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Cyberbullying: Prevention and Intervention to Protect Our Children and Youth

JOHN SNAKENBORG[1], RICHARD VAN ACKER[1], and ROBERT A. GABLE[2]

[1]*University of Illinois at Chicago, Chicago, IL, USA*
[2]*Old Dominion University, Norfolk, VA, USA*

Bullying has long been of concern to school officials and parents alike. Bullying, which is a type of aggressive behavior, has now entered the electronic age in the form of cyberbullying (e.g., e-mails, text messages, profile sites). Cyberbullying is especially insidious because it affords a measure of anonymity and the opportunity to reach a much larger number of victims without a significant threat of punishment. In this article, the authors discuss efforts to combat cyberbullying that include prevention and intervention programs at the community, school, and family levels. The authors point out that the majority of U.S. states have written legislation to address bullying and cyberbullying and that many schools have established policies that prohibit electronic bullying and developed consequences for doing so. Last, the authors discuss a number of antibullying curricula and mediated programs, software packages, and intervention strategies for the school and home designed to help protect children and adolescents from being targets of cyberbullying.

Keywords: bullying, cyberbullying, intervention, prevention

Letter from a victim of cyberbullying

> The beginning of my freshman year of high school I set up a *MySpace* account. Shortly thereafter, someone got into my account and changed all of the headings, comments, and picture titles with nasty critiques of my looks or with the word SLUT! I was mortified. I think the person got my password from a computer at school after I logged in and forgot to log off before leaving. Rather than report what had happened, I just deleted my account so that no one else would see my profile and what had been written about me. Later I learned to be more careful with my passwords and things. I never found out for sure who did it, but of course I have suspicions. I am pretty sure that I know who was responsible, but I can't be quite sure. However, I think that it was my ex-boyfriend's best friend (who was a girl). She had always been jealous of me, and we just never got along. We had known each other since elementary school. She was one grade older. I also knew her from playing softball. I don't remember talking to anyone about it. I mostly just tried to forget about it and move on. I remember feeling a little uncomfortable at school for the next week or so, and I stayed offline for a long time. I waited at least a year or more before I made a new *MySpace* page. I was very cautious then and did not give any of my information to anyone so that the problem would not happen again. Overall, it was a horrible experience. (A. Snakenborg, personal communication, November 12, 2009)

Address correspondence to Richard Van Acker, University of Illinois at Chicago, College of Education, Mail Code 147, 1040 W. Harrison St., Chicago, IL 60607, USA. E-mail: vanacker@uic.edu

The social networks that develop among children and youth play a critical role in their overall social and emotional maturation. Children and youth learn important social, problem-solving, and critical thinking skills and obtain feedback regarding their own social functioning from peers with whom they interact. Furthermore, normative beliefs and values are influenced greatly by a person's social network (Farmer, Pearl, & Van Acker, 1996). Until recently, social networks typically involved those individuals with whom a person interacted on a face-to-face basis over the course of a normal day. For most children and youth, this involved those within the home, neighborhood, and school settings. However, with the advent of the Internet (e.g., e-mail, profile sites) and other modern forms of electronic communication (e.g., instant messaging, cell phones for talking and texting), social networks can now involve the global community. Children and youth can easily access their existing face-to-face social network on a more immediate basis while not actually in their presence. Moreover, individuals can explore new and expanded social networks with an online identity. Online experiences allow children and adolescents to participate in social networks and develop social competency by being afforded the chance to express thoughts, feelings, and ideas.

Personal identity in the electronic age

According to a recent survey conducted by the Pew Research Center, an estimated 90% of youth aged 12 to 17 years are active on the Internet on a daily basis and more than 50% of youth aged 12 to 17 years have personal cell phones (Rainie, 2005). Furthermore, a study released by the Henry. J. Kaiser Family Foundation reported that media usage, including time spent using a computer, among 8–18 year-olds is up 2.25 hours in just the past 5 years (Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010). Given these numbers, it is not surprising that there are those who take advantage of the media to bully, harass, threaten, or otherwise infringe upon a person's virtual space (Chibbaro, 2007).

