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Call to Action: The Impact of Cyberbullying in the COVID Era

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Given the recent COVID-19 pandemic, research suggests that students are spending an increased amount of time online. Consequently, the opportunity for students engaged in, or students who are a victim of cyberbullying has increased as well. Bullying no longer begins and ends with the school bells; it has infiltrated every aspect of students' lives through the internet. Similar to bullying, cyberbullying leads to negative outcomes; the purpose of this article is to identify support, prevention, and intervention suggestions for parents, educators and schools, and mental health providers to decrease students' cyberbullying involvement.

Call to Action: The Impact of Cyberbullying

At the onset of the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic, cyberbullying emerged as a notable concern for parents, educators, and students (Sparks, 2020). Over the past two years, schools have adopted various methods for instructional delivery, including an immediate shift to online instruction (Vaillancourt et al., 2022). While the duration, intensity, and modality of this shift varied across states, districts, and grade levels, the opportunity for engaging in and experiencing cyberbullying escalated with the increased time spent online (Sparks, 2020). This shift, in combination with shelter-in-place orders, reduced access to face-to-face socialization for school-aged youth and resulted in an escalation in social interactions in electronic spaces. Apart from in-home family members, a large portion of academic and personal social interactions of youth occurred online, increasing access and opportunities to engage in and experience cyberbullying. Therefore, cyberbullying has been thrust into the forefront of social concerns among school-aged youth.

Defining Cyberbullying

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention defines bullying as "any unwanted aggressive behavior(s) by another youth or group of youths who are not siblings or current dating partners that involves an observed or perceived power imbalance and is repeated multiple times or is highly likely to be repeated" (Gladden et al., 2014, p. 7). Therefore, bullying includes an intent to cause physical or emotional harm, maintains an imbalance of physical or social power, and is repeated or likely to be repeated over time. Cyberbullying is recognized as a means by which bullying is perpetrated in electronic spaces and maintains the same definitional constructs (Smith et al., 2008). While the definition is consistent, cyberbullying may manifest differently. For example, the potential for repetition occurs immediately after something is shared online. As the use of technology increases, students are becoming more fluent online, and during the pandemic, this fluency increased due to virtual learning.

Virtual Learning

Prior to initial COVID-19 closures of PK-12 school buildings, virtual learning was an option for some families, and this option was available to those with access and availability of reliable internet infrastructure and quality online learning sources (Basar et al., 2021). During the 2017-2018 school year, only 21% of public schools

offered any courses entirely online (Diliberti et. al, 2019). By the end of March 2020, most public schools in the United States were closed due to the global pandemic (Donohue et al. 2020). This unprecedented closure required teachers to suddenly shift to various methods of online learning and virtual instruction. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, millions of students have transitioned their educational and social activities to online platforms. Given that most school-aged youth are online in some capacity, there is concern that traditional forms of bullying may transfer to online classrooms (Darmanjian, 2020; Farge, 2020). Prior to the increase in online learning, research demonstrated that 93% of students who reported experiencing cyberbullying also reported in person victimization (Hase et. al., 2015). While cyberbullying has been a concern for decades (Smith et al., 2008), the recent move to online instruction and virtual learning, coupled with increased online socialization, has escalated the need for school-based supports to reduce cyberbullying involvement.

While technology use was growing exponentially prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the need for online learning and virtual classrooms resulted in rapid development of electronic learning and social platforms (Alshwiah, 2021). Unfortunately, the unintended consequences of increased internet use and time online is a national tendency toward heightened sedentary habits, and increased modalities by which youth can experience and engage in cyberbullying. For example, early research in increased internet usage suggests that students with sedentary habits (more than three hours a day) were 55% more likely to be victims of bullying and more than twice as likely to be aggressors (Rech et al., 2013). Therefore, the purpose of this manuscript is to identify areas in students' lives where prevention and intervention can occur to help the ever-increasing threat of cyberbullying. Within each area, a brief review of the literature will be provided to identify effective strategies and/or suggestions to address cyberbullying.

