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JUST TURN THE DARN THING OFF: UNDERSTANDING CYBERBULLYING

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Abstract

The central role that the Internet now plays in the life of children has transformed everything about bullying between youth in the First World. Three features characterize cyberbullying: it evolves rapidly, adults differ fundamentally from children in their use of the Internet, and children are comfortable with technology but ignorant about the psychological impact of their online behaviors and the dangers to which they expose themselves and their families. This presentation will review the Massachusetts Aggression Reduction Center's innovative and aggressive approach to researching and addressing both bullying and cyberbullying.

Just Turn the Darn Thing Off

Bullying and aggression in schools in Massachusetts today have reached epidemic proportions (Nansel et al., 2001). While always in existence, bullying behaviors have increased in frequency and in severity in the past few decades (Olweus, 1993). Abusive bullying behaviors begin in elementary school, peak during middle school, and begin to subside as children progress through their high school years (Cohn & Cantor, 2003). Nationwide statistics suggest that somewhere between one in six and one in four students are frequently bullied at school (Nansel et al., 2001). The 2005 Youth Risk Behavior Survey in Massachusetts found that 24 percent of Massachusetts teenagers reported being bullied at school in the year before the survey. One-fourth of Massachusetts schools in a December 2006 survey conducted by the Massachusetts Aggression Reduction Center (MARC) characterized the bullying in their school as "serious" or "extremely serious" (Englander, 2007). The problem does not seem to be improving. In that same survey, 54 percent of Massachusetts schools indicated that bullying had become more of a problem "in the last few years" (Englander, 2007). One study of Massachusetts schools found that most children who were bullied in the state were victimized for six months or longer (Mullin-Rindler, 2003). The U.S. Department of Education has found that bullying increased 5 percent between 1999 and 2001 (U.S. Department of Education, 2002) and the National Education Association (NEA) has suggested that bullying is a serious problem in U.S. Schools (NEA, 2003).

Bullying behaviors are associated with catastrophic violence. In the 2004-2005 school year, 24 school deaths in the U.S. were the results of shootings (National School Safety and Security Services, 2005), and the most common reason students bring weapons to school is protection against bullies (National Youth Violence Prevention Resource Center, 2002). We now know that the school shooters of the 1990s often reported being the chronic victims of bullies (Cohn & Canter, 2003). In the 1990s, a string of copycat shootings in suburban and rural school districts caused enormous alarm, and, although more recent attacks have been averted, vigilance and fear remain high (Englander, 2001).

Bullying has increased online as well as offline. Cyberbullying has emerged as one result of the increasingly online social life in which modern teens and children engage. Teens reported having received threatening messages, having had private emails or messages forwarded without their consent; having had an

embarrassing picture of themselves posted online without their consent; or having had rumors spread about them online (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2007).

Because online teenage life is ever-present among First World teenagers, cyberbullying may become – or may already be – the dominant form of bullying behavior among children. Is cyberbullying more common than schoolyard bullying? A recent telephone study of 886 U.S. Internet users age 12 to 17 (conducted October to November, 2006) found that one-third (32 percent) of all teenagers who use the Internet say they have been targeted for cyberbullying online (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2007). Another 2006 survey of 18- and 19-year old college freshman (conducted by the Massachusetts Aggression Reduction Center (MARC) at Bridgewater State College) found that 40 percent reported having been “harassed, bullied, stalked, or threatened via instant messaging” (Englander, 2006). One-fifth (20 percent) of the respondents in that study also admitted being a cyberbully themselves. Over two-thirds (73 percent) had seen an insulting, threatening, or degrading profile on a social networking website such as MySpace. A follow-up MARC survey in 2007 of undergraduate students found that 24 percent admitted to cyberbullying and that, again, 40 percent admitted to being victimized online. A 2006 poll of 1,000 children conducted by Fight Crime: Invest in Kids, found cyberbullying frequencies of about 33 percent - similar to those found by Pew and MARC (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2007). These numbers suggest that cyberbullying (with about 35-40 percent admitting victimization) may be more common than traditional bullying (with about 20-24 percent admitting victimization).