A person's online identity is a virtual representation of his or her idealized self. Use of and participation in the Internet and the virtual groups and networks therein can have a powerful effect on the concept of self and the formation of one's identity (Bargh & McKenna, 2004). The personal photos that a youngster chooses to include in his or her profile, online friends, coupled with the ability to represent yourself as smart, funny, sensitive, descriptions of interests, associations with groups or Web sites, are among the components that make up a virtual picture that can be controlled, shaped, and edited across time. Unfortunately, this increased electronic social access to others also provides an opportunity for misuse of the technology. In what follows, we distinguish between two forms of bullying, traditional face-to-face bullying and cyberbullying. We briefly discuss the magnitude of the problem of cyberbullying, and last, offer some recommendations regarding prevention and intervention that relate to the home, school, and community.

Traditional bullying

In defining traditional bullying, Olweus (1992) asserted that bullying is a category of aggressive behavior that involves repeated exposure to a physical, social, or psychological imbalance between the more powerful bully and the victim who has difficulty defending himself or herself. Bullying can take many forms and is differentiated from developmentally appropriate types of childhood and adolescent behavior involving conflict with respect to intensity and purpose. Generally, bullying involves physical or verbal behaviors that result in the frightening, harassing, threatening, or harming another individual. The intent of bullying behavior is to cause physical, emotional, or psychological harm (e.g., Mason, 2008).

Researchers have defined three types of bullying behaviors: (a) physical bullying, (b) harassment, and (c) relational bullying. *Physical bullying* includes behaviors such as hitting, kicking, pushing, or wrestling. *Harassment* is defined as verbal threats, taunting and name calling. Relational bullying negatively affects the social status of the victim by damaging friendships with peers directly through exclusion from a group or indirectly by the spreading of rumors or through encouragement of the peer group to ostracize the victim. Males are more likely to use overt means (physical attacks), whereas females are more likely to use covert means to bully others (e.g., spreading rumors; Mason, 2008). On playgrounds, the school bus, and in the cafeteria, males are both the primary instigators and victims of bullying (Beale & Hall, 2007).

Defining exactly what constitutes bullying poses several challenges for school officials (Elinoff, Chafouleas, & Sassu, 2004). Most definitions of bullying have three critical components: (a) bullying involves physical or verbal behavior that is aimed at another with the intent to cause harm or distress, (b) these behaviors are repeated over time, and (c) these behaviors occur in a relationship wherein there is an imbalance of power or strength. However, certain interactions between peers can appear to constitute bullying behaviors when in fact they may be developmentally appropriate forms of rough-and-tumble play (Pelligrini, 2006). Also, verbal insult (even when delivered repeatedly over time) does not necessarily constitute bullying. Peers routinely trade verbal insults and putdowns without malicious intent (e.g., "playing the dozens"). Educators are put in the difficult position of having to distinguishing between harmful interactions and playful, albeit rough, instances of peer-to-peer behavior. Another challenge is that some instances of bullying may only occur one time. Typical definitions of bullying stipulate repeated episodes of bullying over time. Although a pattern of maltreatment may not be evident, the effects of one-time bullying encounters may be devastating to the victim (Guerin & Hennessy, 2002). Arriving at a workable defining of cyberbullying poses similar challenges.

Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying is a relatively recent phenomenon that takes one of two forms: direct bullying and indirect bullying by proxy (Wong-Lo, Bullock, & Gable, 2009). With direct cyberbullying, messages are transmitted from the bully to the victim; whereas with indirect cyberbullying, the instigator enlists others to bully the victim. Some authorities feel that cyberbullying is another form of traditional bullying using 21st-century technologies (Li, 2007). Indeed, much of the current research suggests that the majority of cyberbullying is a direct extension of face-to-face bullying. That is, the majority of cyberbullying is carried out by youth who bully face-to-face and is directed toward the same victims within previously established social networks (Juvonen & Gross, 2008; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004).

According to Vandebosch and Van Cleemput (2008), definitions of *cyberbullying* often include behaviors not covered by traditional definitions of bullying, such as having personal communications copied and sent to others, sending large amounts of icons or emoticons to others, and altering photos and sending them to others. Drawing from the accumulated literature, we define *cyberbullying* as the

use of electronic forms of communication by an individual or group to engage repeatedly in sending or posting content about an individual or group that a reasonable person would deem cruel, vulgar, threatening, embarrassing, harassing, frightening, or harmful (e.g., Beale & Hall, 2007; Mason, 2008; Vandebosch & Van Cleemput, 2008; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004).

