorised videos of other kids and uploading them (to YouTube, for example) for the world to see, rate, tag and discuss. It is also happening with portable gaming devices, in 3-D virtual worlds and on social gaming sites, and also in sites that involve the use of webcams. Moreover, since many mobile phones available to youth are smart phones (e.g., iPhones, Blackberries, Droids), they often have full computing, recording and Internet surfing capabilities on a device that is always with them.

Negative Effects of Cyberbullying

Many targets of cyberbullying report feeling depressed, sad, angry and/or frustrated. As one teenager stated: "It makes me hurt both physically and mentally. It scares me and takes away all my confidence. It makes me feel sick and worthless." Victims reveal that they are afraid or embarrassed to go to school. In addition, research has revealed a link between cyberbullying and low self-esteem, family problems, academic problems, school violence and delinquent behaviour. Cyberbullied youth also report having suicidal thoughts, and there have been a number of recent examples in Australia where teens who were victimised ended up taking their own lives.



"I was surfing the Internet and decided to look at my email. Kristina, a friend from school, in an email said 'tomorrow watch your back we are coming for you'. It made me feel so bad I started to cry. Nobody likes me."

—Anonymous

Why is Cyberbullying Becoming a Major Concern?

Cyberbullying may grow in frequency and scope because increasing numbers of students are using computers and mobile phones to communicate. Two-thirds of students go online every day for school work, to keep in touch with their friends, to play games, to learn about celebrities, to share their digital creations or for many other reasons. Because these online communication tools have become an important part of their lives, it is not surprising that some have decided to use these devices to be malicious or menacing towards others. The fact that teens are connected to technology 24/7 means they are susceptible to victimisation (and able to act on mean intentions towards others) around the clock. Apart from a measure of anonymity, it is also easier to be hateful using typed words rather than spoken words face-to-face. And because some adults have been slow to respond to cyberbullying, many cyberbullies feel that there are little to no consequences for their actions.

Additionally, cyberbullying crosses all geographical boundaries. The Internet has opened up the whole world to users who access it on a broad array of devices. As a result some students feel free to post or send whatever they want while online without considering how that content can inflict pain – and sometimes cause severe psychological and emotional trauma.

"A girl that was a lot bigger than me made me cry when I talked to her online because she told me if she saw me in school she was going to stuff me in a locker and that no one was going to find me for a very long time. I faked being sick for a week and a half until I found the courage deep inside me to go to school. Nothing bad ever happened. I was really relieved."

—High School senior from New York

How Cyberbullying Affects Schools

When students use technology to harass their peers, it occurs in two primary ways. First, cyberbullying can take place in the school through the use of school-owned resources (such as lab computers or school-issued laptops and the wired or wireless school network) or through personal devices used on school grounds (mobile phones, iPads, netbooks, etc.). In these situations, administrators have full authority to address the misbehaviour if it violates school policy or otherwise detracts from the purpose, intent and goals of the school.



Second, cyberbullying can happen off-campus on home computers, mobile phones and other electronic devices using a non-school Internet connection. In these situations, school administrators are often more reluctant to get involved. While this is a legally complicated situation and courts have typically supported the free expression (First Amendment) rights of students, several rulings have upheld the actions of school administrators in disciplining students for off-campus actions.

In such cases, the schools must show that the misbehaviour substantially or materially disrupted learning, or interfered with the educational mission or school discipline, or that school-owned technology was used to harass, or threaten other students or infringe with their rights to feel and be safe and secure.

Despite the legal uncertainties, schools should always respond to all cyberbullying incidents that they are made aware of. With relatively minor situations, contacting the parents of the student(s) involved may be all that is necessary to stop the behaviour from continuing. Students also need to be made aware that all forms of bullying that interfere with the learning environment at school are potentially subject to school sanctions such as detention, suspension or loss of extra-curricular privileges.