In the most recent MARC survey (Englander, 2007), most cyberbullying perpetrators attributed their online bullying to either “anger” (65 percent) or “a joke” (35 percent) with “revenge” and “no reason” being distant third choices. More than two-thirds of students knew a friend who had been victimized online and almost one-fourth (24 percent) characterized cyberbullying as either prevalent or very prevalent in their high school. Even if cyberbullying is more prevalent than in-person bullying, the focus of cyberbullying seems to be similar to the focus of bullying: the most common foci for cyberbullies were someone’s appearance and/or who they dated or befriended.

Cyberbullying seems to evoke bullying behaviors among some adolescents who otherwise might not bully. Only 13 percent of the college students in MARC’s 2007 study (above) expressed the opinion that most cyberbullies “would bully no matter what;” instead, they saw bullying online as an opportunistic crime (“easier because you don’t see the person” (69 percent)), done because “you can do it anonymously” (65 percent). More than two-thirds of the respondents (72 percent) characterized cyberbullies as predominantly female – a stark contrast to the traditional view that males are predominant in aggression (Englander, 2006). Females appear to use cyberbullying predominately for revenge, while boys used it mostly “as a joke.” These data suggest that different approaches may need to be tried with boys and girls regarding cyberbullying, and that cyberbullying “attracts” more female offenders than traditional bullying ever did. Clearly, cyberbullying throws a wider net than traditional “in-person” aggression, and more and different types of offenders should be expected to emerge.

What is Bullying?

Bullying refers to the physical and or psychological abuse perpetuated by one powerful child upon another with the intention to harm or dominate. Typically, bullying is repetitive, intentional, and involves an imbalance of power (Olweus, 1991). Bullies enjoy social power and therefore seek out situations where they can dominate others. Bullying can be either direct, such as physical or verbal aggression, or indirect, such as insults, threats, name calling, spreading rumors, or encouraging exclusion from a peer group (Olweus, 1993).

It is unfortunate that adults often consider bullying an inevitable and even normal part of childhood. This belief undoubtedly stems from memories of the qualitative bullying of past generations, which was much less

frequent, less supported by children's peers, conducted by socially ostracized children, and never, of course, online. Little wonder that adults today frequently ask why "such a fuss" is made over bullying – which is, as they recall it, an unpleasant but infrequent childhood behavior. One result of this attitude is that adults sometimes fail to intervene, which results in the victim feeling powerless and hopeless in a situation that is torturous in nature (Davis, 2004). If children feel powerless in situations that adults acknowledge, yet dismiss, how much more powerless must they feel when they are victimized in a way that adults cannot even begin to comprehend?

What Has Changed?

Bullies today are popular and socially successful in a way that they have not been in past generations (LaHoud, 2007). The popularity of bullies may be a significant change, but it pales in comparison to the significance of the dawn of the age of cyber immersion. Cyber immersion refers to the utilization of cyber technology and the Internet as a central, rather than as an adjunct, element of daily life (Brown, Jackson & Cassidy, 2006). The generational shift from cyber utilization (using the Internet as a convenience and an adjunct to real life) to cyber immersion (using the Internet as a primary or central method of communication, commerce, relationships, and recreation) is a generational shift which has not seen its equal since the Sexual Revolution in the 1960s and 1970s or the turn-of-the-century immigration into the United States. Then, as now, the older generation lacks a basic understanding of how the younger generation is thinking, feeling, and acting. This ignorance adds an additional layer of obstacles to the work that adults must do to combat childhood abusiveness or bullying.