Cyberbullying usually takes place in a medium in which adults seldom are present, the hidden world of adolescent electronic communication (Mason, 2008). That environment provides some unique elements that differentiate it from traditional bullying. For example, cyberbullying generally can be carried out with anonymity and, therefore, may be more volatile (Patchin & Hinduja, 2006). This anonymity fosters a sense of disinhibition and of invincibility because the bully can remain faceless (Mason, 2008). Individuals who might otherwise be afraid to engage in bullying behavior (e.g., victims wishing to retaliate against stronger individuals who have bullied them, individuals reticent to engage in face-to-face bullying) are more willing to do so (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004). Cyberbullying also allows perpetrators to victimize a greater number of targets in front of a larger audience without significant risk (Dempsey, Sulkowski, Nichols, & Storch, 2009). Accordingly, most cyberbullies do not fear any punishment for their participation in this hands-off activity.

Some authorities report that the incidence of cyberbullying increases during elementary school, peaks in middle school, and then decreases in high school (Beale & Hall, 2007). According to Chibbaro (2007), cyberbullying is the most prevalent form of harassment among sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-grade students. However, accounts differ regarding the role males versus females play in cyberbullying (victims versus perpetrators; cf. Beale & Hall, 2007; Mason, 2008). Cyberbullying appears to follow a pattern that is contrary to face-to-face bullying in which males are the primary instigators and victims (Beale & Hall, 2007). Some authorities report that females (25%) are more likely to be victims of cyberbullying than are males (11%); others state that females are twice as likely to be instigators and victims (cf. Kowalski & Limber, 2007; Mason, 2008). Furthermore, the identity of the cyberbully is not always known, which serves to increase the victim's sense of dominance and powerlessness (Mason, 2008). In one study, 48% of the respondents said that the instigator was unknown to them (Kowalski & Limber, 2007), whereas Juvonen and Gross (2008) reported that 73% of their respondents were "pretty sure" or "totally sure" of the identity of the bully. Table 1 provides a summary of some of the most common forms of cyberbullying.

Cyberbullying: Prevention and intervention

At present, there is a dearth of empirical research regarding effective prevention and intervention efforts to combat cyberbullying. Keyword searches of social science databases including the Web of Science, Academic Search Premier, Ovid, and ERIC turned up no peer-reviewed empirical studies for the prevention of or intervention with cyberbullying. Nonetheless, a number of approaches have been advocated for state and local governments, schools, families, and students to use when addressing cyberbullying. In general, these fall into three categories: (a) laws, rules, and policies to regulate the use of media and to establish controls related to cyberbullying and other forms of abuse; (b) curricular programs designed to educate children and youth about safe Internet and electronic media use and how to avoid and address cyberbullying should it occur, typically addressing the consequences for cyberbullying; and, (c) technological approaches to prevent or minimize the potential for cyberbullying.

In 2008, Congress passed the Protecting Children in the 21st Century legislation, which among other issues, addresses cyberbullying. In addition, 44 states currently have legislation that addresses school bullying, harassment, and intimidation (Anti-Defamation League, 2009; National Conference of State Legislatures, n.d.). The challenge in addressing cyberbullying through current antibullying legislation lies in some of the previously mentioned differences between traditional face-to-face bullying and cyberbullying (e.g., anonymity, power differential between the bully and the victim, intent to harm, repetitive nature of the act). The task of demonstrating that an instance of cyberbullying qualifies under current legislation is often a challenge. To remedy this situation, some states are developing specific cyberbullying legislation. For example, North Carolina has enacted the Protect Our Kids/Cyberbullying Legislation (S.L. 2009-551) making it a misdemeanor to engage in cyberbullying. In Missouri, cyberbullying is a crime that can result in jail time, fines or both (Stroud, 2009). Other states including Ohio and Virginia have amended existing legislation to address cyberbullying.

The Anti-Defamation League (2009) developed a model statute to help states and municipalities develop cyberbullying prevention legislation. Depending on the situation, students who perpetrate cyberbullying may be in violation of one or more of the following offenses often covered in civil legislation:

- Invasion of privacy/public disclosure of a private fact: publicly disclosing a private fact about an individual under conditions that would be highly offensive to a reasonable person.
- Defamation: publishing a false statement about another that damages his or her reputation.
- Invasion of personal privacy/false light: publicly disclosing information that places an individual in a false light.
- Intentional infliction of emotional stress: engaging in intentional behavior that are outrageous and intolerable and result in extreme distress to another.