Prevention & Intervention

While there are several stakeholders responsible for cyberbullying prevention, there are six primary domains: 1) law and legislators, 2) social media and electronic platform developers, 3) health care providers, 4) parents, 5) peers and bystanders, and 6) educators and schools(Ansary, 2020). While individuals from each of these domains hold a unique role in cyberbullying prevention, addressing each is beyond the scope of the current manuscript. Therefore, we will primarily focus on parents, schools, teachers, and mental health providers.

Parental Prevention and Supports

Parents play a critical role in cyberbullying prevention and interventions. Most parents believe it is both the school's and the parents' responsibility to teach children about cyberbullying, and many parents would turn to the school for support in helping their child with cyberbullying prevention (Tal & Prebor, 2020). However, parents are often the first to recognize the warning signs associated with cyberbullying involvement. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services developed www.stopbullying.gov (Health Resources and Services Administration, 2020), which provides a list of warning signs associated with cyberbullying victimization and perpetration (see Table 1).

Table 1. *Warning signs for cyberbullying victimization and perpetration*

Cyberbullying Victimization Warning Signs	Cyberbullying Perpetration Warning Signs
Unexpected changes in device use	Quickly switches screens or hides device when adult is near
Appears nervous about attending school	Gets unusually upset if they cannot have their device
Changes in mood, behavior, or performance	Laughs excessively when using their device
Becomes abnormally withdrawn	Increased disciplinary actions due to behavior problems
Changes in eating or sleeping habits	Demonstrated increased insensitivity towards others
Avoids discussions about online activity	Appears overly confident about technology skills
Frequently asks to leave school	Appears overly concerned about popularity
Desire to spend more time with parents than peers	Increasingly withdrawn from family

Becomes secretive regarding online activity	Seems to be using multiple online accounts

Note. Table adapted from www.stopbullying.gov

In addition to recognizing the warning signs associated with cyberbullying, parents should actively monitor their child's technology use, including keeping the device screen visible, using parental controls, establishing rules and guidelines, and encouraging activities away from electronics (Perren et al., 2012). Parents should also maintain an open line of parent-child communication and actively engage in conversations with their child about responsible technology use. Specifically, parents should ask direct questions about online activity. For example, parents could use the following questions as conversation starters:

- What did you do online today?
- Who did you talk to online today?
- What is your favorite thing to do online?
- What is your favorite game to play online?
- What makes you most happy when you are online?
- What types of videos did you watch online today?
- Do you have friends online that you don't know in person?
- How do you decide what you are going to do online?
- Can you teach me how to play (insert game) online?

By using conversation starters, parents can demonstrate that they are interested in their child's online activity, and that they care about what they are doing online (Helfrich et al., 2020; Aboujaoude et al., 2015; Ansary, 2020).

Most importantly, parents should teach their child safety online, and provide support as they develop digital fluency. For example, parents should teach their child that online activity establishes a permanent record; how to report questionable online activity, uncomfortable interactions, or threatening messages; strategies for maintaining private usernames and passwords; and the dangers of disclosing personal information or sending inappropriate photos and messages (Tomczyk & Potyrala, 2021). To help support the development of digital fluency, parents should also become familiar with social media apps, online games, and electronic platforms. If a concern does arise, parents can use the school as a professional resource and report concerns to the website or service provider (Aboujaoude et al., 2015; Ansary, 2020; Helfrich et al., 2020). Given the increase in online activity among school-aged youth, parents serve a critical role in cyberbullying prevention.