Cyberbullying – the abuse of choice of the Cyber Immersion Generation – is the perfect bullying crime. It is very hurtful, yet (generally) does not kill its victims; it is extremely simple and easy; it does not require significant planning or thought; it similarly does not require self-confidence or social finesse; and the perpetrator is extremely unlikely to be caught or disciplined. The Cyber Immersion Generation ensures that the victim will be accessible, and the generation gap ensures likewise that the oversight of adults will be sporadic or absent. Technological advances designed to prevent cyberbullying are often easily circumvented (e.g., school computer system filters) and adults are so out of touch that they are often unaware of the frequency of cyberbullying or the types that exist – never mind being unaware of how to control or reduce it.

Risk Factors for Cyberbullying

Little research exists that can inform the study of cyberbullying risks. Some experts have postulated that risks for cyberbullying include less education about electronic communications, risks, and values; being less able to rely on parents for guidance about the Internet; and being less attentive to – or not receiving – Internet safety messages (Willard, 2006). Only eight percent of schools have any education for children about Internet safety or bullying, even though experts agree that education in this area is the key to safety (Devaney, 2007). Anecdotal evidence suggests that being a victim of offline bullying may increase the probability of becoming an online cyberbully (Englander, 2007). Schools in Massachusetts have reported that many offline bullies operate online as well (Englander, 2007), suggesting that risk factors for cyberbullying may include the risk factors for traditional bullying.

At the time of this writing, cyberbullying occurs primarily through webpages, online social networking websites, and instant messaging via the Internet and cellphones. The 2007 MARC cyberbullying study found that despite the high numbers of online abuse victims, instant messaging and talking on cell phones were only slightly less popular as preferred communication strategies to speaking face-to-face. Thus, the Cyber Immersion Generation sees digital communication as indispensable, regardless of its misuses by peers.

The rapid evolution of technology and the way it is used renders any specific type of cyberbullying definition

(e.g., “sending abusive emails”) obsolete by publication date. Indeed, it is perfectly possible that in the short months intervening between this writing and its publication, new technologies may well have spurred new types of cyberbullying.

A characteristic that makes cyberbullying particularly insidious is that derogatory statements or threats and humiliating pictures or videos of a person can instantaneously be sent to hundreds of viewers with the click of a button. This can exploit the natural developmental tendency of adolescents to feel constantly watched or “on stage” (often referred to as “imaginary audience”). Bad as it is to be cornered by a schoolyard bully in an isolated corner of the schoolyard, there isn’t a vast audience to witness your humiliation. Thus the problems associated with schoolyard bullying may be magnified in cases of cyberbullying (Englander, 2006). Anecdotal cases support that possibility (e.g., the Ryan Halligan case (Halligan, 2003)), but the real research remains to be done.

Different Types of Bullies

Many theoreticians have offered typologies of bullies. The following typology has been utilized (Englander & Lawson, In Press) in response to the advent of cyberbullying and the resulting comparisons that now occur between school yard (traditional) bullying and cyberbullying. Traditional psychological theory might hold that the vehicle is of less importance than the intent. That is, if one wants to be a bully, then one finds a vehicle (schoolyard or cyber) – and if a vehicle is unavailable another will be used (e.g., if one cannot bully online then one bullies in person). The motivation is paramount. Other psychological theories emphasize the opportunistic situation more (i.e., that some types of bullying will only occur when the situation permits or encourages them), and these theories seem to “fit” better with cyberbullying since many cyberbullies do not choose in-person bullying if the cyber route is denied (Englander, 2006).

It is notable that some experts have already identified patterns of differences between children who only bully online and children who bully in person or both in person and online (Aftab, 2004). In working with schools, MARC finds it useful to identify five types of bullies:

Bullies

These children are “traditional” school yard bullies. Their motivation is to dominate over their victims, increase their own social status, and instill fear in potential victims. Their modus operandi is to abuse their victims, either physically or (more commonly) psychologically/verbally. As a group, they tend to have high self-esteem and a marked tendency to perceive themselves as under attack in a hostile environment (Staub, 1999). Their academic achievement may be moderate to poor, and aggression is their preferred tool for domination. They rely on peer support or lack of intervention in order to continue their activities. Limit-setting is the adult response which operates best to reduce this type of bullying behavior (Olweus, 1993).