Table 1. Sample Technology Uses and Potential Misuses

Device or technology	*General uses*	*Potential misuses*
E-mail	Used to send messages and comments to others	1. Sending messages with harassing comments or hurtful images, video clips, and so forth 2. Forwarding someone's private e-mails to others 3. Repeatedly sending unwanted messages
Mobile phone	Talk to others, send text messages and images, take photos and access the Internet and e-mail others	1. Making harassing or threatening calls or sending inappropriate text messages or images to others 2. Taking or sending inappropriate photos
Instant messaging	Allows the user to chat with others live using text	1. Sending threatening or inappropriate messages 2. Hacking into another person's account or using their screen name to harass others
Chatrooms and message boards	Chatting with others live (voice or text) and posting messages for others about common interests	1. Sending threatening or inappropriate messages 2. Phishing—tricking people into sharing private information that leads to exploitation 3. Repeatedly ignoring someone in an effort to make him or her feel excluded or rejected
Video-hosting sites (e.g., YouTube)	Share video clips of interest to others	1. Posting embarrassing or inappropriate videos of others
Webcam	Allows the user to send photos or videos and to see the person with whom they are chatting with online	1. Producing and sharing inappropriate or humiliating material 2. Convincing someone to behave inappropriately on the Webcam
Social network sites (e.g., Facebook, Twitter)	Developing friendships worldwide, keeping in touch and sharing information with others through blogs, homepages, and so forth	1. Posting inappropriate material, threatening or humiliating text or images 2. Hacking into another's account and altering the content in an effort to humiliate or embarrass the person 3. Hacking into another person's account to send inappropriate content to others 4. Creating a fake profile using another person's name in an effort to humiliate or threaten
Virtual learning environments	Typically a school site set up to promote sharing information between students and students and teachers; assignments, activities, and group projects are often posted and actively worked on within the site	1. Posting inappropriate messages or images 2. Hacking into another student's account and posting inappropriate material or deleting their work

School policies and procedures regarding cyberbullying

Most authorities agree that it is important for schools to develop policies on bullying and cyberbullying that address the seriousness of the problem and the consequences for engaging in such behavior (e.g., Beale & Hall, 2007). Policies prohibiting the use of the school or district Internet system for inappropriate communication can be easily enacted. It must be made clear to all students that there is a limited expectation of privacy when using technology on school property. There has been considerable controversy, however, as to what authority schools have in the regulation of student behavior that occurs outside of the school. As such, the school has limited jurisdiction, although this has not prevented some schools from developing policies that hold students accountable for their online behavior, even while off campus (Walsh-Sarnecki, 2009). Often the material used in cyberbullying is created outside of the school setting (i.e., home computer) and is not intended to be viewed within the school. However, when the material is known to others, it can have a significant impact on the school through the disruption of the learning environment and the victimization of target students. Accordingly, cyberbullying that occurs outside the school setting can create a hostile teaching/learning environment. Federal legislation

provides that school administrators can discipline students for

> . . .conduct by the student, in class or out of it, which for any reason—whether it stems from time, place, or type of behavior, materially disrupts classwork or involves substantial disorder or invasion of the rights of others is, of course, not immunized by the constitutional guarantee of freedom of speech. (*Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District*, 1969)

When teachers and administrators act to confiscate and search student cell phones, laptop computers, and so forth, they risk violating the First and Fourth Amendments of the U.S. Constitution related to "chilling effect on otherwise innocent communication" and "search and seizure" regulations, respectively. State and federal wiretap laws and invasion of privacy violations have also been levied against school districts attempting to intervene in suspected acts of cyberbullying (Baldas, 2007). Moreover, without careful policies and procedures to preserve a 'chain of custody' when confiscating items from a student or saving cyberbullying content, important evidence may be suppressed by the court (e.g., as a result of illegal search and seizure) and, in turn, undermine an otherwise sound prosecution. Thus, care should be taken to develop a legally defensible policy and approach for addressing cyberbullying within the school.[1]

Comprehensive programs of prevention/intervention

In addition to policies and procedures related to cyberbullying, school administrators should consider efforts to educate students on the proper use of electronic media and ways to prevent and address cyberbullying. Several curriculum-based programs that purport to address cyberbullying in schools have been developed. Examples include the iSAFE Internet Safety Program (i-SAFE Inc., 1998), Cyber Bullying: A Prevention Curriculum (Kowalski & Agatston, 2008, 2009), Sticks and Stones: Cyberbullying (Chase Wilson, 2009), and Lets Fight It Together: What We All Can Do to Prevent Cyberbullying (Childnet International, 2007). Typically, these programs involve video or Webisodes related to cyberbullying and a series of scripted lessons to help students discuss issues related to cyberbullying and efforts to prevent and how to address cyberbullying when it occurs. Each of these programs has the potential to be used as a stand alone intervention to help prevent cyberbullying or they can be embedded within a larger schoolwide antibullying program. Because there is a strong overlap between victims and perpetrators of traditional bullying and cyberbullying (Juvonen & Gross, 2008; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004), a comprehensive prevention and intervention program may be a preferred approach.

