

Cyberbullying Fact Sheet

What you need to know about online aggression



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Adolescents have been bullying each other for generations. The latest generation, however, has been able to utilize technology to expand the reach and harm associated with bullying. This phenomenon is being called *cyberbullying*, briefly defined as: “willful and repeated harm inflicted through the use of computers, cell phones, and other electronic devices.” We developed this definition because it is simple, concise, reasonably comprehensive, and captures the most important elements. These elements include: “willful” (the behavior has to be deliberate, not accidental); “repeated” (bullying reflects a pattern of behavior, not just one isolated incident); “harm” (the target must perceive that harm was inflicted); and “computers, cell phones, and other electronic devices” (this, of course, is what differentiates cyberbullying from traditional bullying).

Cyberbullying is willful and repeated harm inflicted through the use of computers, cell phones, and other electronic devices.

Though not explicit in our definition, there is usually an imbalance of “power” in cyberbullying situations. We choose not to include it in our definition because the type of power being exerted in cyberspace is somewhat amorphous and often shifting. While power in traditional bullying might be physical (stature) or social (wit or popularity), online power may simply stem from proficiency or knowledge or the possession of some content (information, pictures, or video) that can be used to inflict harm. Anyone with any of these characteristics or possessions within a certain online context has “power,” which can be wielded through some form of cyberbullying. It is also important to point out that while adults can, and often do, engage in the types of behaviors described in this fact sheet, the term “bullying” and therefore also “cyberbullying” is commonly used only to describe the behaviors of adolescents while interacting with their peers.

Examples of Cyberbullying

There are a number of common types of cyberbullying which we are seeing quite regularly. First, using an Internet-connected computer a bully can send harassing e-mails or instant messages, post obscene, insulting, and

slandorous messages to online bulletin boards or social networking sites, or develop Web pages to promote and disseminate defamatory content. Second, malicious text messages can be sent to the target via cell phones. In addition to sending threatening text messages, most phones have picture-taking and video-recording capabilities. This functionality creates additional opportunities for would-be bullies to collect content (e.g., a picture) that could be used against someone else. For example, a picture could be taken in a place where privacy is expected (e.g., a locker room) and posted online for all to see.

Issues to Consider

Certain characteristics inherent in new technologies increase the likelihood that they will be exploited to cause harm to others. For example, electronic bullies can remain “virtually” anonymous. Temporary email accounts and pseudonyms in chat rooms, instant messaging programs, and other Internet venues can make it very difficult for adolescents to determine the identity of aggressors. Individuals can hide behind some measure of anonymity when using their personal computer or cell phone to bully another individual, which perhaps frees them from normative and social constraints on their behavior.

14-year-old girl from New Jersey

Being bullied besides over the internet is worse. It's torment and hurts. They say 'sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.' That quote is a lie and I don't believe in it. Sticks and stones may cause nasty cuts and scars, but those cuts and scars will heal. Insultive words hurt and sometimes take forever to heal.

Further, it seems that bullies might be emboldened when using electronic means to harm others because it takes less energy and fortitude to express hurtful comments using a keyboard or keypad than with one's voice. Along similar lines, cyberbullies do not have to deal with the immediate emotional, psychological, or physical effects of face-to-face bullying on their victim. In cyberspace, there is usually no swift or certain response that clues in an adolescent to the inappropriateness of harmful words. Such feedback in real life can send a message to bullies that “enough is enough” or that their behavior is inappropriate.

Another key feature that makes cyberbullying so problematic is the fact that hurtful or humiliating content can be sent to a large number of people in a short period of time. While spoken rumors seem to spread around a school like wildfire, this process is greatly expedited when utilizing technology. Text messages can be sent from one electronic device to a limitless number of recipients in a matter of seconds. If a student posts a humiliating picture of a classmate on the mirror in the girls' bathroom, only those who ventured in there would view the picture. If the same picture was posted to a Web site or sent to "everyone" via e-mail, many more people would be drawn into the joke, thereby making the target feel even worse.