Eggers

Eggers (referred to by Olweus as “henchmen” or “followers”) are so called because their main function is to egg on bullies. These children are a primary support system for school yard bullies. Eggers often have poor self-esteem and poor social skills. They befriend and assist bullies because they fear being victimized and because by doing so they gain a high-status, socially powerful friend. Unlike bullies, they do not see their own bullying behaviors as a justified response to a hostile world; they accurately perceive that their behaviors are harmful and unacceptable but they tend to minimize their own involvement or minimize the impact of their own behaviors. While some eggers are consistently friendly with a bully, a subtype are Floaters. Floaters are not regular friends of bullies, but they may egg on or help

bullies during specific bullying situations because they fear being victimized themselves, or because they see it as socially desirable to help out popular bullies. They may “float” in and out of helping bullies. In some situations, they may be a silent bystander, while in others, they may actively assist the bully (e.g., by laughing at a victim). Like all eggheads, they minimize the damage their behavior causes and try to avoid self-confrontation regarding their own role in bullying. Floaters may be “unintentional cyberbullies” as well (see below).

All-Around Bullies

All-Around Bullies are school yard bullies who are widening their bullying activities into the electronic realm (i.e., cyberbullying). Their motivation and M.O. is the same as bullies; they simply regard the electronic realm as a new arena of opportunity to continue their abusive activities.

Only-Cyberbullies

Only-Cyberbullies are children who would not engage in school yard bullying, but do engage in cyberbullying because they have a set of beliefs or attitudes that support cyberbullying specifically. For example, only-cyberbullies might not bully in person because they are powerless socially, or invested in school and academics; yet, they are willing to bully online because they believe that cyberbullying is without risk, since adults are seen as simply not being part of the virtual world. The only-cyberbully could be a victim of an in-person bully at school, who attacks his tormenter online, where he can do so relatively safely.

Unintentional Cyberbullies

These children also cyberbully because of a set of beliefs or attitudes, but they appear to do so without the intent to actively bully that characterizes only-cyberbullies (#4 type above). One common attitude in this group is that the Internet “doesn’t count” or “isn’t real” and so what happens there doesn’t particularly hurt anybody or carry any risks. Because of their limited ability to apply their own victimization experiences, children may believe these myths even when they themselves have been hurt online. Alternatively, some unintentional cyberbullies may truly be intending to joke but their writing does not convey their tone accurately, and their words are taken seriously even though they were not intended to be taken that way. We know that many adults are overconfident that their writing accurately reflects its intended emotional tone (Kruger et al., 2005), and it is reasonable to assume that children make similarly poor judgments.

The Massachusetts Aggression Reduction Center

In the fall of 2004, the first author of this paper began a year as the first Presidential Fellow at Bridgewater State College in Bridgewater, Massachusetts. That year was utilized to set up the Massachusetts Aggression Reduction Center (MARC) and launch its model programs to the Massachusetts K-12 educational community. The approach of the Center is somewhat different from that of most other experts and Centers in the field of bullying prevention. First, the Center is an academic Center, with a salaried faculty member as its Director. It brings services to K-12 education at either no cost or a very low cost to schools. This has removed the profit motive from a field of expertise that previously was largely defined by the marketplace. In addition, MARC utilizes the resources of an academic institution in a very efficient manner. Services from the Center are provided by faculty members, graduate students, and trained undergraduates. The undergraduates in the Center are particularly valuable as high-status, role-model peers in helping teenagers in local high schools form and promote their own bullying prevention work in their own schools.