School Prevention and Supports

Schools play a primary role in cyberbullying prevention and intervention efforts. The foundation of cyberbullying prevention is to foster a positive school climate. This includes establishing an environment that allows for the cultivation of positive peer interactions and increased peer social support. Unfortunately, limited bystander support is associated with youth believing it is too late to respond, others will interfere, it is not their responsibility, and concern over what others will think or how others will react (Ansary, 2020). Schools can encourage youth to avoid issues related to cyberbullying by direct instruction in digital citizenship and outcomes related to cyberbullying. Common Sense Standards defines digital citizenship through six domains: 1) Media Balance & Well-Being; 2) Privacy & Security; 3) Digital Footprint & Identity; 4) Relationships & Communication; 5) Cyberbullying, Digital Drama & Hate Speech; and 6) News & Media Literacy (*Digital Citizenship Curriculum*, 2020). Fortunately, there are a number of prevention and intervention curricula for cyberbullying, which are outlined in Table 2.

Table 2. *Commercially Developed Cyberbullying Interventions*

Intervention Title	Length of Intervention	Program Elements
Living in Harmony[1]	Not reported	-Can be integrated in general subjects; -Targets personal and social skills (self-esteem, empathy, assertiveness, emotional self-control, and conflict resolution); -Targets technological skills (risks and proper use of technology)
Media Heroes[2]	Ten 90-minute Lessons Grades 6-8	-Shows assets and dangers to "new media"; -Discusses different aspects of cyberbullying (definitions, consequences, feelings and perspectives, roles of cyberbullying, how to take action, legal range, and parental involvement)
Cyberbullying: A prevention program[3]	Grades 6-10	-Targets the positive use of technology, cyberbullying, and respectful online interactions; -Sends home a letter explaining assignments, and call to action for parents to discuss internet safety and cyberbullying with their student
ViSC Program[4]	Grades 5-8 Program is implemented for over a year	-A general anti-bullying program for cyberbullying; -Discusses victimization and perpetration

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[1] Flores Builes et al., 2020

[2] Aboujaoude et al., 2015; Chaux et al., 2016; Della Cioppa et al., 2015; Wolfer et al., 2014
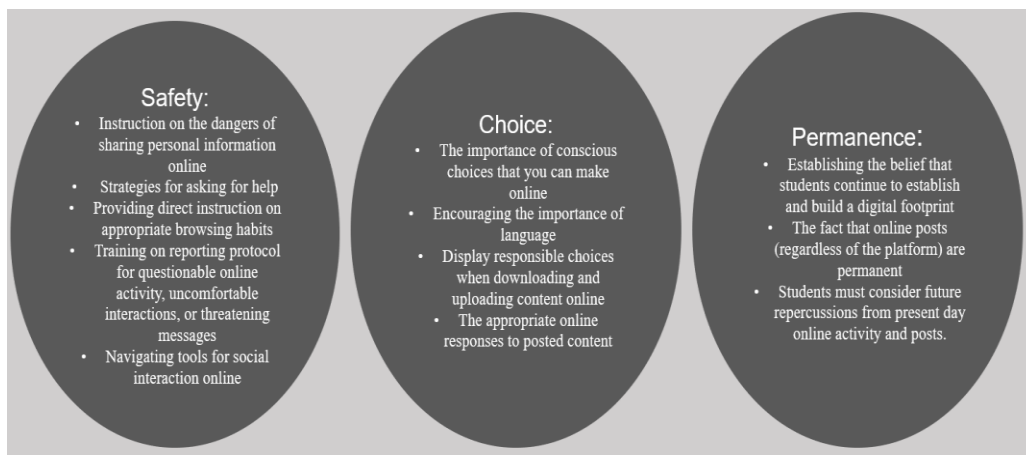
[3] Aboujaoude et al., 2015

[4] Gradinger et al., 2016

Outcomes			
-Effective to provide training on the use and risks of technology and fostered skills directly linked to the prevention of cyberbullying. -Results showed a positive impact on emotional self-awareness, problem solving, family supervision, and digital teaching tutoring was indicated in the experimental group receiving the intervention	-Effective in the reduction in traditional bullying perpetration as well as the reduction of cyberbullying perpetration. -The program received a 4/5 (80%) rating for the ease in which it can be implemented by educators	No Outcomes Reported	-Effective and sustainable to prevent cyberbullying and cyber victimization. -Lead to a decrease in cyberbullying and cyber-victimization -After 6 months, the results remained the same