The Bullying Prevention Program (Olweus, Limber, & Mihalic, 1999, as cited in Mason, 2008) has been recognized as a national model and a Blueprint Violence Prevention Program by the Center for the Study for Prevention of Violence at the University of Colorado. It is a schoolwide program designed to address the problem of bullying and create a safe and positive teaching and learning environment through increased understanding of bullying, more careful supervision of students, establishing rules and consequences for rule violations, and otherwise imposing limits on inappropriate/unacceptable behavior.

The iSafe Internet Safety Program (i-SAFE Inc, 1998, 2009) is a subscription-based prevention curriculum for students in Grades K–12. School personnel, parents and/or community leaders are provided a professional development program either in person or via DVD to prepare them to deliver the comprehensive curricula. In Grades K–4, lessons expose students to Internet concepts and vocabulary and introduce safe Internet use through hands-on learning. In Grades 5–8, students participate in activities and discussions related to ways to prevent and address cyberbullying. In Grades 9–12, students engage in activities and discussions around Webcast video materials as well as traditional lesson formats addressing various forms of cyberbullying and the appropriate use of electronic media. Service learning activities are provided at all levels.

The Cyber Bullying: A Prevention Curriculum (Kowalski & Agatston, 2008) is an eight-session curriculum designed for students in Grades 6–12. Specifically, the curriculum helps students understand the concept of cyberbullying, the consequences for participating in this behavior, and ways to resist and intervene in cyberbullying. The program includes a CD-ROM of reproducible handouts, posters, and parent materials (in both English and Spanish) provided along with video vignettes to facilitate discussion. Peer leaders are used to facilitate learning. A corresponding curriculum for younger students was added later (Kowalski & Agatston, 2009).

Sticks and Stones: Cyberbullying (Chase Wilson, 2009) involves a film that depicts a student who is the victim of cyberbullying. The film is accompanied by a comprehensive teacher's guide to help facilitate group discussion and ways to extend the learning. This program was developed for use in high school programs.

"Let's Fight It Together: What We All Can Do to Prevent Cyberbullying" (Childnet, 2007) is a curriculum with video segments designed to be delivered in an assembly or classroom setting and followed up by suggested activities (lesson plans and study guides are provided). This program is specifically intended for students between 11 and 14 years of age but can be adapted for use with students between 10 and 18 years of age.

The Anti-Defamation League has developed workshops for educators, school administrators, and parents: "Trickery, Trolling, and Threats: Understanding and Addressing Cyberbullying" (2008c) and "Youth and Cyberbullying: What Families Don't Know Will Hurt Them" (Anti-Defamation League, 2008b). They have also developed online lesson plans for elementary (called "Building a Foundation for Safe and Kind Online

Communication"; Anti-Defamation League, 2008a), middle (Dealing with the Social Pressures that Promote Online Cruelty; Anti-Defamation League, 2008b) and secondary students (Cyberbullying and Online Cruelty: Challenging Social Norms; Anti-Defamation League, 2008a, 2008b).

Last, there are a number of prevention and intervention procedures available to combat cyberbullying that are available through the electronic media itself. One readily accessible process available to anyone who is targeted by a cyberbully is to simply block further e-mails, instant messages, or phone calls from that individual or screen name. In fact, the most basic procedures taught to students to combat cyberbullying involve a four step process: Stop, Save, Block, and Tell. The first thing students should be taught is to refrain from responding in any manner to the cyberbully. Any response or retaliation will generally only exacerbate the situation. If possible, students should save the e-mail, text message, picture, and so forth, that constitutes the basis of the cyberbullying as this will help identify and possibly prosecute the cyberbully and block any further communication from this individual using the blocking options available through your Internet or cell phone provider. Many of the computer profile sites (e.g., MySpace) allow the user to report abuse by simply accessing a link at the bottom of each profile. Facebook has an e-mail address (abuse@facebook.com) available to report any misuse of their site. Last, students should tell a trusted adult (parent, teacher, or older sibling) about the incident. For that reason, both in the school and in the home there should be a climate in which students feel comfortable reporting and talking about incidences of bullying.