When MARC goes into a school, we focus not only on services but on assistance with the implementation of services (Berends, Bodilly, & Kirby, 2002). While assisting schools with implementation, we work intensively with administrators, classroom teachers, support staff, students, and parent and community groups. We have found that it is critical to address both bullying and cyberbullying; to only address traditional bullying is, in effect, to miss half the lesson. Several issues demand a particular focus when doing cyberbullying and bullying prevention work in K-12 schools including the following:

Be up to date regarding Information Technology and its misuses. This is not a reference to traditional knowledge about computers; knowing how to use Excel or Google is not enough. What are the problems that are currently referenced on security blogs? What trends in cyber behavior are currently seen? What kinds of cyberbullying are kids engaging in? It's not enough to know that kids can send each other nasty emails. It is important to know that they're starting to misuse three dimensional online worlds, or that they send each other phony e-greeting cards with malicious imbedded links.

Understand that cyberbullying and bullying are different but not separate. For the Cyber Immersion Generation, cyberbullying and bullying are integral and cannot be separated. If it happens in person, it will likely spill over into online life – and vice versa. However, the causes of these two types of bullying are different. Despite that, the co-existence of these two worlds needs to be understood and expected.

Understand that the role of technology is not going away. Using a “just turn the darn thing off” argument will only accomplish one result: students will be certain that you don't understand how they live and how they work. The cyber world is here to stay. Preparing children to live online may seem like a waste of time, unless you consider the alternative.

Education about cyberbullying is an important part of Internet safety. Many schools see Internet safety as a separate issue from cyberbullying, but children are much more likely to be cyberbullied than they are to be stalked or approached online by a threatening adult (Bangeman, 2007).

We must begin talking with children about cyberlife and how it fits in with “real” life. The only safety mechanism that children will ultimately retain is the one between their ears. Yet, most parents and most schools do not discuss Internet safety and cyberbullying with children. As cited above, one study found that a mere 8 percent of schools in the United States have any education for children about Internet safety or bullying, even though experts agree that education in this area is the key to safety (Devaney, 2007).

Encouraging reporting is job #1. I don't care how wonderful you are doing as an educator; however good you are at encouraging reporting, it's an issue that must be worked on in every school. Online rumors can be incredibly valuable sources of important information.¹

Discussion

During its first three years, outcome data have helped to identify several elements as the most important aspects of the MARC program.

¹ Encouraging reporting by children should be a high priority for every single principal in elementary, middle, junior, or high schools. In *every single* school shooting studied by the U.S. Secret Service (Vossekuil, Fein, Reddy, Borum, & Modzeleski, 2002), other children knew about the shooting prior to the actual event but *did not report it* to adults. It is no exaggeration to state that encouraging reporting – especially in elementary, middle, and high schools – can literally save lives.

Element # 1

Acknowledge that educators are overwhelmed, cannot know everything, and offer them help with implementation and assistance. There is no real substitute for an in-depth knowledge of the realities of teaching today. Factors such as low pay, tenure, the pressures of standardized testing, and increased class size may seem unrelated to bullying but in fact they are quite important. Increasing the pressure on teachers to be up-to-date in their fields decreases the time they have to gain expertise in new fields (such as cyberbullying). Acknowledging these realities renders classroom teachers and support staff more willing and ready to acquire new skills and be more receptive to the source of new information. In-service trainings, where expertise is brought to the school to train its faculty, must be responsive to the taxed and overwhelmed state of mind most educators bring to the training. Asking these professionals, for example, to explore their own personal feelings publicly may be well-intentioned but often seem to be interpreted as a waste of time; no one is really receptive to enforced psychotherapy under the guise of education. In contrast, emphasizing very practical and concrete steps that teachers can take away and implement immediately can actively encourage their acceptance of effective interventions.

Cyberbullying education for faculty needs to focus on the six issues noted above. The goal is not just to make sure faculty have a sense of “what is happening out there,” but also to raise their awareness about the difference between their and their students’ use of the Internet. Such awareness is truly the first step to understanding and discussions with children.