Teachers' Prevention and Supports

In addition to commercially developed cyberbullying prevention programs, digital citizenship should be embedded throughout the daily curriculum. Consideration should be given to three domains: 1) Safety, 2) Choice, and 3) Permanence. See Figure 1 for examples of teaching safety, choice, and permanence.

Figure 1. *Foundational Concepts of Teaching Cyberbullying Prevention and Digital Citizenship*

Safety:
- Instruction on the dangers of sharing personal information online
- Strategies for asking for help
- Providing direct instruction on appropriate browsing habits
- Training on reporting protocol for questionable online activity, uncomfortable interactions, or threatening messages
- Navigating tools for social interaction online

Choice:
- The importance of conscious choices that you can make online
- Encouraging the importance of language
- Display responsible choices when downloading and uploading content online
- The appropriate online responses to posted content

Permanence:
- Establishing the belief that students continue to establish and build a digital footprint
- The fact that online posts (regardless of the platform) are permanent
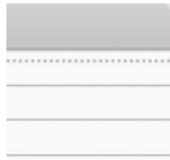- Students must consider future repercussions from present day online activity and posts.

Although teaching digital citizenship is important to embed within the daily curriculum, teachers should also establish a rapport with their students that cultivates an open line for student-teacher communication about online activity. For example, teachers can take a scaffolded approach to communication by asking the following questions of youth at risk for increased cyberbullying:

- How do you spend your time online?
- How much time do you spend online?
- How do you spend your time when you are not online?
- Do you have any close friends online?
- Has someone ever asked you to share personal information online?
- Have you ever felt uncomfortable talking to someone online?
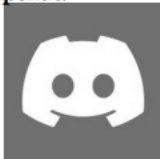- Who do you trust at school to talk to about cyberbullying?

Teachers should also familiarize themselves with the evolving landscape of social media apps, online games, and electronic platforms (see Figure 2). By being consumers of changing technology, teachers can be more prepared to support their students and better equipped to respond to concerns. Additionally, by embedding digital citizenship, establishing an open line of communication, and being avid consumers of evolving technology, teachers can provide parents recommendations for addressing cyberbullying concerns outside the school environment.

Figure 2. *Popular Social Media Apps and Electronic Platforms*

The notes app on iPhone now have access to "shared notes." Much like google docs, students can collaborate and communicate with one another. This is the new way to pass notes to one another in class and can be a vessel for verbal and cyberbullying.

Instagram is a social media platform that you can showcase pictures and videos as well as save and send different messages to people. There are little privacy controls and open avenues for different instances of cyberbullying.

One of the most popular apps. Students feel empowered to do things on this app because it "disappears" after viewed or after an allotted amount of time; however, we need to stress the importance of how even though the snaps aren't visible, you can still retrieve them after contacting snapchat.

Discord is an app that allows users to contact and talk to people online via voice, text, or video. This is commonly used while playing video games. Many report instances in which racial slurs, explicit content, and more is mentioned.

Tik Tok Is an app that students use for creating and sharing short videos. There are very little privacy controls and students can be subjected to explicit content.

With the iPhone's current update, students can disguise apps with a different logo for the lock screen. This can mean that they misdirect teachers and parents with what apps are really being accessed.

Omegle is an online video chatting website that allows students to chat randomly with strangers. This could be dangerous for students as it's unregulated and have little privacy settings. There is a history of Child Pornography shown on this site.