Additionally, supervision is lacking in cyberspace. While chat hosts sometimes observe the dialog in some chat rooms in an effort to police conversations and evict offensive individuals, personal messages sent between users are viewable only by the sender and the recipient, and therefore outside their regulatory reach. Furthermore, there are no individuals to monitor or censor offensive content in electronic mail or text messages sent via computer or cell phone.

14 year-old girl from Illinois

I still cry when I think of what she said. After awhile you start believing all of the things people tell you that aren't true. When I look in the mirror I wonder if I'm fat (I'm not) after what my ex-friend said.

Another problem is the increasingly-common presence of computers in the private bedrooms of adolescents. Indeed, teenagers often know more about computers and cell phones than adults and are therefore able to operate the technologies without worry or concern that a probing parent will discover their participation in bullying (or even their victimization).

In a similar vein, the inseparability of a cell phone from its owner makes that person a perpetual target for victimization. Users often need to keep it turned on for legitimate uses, which provides the opportunity for those with malicious intent to send threatening and insulting statements via the cell phone's text messaging capabilities. What's more, most adolescents connect to the Internet at home and are online all hours of the evening and night. This contributes to the invasive nature of cyberbullying. There may truly be "no rest for the weary" as it penetrates the walls of a home - traditionally a place where victims could seek refuge.

Finally, the coordination of a bullying attack can occur with more ease because it is not constrained by the physical location of the bullies or victims. A veritable onslaught of

mistreatment can quickly and effectively torment a victim through the use of these communications and connectivity tools.

Nature and Extent of Cyberbullying

In 2007, we surveyed a random sample of approximately 2,000 middle-school students from a large school district to learn about their experiences with cyberbullying. When asked if they had been "cyberbullied" in their entire lives, 17.3% said "yes." A similar proportion (17.6%) admitted to cyberbullying others at some point in their lifetime. Finally, 12% of the sample reported being both a victim and a bully.

In addition, 42.9% experienced at least one of the following in the last 30 days:

- Received an e-mail that made them upset (not spam)
- Received an instant message (IM) that made them upset
- Had something posted on MySpace that made them upset
- Been made fun of in chat room
- Had something posted on a Web site that made them upset
- Had something posted online they didn't want others to see
- Been afraid to go on the computer

While some of the above behaviors may not fit neatly under our definition, they may be considered cyberbullying if perpetrated by peers repeatedly over time. The point is that students might say "no" when asked if they have been "cyberbullied" - but "yes" when asked about specific *forms* or *examples* of cyberbullying.

It is also important to point out that this latest study was conducted among middle-schoolers, so the prevalence rates are slightly less than much of our previous research (which also included high school aged students). We estimate that approximately one-third of Internet-using adolescents have experienced some form of cyberbullying within the past year. Unless we do something about it, this number will undoubtedly continue to rise.

What Can Be Done?

It is hoped that cyberbullying can be curtailed by proactively addressing the potentially negative uses of technology. Parents must regularly monitor the online activities in which their children are engaged. They must also encourage an open dialog with their children regarding issues of safety and responsible Internet use. Teachers, too, must take care to supervise students as they use computers in the classrooms and should consider incorporating discussions of issues related to cybersafety