Because bullying and cyberbullying are so enmeshed, we rarely address one issue without addressing the other. Concrete response-skills are an important element in changing the culture of a school: what should a teacher do when encountering, for example, a student who appears to be the victim of bullying but insists that it is just “fooling around”? These are the kinds of concrete issues, in addition to online problems, that need to be addressed for schoolteachers and staff in schools today. Space limitations here prevent a complete review of the issues and examples we use, but the MARC website has more information (<http://www.MARCcenter.org>).

Element # 2

Use of the academic/teaching model rather than the marketplace model. An academic Center reduces and scales costs; removes the profit motive by utilizing a salaried professor as a Director; utilizes existing resources very effectively (such as students, computer and physical infrastructure, high quality levels of knowledge and expertise); and establishes, for the schools seeking services, a dependable source of qualified professionals. Using academic experts is no panacea and their knowledge about children’s aggression and bullying may not always be as high quality as desired, but academia generally represents a more dependable source of expertise than that offered by the public marketplace.

Element # 3

Research-informed practice. What works with bullies? What types of adult responses actually reduce their abusive behaviors? What do we know about the difference between different types of bullies (e.g., “bullies” versus “only-cyberbullies”). Research on traditional bullying abounds, while paucity characterizes the body of research on cyberbullying. Nevertheless, informed practices are best practices and it is important to keep in touch with the difference between anecdotal and experimental evidence – however compelling anecdotal evidence in the field may be.

Element # 4

Distinction between bullying and conflict. The final research element is the recognition that bullying and conflict are not the same. Bullying, unlike conflict, is defined by a power differential: A bully is very powerful, while a victim has little or no social power in the situation (Vaillancourt, 2004). This power differential means that, unlike equal-power conflicts, the bully has little or no incentive to “settle” the conflict; rather, he/she may be invested in its continuation (Englander, 2005). This is an important reason to avoid mediating bullying conflicts since successful mediation requires that both parties have some motivation to end the conflict in question (Englander, 2005).

Element # 5

Produce innovative programming that addresses persistent obstacles. First, adults need to become much more aware of the difference between the generations – the cyber utilization versus the Cyber Immersion Generations. Second, the most up to date issues emerging in cyberspace should be reviewed. Third, adults need guidance on beginning conversations with children about cyberbullying and cybersafety. The second issue renders long-term research difficult regarding outcomes, because no cyberbullying program can or should remain static for three or more years – the field itself evolves much more rapidly and our curricula are updated monthly to reflect that. (This is not an argument that outcomes research should not occur; it is merely an acknowledgment of the difficulty faced in this area.)

Element # 6

Address school climate. This means that everyone – faculty, administration, students, and parents – must get involved. Students, especially adolescent students, need to be proactive partners, not passive recipients of adult-led programs. Adults need to be sensitized to the issue of cyberbullying, to the reality of the school day, to the limitations schools face, and to their own responsibilities at home and in the community. It is easy to list these needs and very difficult to fulfill them. Despite the obvious implication of current statistics, we’ve encountered a staggering number of educators who deny the existence of any cyberbullying in “their” schools entirely. Parents, similarly, are often completely unaware of what their child is doing online (and sometimes in person) and, in any case, engaging their interest and attendance is a struggle. Innovative methods need to be found. We have experimented with morning presentations, evening presentations, parent/child discussion homework assignments, local cable access TV, and, generally, find that each method reaches a different subset of the community. This probably means that multiple efforts must be made at every school, but the future growth of the Internet may be one good avenue for communication.

Outcomes Research

At the time of this writing, analysis of past year’s outcome research is underway. Still, the past data clearly indicate several elements that are strong in the MARC program, most notably for this paper, the cyberbullying information and approach. Schools are consistently rating the program as both interesting and very effective in the short-term. Some anecdotal evidence suggests that more long-term education is needed, although the time and attention needed for that will be a challenge in the current climate in education in the U.S. Preliminary interviews with administrators at the end of the first year found that every school found these approaches helpful and effective (to varying degrees), and that the adolescent student engagement and faculty training were the most helpful elements. The program was further developed in its second and third years and research on the effectiveness during those years is currently underway.

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