Mental Health Providers Prevention and Supports

Another school-based support for addressing cyberbullying is mental health providers. For example, school psychologists are active agents in addressing school violence, promoting safe schools, and providing mental health services within the schools (NASP, 2020). They recognize that bullying and relational aggression are forms of school violence that can jeopardize the psychological and emotional well-being of children and adolescents; therefore, they should take on a leadership role in developing methods to reduce school violence, including cyberbullying (Elbedour et al., 2020). School psychologists can address the problem of cyberbullying among school-aged youth by developing, supporting, and evaluating effective prevention programs. See Figure 3 for the steps for mental health providers to take to help support students in schools.

Figure 3. *Steps for Mental Health Providers*

Step 1: Assess the problem

Step 2: Response to Intervention

Step 3: Collaboration
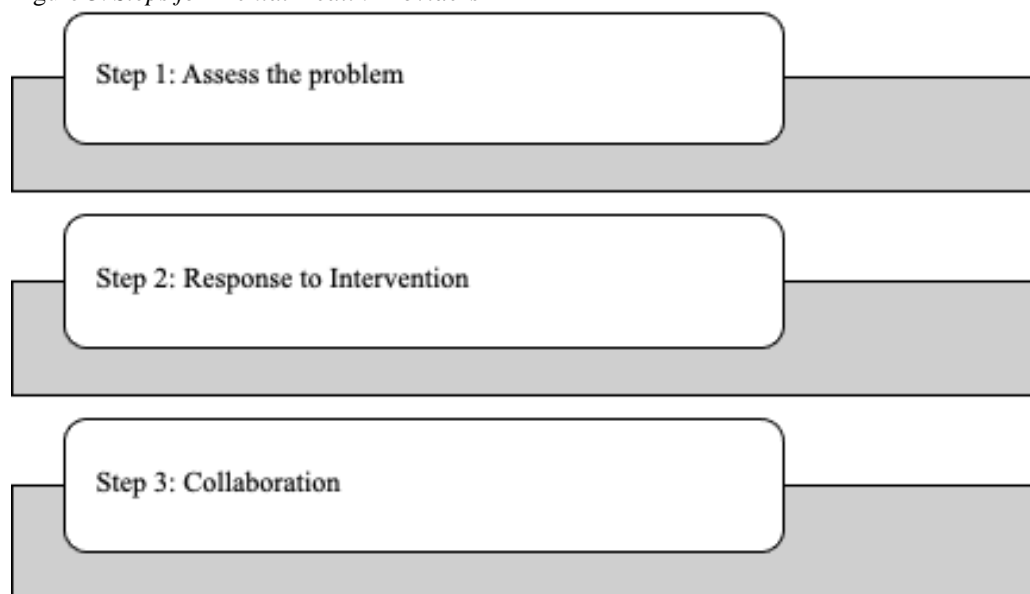
Step 1: Assess the problem. School mental health providers must be able to recognize the warning signs of cyberbullying perpetration and victimization. Administering universal screeners can help identify students at risk for school bullying and cyberbullying and provide educators the information necessary for early intervention. Universal screeners can be used to identify a wide range of problem behaviors of varying intensity, including those related to cyberbullying (Davis & Schmidt, 2016). Screening tools can identify risk characteristics early before they become too severe and when they are more responsive to interventions. For the best results, mental health providers should conduct universal screeners on a consistent basis (e.g., two times per year; Essex et al., 2009). These screening tools are used in conjunction with other data sources collected as part of regular school practices (e.g., office disciplinary referrals, school-wide climate data, nurse visits, individualized education program data) to connect students to relevant tiered supports. Fortunately, several systematic screening tools are available for use across preK-12, including:

- Behavior Assessment System for Children, 3rd Edition: Behavioral & Emotional Screening System (BASC-3; Kamphaus & Reynolds, 2015)
- Social, Academic, and Emotional Behavior Risk Screener (SAEBRS; Kilgus et al., 2013)
- Social Skills Improvement System-Performance Screening Guide (SsiS-PSG; Elliott & Gresham, 2007)