It is interesting to note that although most youth report familiarity with tactics such as blocking (Li, 2007), there is little evidence that victims of cyberbullying engage in any behavior to reduce or stop cyberbullying (Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1997; Salmivalli, Karhunen, & Lagerspetz, 1996). A number of studies have reported that children and youth are afraid to report cyberbullying out of fear that the bullying might escalate or that parents might restrict use of the Internet. For example, Juvonen and Gross (2008) reported that 90% of their respondents who had experienced cyberbullying failed to report it to any adult. These students indicated that they felt they needed to deal with it themselves (50% of respondents). Thus, education in the use of blocking and reporting strategies alone may do little to curtail cyberbullying. Again, parents must become more involved, not only in discussion regarding cyberbullying, but also monitoring their son or daughter's use of the Internet. In fact, parental monitoring can reduce the probability that a youth will bully online by as much as 50% (Mason, 2008).

Parents (or students themselves) can use one or more of the popular search engines such as Google to check and see if any personal information has found its way onto the Web. Parents can go to the search engine (e.g., Google) and type in the full name within quotation marks—such as "John Snakenborg." All references (as well as others with the same name) will be provided. Parents also can search an e-mail address and/or instant message screen name and newsgroup postings by clicking on "groups" above the search screen on Google. If there is unwanted information, parents can ask Google or other search engine sites to disable the information. If a youngster's information is posted online and he or she is younger than 13 years of age, parents should notify the Web site or the online service that they must remove the information because it violates the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act. If they do not respond, parents can contact the Federal Trade Commission directly at http://www.ftc.gov/.

Many software programs allow a parent or school district to filter and block content based on key words, Web site addresses, and specified categories. For example, NetBox Blue has developed Cyber Bullying Prevention Engine and PureSight has Child-Friendly Internet. Both programs block, quarantine, and report offensive e-mails, instant messages, and other communiqués on the basis of keywords or sources identified by the user. Most of these commercial software programs provide a third party (e.g., parent or school administrator) the ability to monitor a summary of violations (e.g., messages delivered with targeted keywords) allowing the identification of potential cyberbullying without the need to review each and every electronic communication. Although most online bullying originates from the home computer (Mason, 2008), youth can assess the Internet from many other locations (e.g., the public library, a friend's home, electronic devices; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004); thus, these software programs provide only limited victim protection.

Group/individual programs of prevention/intervention

Like most behavior, the motivation behind cyberbullying varies—depending on the individual. It is likely that a number of different strategies will be needed depending on the function the behavior serves for the perpetrator. Common functions for most behavior include the following: attention, escape or avoidance, peer affiliation, power and control, justice and revenge (Van Acker, 2005, 2006). In theory, cyberbullying could serve any number of these functions. For example, Ybarra and Mitchell (2004) reported that cyberbullying is frequently initiated by individuals who have been the victim of traditional bullying and/or cyberbullying themselves. Often these victims retaliate by cyberbullying those who bully them or at least who they suspect are the bullies. There are times when these victim/bullies target others who may be unknown to them. Thus, cyberbullying may serve the function of justice or revenge for these individuals.

Another theme that often surfaces when exploring reasons youth participate in cyberbullying involves the perpetrators desire to demonstrate their ability to manipulate the electronic media (e.g., edit photographs or conceal their identity; Vanderbosch & Van Cleemput, 2008). This may

provide a sense of competence or power. Even when conducted anonymously, cyberbullying can provide high levels of vicarious attention from others as one witnesses the effect of their "work" on the social scene of the school (e.g., people talking about the situation or sharing the embarrassing material). While many cyberbullies act in isolation, some cyberbullying is conducted in the presence of bystanders or as part of a social clique targeting a common victim (Vandebosch & Van Cleemput, 2008). In these circumstances, the desire for peer affiliation and a sense of belonging may support cyberbullying. Given the various functions served, efforts to address cyberbullying will likely require more than a one-size-fits-all intervention program. In all probability, efforts to effectively address bullying (both traditional face-to-face and cyberbullying) will require an epidemiological approach incorporating multiple levels of prevention and intervention.