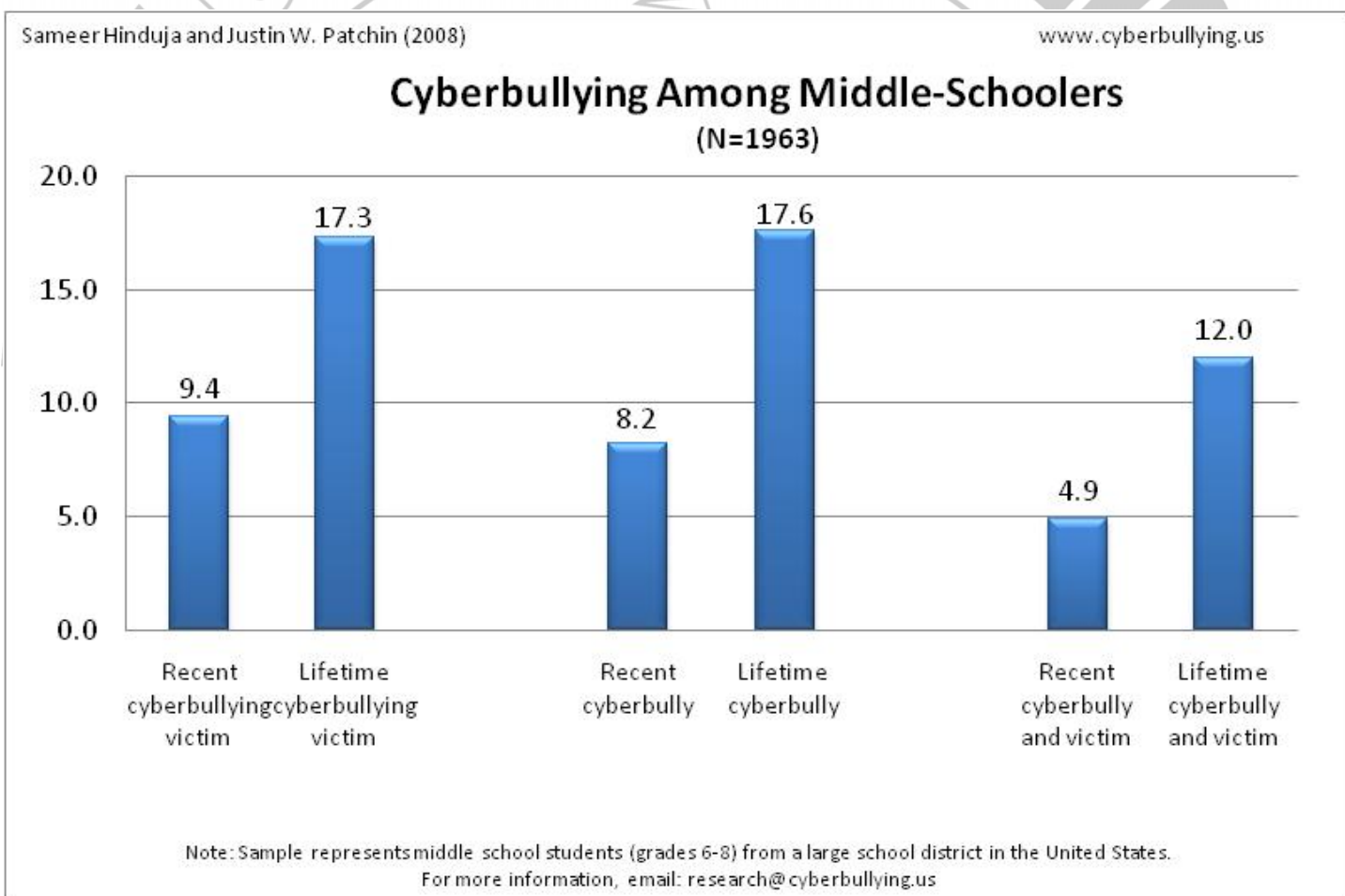
in their curriculum when appropriate. "Hands-on" activities and role-playing exercises may be particularly useful for introducing this topic to youth. School liaison officers and law enforcement officials must investigate all instances of harassment – including electronic bullying – and hold responsible parties accountable. Each of us has an important role to play.

Conclusion

Victimization on the Internet through cyberbullying is increasing in frequency and scope. This negative experience not only undermines a youth's freedom to use and explore valuable online resources, but also can result

in severe functional, psychological, and emotional ramifications. It is hoped that this fact sheet will contribute to improving society's overall understanding of the causes and consequences of online aggression.

For more information about cyberbullying, visit www.cyberbullying.us and look for our book: Bullying Beyond the Schoolyard: Preventing, and Responding to Cyberbullying which is available from Sage Publications (Corwin Press).



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