Step 2: Response to Intervention. Data generated from the screeners can be used to tailor interventions according to students' unique needs. School-based programs for cyberbullying have been evaluated extensively over the past years. Evidence suggests multidisciplinary, whole-school interventions are the most effective means of preventing and managing cyberbullying behavior (Cantone et al., 2015; Cross et al., 2015). Hutson et al. (2018) completed a systematic review of cyberbullying interventions programs and found that the most frequently used intervention components included education on cyberbullying, coping skills, empathy training, communication and social skills, and digital citizenship. Additionally, parent education on cyberbullying was also found to be important and was included in programs with significant outcomes. Schools should also implement school-wide positive behavior support plans to reduce risks associated with bullying and victimization, including cyberbullying (Orpinas et al., 2003, Sherer & Nickerson, 2010). Nunn (2010) suggested that teaching children and youth ways to avoid bullying works better than trying to stop perpetrators. These approaches include social skill lessons and digital citizenship (Jones & Mitchell, 2016; Whitted & Dupper, 2005). Schools' plans should include activities that involve the entire school, such as researching and disseminating information about local, state, and federal laws addressing internet abuse and cyberbullying. School mental health providers can support these school-based plans by designing, supporting, and/or implementing programs and interventions regarding ethical standards associated with cyberbullying, teaching empathy, targeted supports for bullying prevention strategies (e.g., social and communication skill instruction), and targeted or individualized digital citizenship instruction. Most importantly, plans should focus on strategies to involve all educational stakeholders in the prevention of cyberbullying, including parental instruction and support.

Step 3: Collaboration. Mental health providers can be change agents by creating awareness regarding the social pitfalls and assessing detrimental long- and short-term consequences associated with cyberbullying, while promoting positive outcomes and socially appropriate digital literacy skills by collaborating with teachers to educate school-aged youth about cyberbullying and internet safety. Collaborating to design lessons around cyberbullying and the impact can include classroom presentations, activities, and discussions about short- and long-term harm associated with cyberbullying (Ysseldyke et al., 2006). Students should be informed about cyberbullying so that they will know how to respond if they become a victim. School mental health providers have the skills and training necessary to identify perpetrators and victims of cyberbullying, as well as the knowledge to create direct intervention programs, including long-term follow-up assistance. Raskauskas (2013) discussed the benefits of support groups to provide emotional support and social skill development for involved youth to usher in behavioral understanding and change. Teachers and counselors then can instruct potential victims on ways to avoid and block unwanted e-mails, messages, and texts from perpetrators.

As previously stated, parents also need to be made aware of the dangers of cyberbullying and be instructed in ways to monitor their children's online activities. School mental health providers, in collaboration with teachers and administrators, can help parents develop the skills necessary to talk with their children about cyberbullying. Parents can be given lists of simple responses, installing filtering and tracking software to monitor children's online activities, and setting clear expectations (Diamanduros et al., 2008). By acting as agents of change, school mental health providers play a critical role in promoting awareness in schools and reducing cyberbullying.

Discussion

The changing landscape of virtual learning and access to evolving technology, especially on the heels of the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic, has increased the necessity for directly addressing cyberbullying among school-aged youth. It is fundamentally important to establish a multifaceted approach to reducing cyberbullying risk factors. Prevention begins at home, where parents should establish an open line of communication by recognizing warning signs, being aware of social interaction habits of their children, familiarizing themselves with current social medial apps and online platforms, and teaching their children about online responsibility. Schools should actively implement digital citizenship curricula, and teachers should embed digital citizenship activities within the daily curriculum by teaching students about safety, choice, and permanence. School-based mental health providers can help support the development, evaluation, and implementation of cyberbullying prevention efforts, while establishing collaborative practices between the family, school, and teachers. Most importantly, all educational stakeholders should be actively involved in cyberbullying prevention and recognize the importance of home-school collaboration.

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