Education personnel are increasingly introducing schoolwide programs designed to explore the nature of bullying behavior and ways to prevent various forms of bullying, including cyberbullying. School personnel identify precisely what behaviors constitute bullying and cyberbullying, develop and enforce reasonable policies, and teach all students—directly and systematically—ways to prevent bullying and to effectively address instances in which they are a victim or a bystander. In addition to the previously discussed programs, schools should consider incorporating antibullying strategies such as cooperative learning, peer mediation, and social skills into the fabric of daily instruction (e.g., Mason, 2008; Olweus, 1992). When bullying occurs, victims may need counseling or mental health services (Chibbaro, 2007; Mason, 2008). Administrators and faculty must ultimately establish a culture in which bullying is not tolerated and there is routine reinforcement of appropriate social norms.

Those students deemed most at risk for experiencing bullying and cyberbullying would be targeted for more focused intervention. Although any student might be a target, students who are anxious, withdrawn, insecure, physically weak, small in stature, or victims of traditional bullying are at increased risk of falling victim to cyberbullying. Ways to identify students who are at risk include anonymous surveys, focus groups, or questionnaires (e.g., Beale & Hall, 2007); then, a more intensive set of prevention and intervention strategies would be incorporated into the school curriculum (e.g., anger management; assertive, nonaggressive behavior training, conflict resolution; Mason, 2008). As Mason (2008) pointed out, bullies most be held accountable for their actions and adults should stress the fact that there are other ways to deal with social conflicts. However, it also is important to look for ways to enhance the student's positive association and sense of belonging in school.

Students who have initiated or been the victim of bullying or cyberbullying should be provided intensive intervention strategies on the basis of the individual needs of the student. Developing these individualized interventions would most likely be predicated on information gained from a formal behavioral assessment of the cyberbullying behavior. That is, the intervention would be based on the motivation behind the behavior (e.g., social status, revenge, power).

Conclusion

By all accounts, cyberbullying is an increasingly serious public mental health problem with sometime devastating consequences (Srabstein, Berkman, & Pyntikova, 2008; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004). Cyberbullying is associated with various academic and social problems. They range from withdrawal from school activities, school absence, and school failure, to eating disorders, substance abuse, depression, and even suicide (e.g., Chibbaro, 2007; Klomek, Marrocco, Kleinman, Schonfeld, & Gould, 2007; Mason, 2008). At the least, cyberbullying undermines the freedom of youth to use and explore online resources (Hinduja & Patchin, 2007).

A majority of states have enacted some kind of legislation to combat bullying and more recently cyberbullying. A growing number of community and school leaders recognize the importance of developing policies and implementing programs designed to address these acts as well as the norms and social values of students. All students must be taught ways to respond appropriately to cyberbullying and potential bullies must recognize there are serious consequences associated with such behavior, including school discipline, litigation, and criminal prosecution (Beale & Hall, 2007). In that cyberbullying usually occurs when adults are not present, parents must play a more active role in monitoring their son or daughter's online usage.

Most current cyberbullying programs are based on practical beliefs about prevention and logical approaches rather than on scientific evidence. Researchers and practitioners must work together to identify scientifically based prevention and intervention programs designed to address both traditional bullying and cyberbullying (Ryan & Smith, 2009). Various authorities advocate research designed to investigate attributes of both the bully and the victim (e.g., age, gender, ethnicity, social status, economic circumstance). That knowledge should contribute to the development of more empirically-based interventions (Wong-Lo et al., 2009). Until more is known about proven effective ways to combat bullying, care must be taken to monitor the outcomes of current practices to help ensure that they result in the desired effects.

Note

1. A model school policy related to cyberbullying is available at http://www.usdoj.gov/criminal/cybercrime

Author notes

John Snakenborg is a doctoral student at the University of Illinois at Chicago with an interest in bullying and school violence.

Richard Van Acker is a professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago and former president of the Council for Children with Behavioral Disorders. He is interested in bullying, school violence, cognitive–behavioral interventions with children and adolescents with challenging behaviors, and function-based interventions in applied settings.

Robert A. Gable is the Constance and Colgate Darden Professor of Special Education at Old Dominion University, in Norfolk, VA, and the former president of the Council for Children with Behavioral Disorders. He is interested in bullying, functional behavioral assessment, function-based interventions in applied settings, and teacher preparation in the area of emotional disabilities.

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