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Elizabeth Englander

Bridgewater State University, eenlander@bridgew.edu

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Cyberbullying among 11,700 Elementary School Students, 2010-2012

Dr. Elizabeth Englander
Director, Massachusetts Aggression Reduction Center
Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, MA

Presented on November 6, 2012, at the *International Bullying Prevention Association Annual Conference, Kansas City, MO.*

Study: 11,700+ Third-, Fourth- and Fifth-Graders, sampled in New England from a variety of schools (representing a variety of socioeconomic classes), between January 2010 and September, 2012.

Major Findings:

1. Elementary school children are already immersed in cyber-technology. Over 90% of third graders reported playing interactive games online. 35% of subjects reported owning a cellphone; most owned smartphones (see #8 below). *This suggests:* cyber-education needs to begin well before middle school.

2. Most elementary cyberbullying occurred in online games. However, children at the highest risk for repeatedly cyberbullying others were the most likely to report problems on Facebook, email, or through Text Messaging. *This suggests:* elementary cyberbullying education should probably include lessons relevant to online game-playing dynamics. Also, when a child aged 8 to 11 reports a problem on Facebook, email, or messaging, that should be regarded as a possible warning sign of higher-risk online involvement.

3. Use of Facebook increased among third, fourth, and fifth graders between 2010-2012, especially among girls. 19% of girls were using Facebook in 2010; that number rose to 49% in 2012. *This suggests:* parents and children may not understand the existence or rationale of federal age guidelines (13 years or older) for Facebook and similar websites.

4. Cell phone ownership increased in every grade. For example, among fourth graders, 26% owned cell phones in 2010, and this increased to 35% in 2012. 52% of fifth graders and 22% of third graders reported owning cell phones by 2012.

5. In every grade, smartphone ownership increased and non-smartphone ownership decreased between 2010 and 2012. Owning a smartphone was a significant risk factor for both being a cyberbully and being a cyberbullying victim. 12% of fifth grade non-owners, and 18% of smartphone owners, admitted being a cyberbully. Similarly, 12% of fifth grade non-owners, and 34% of smartphone owners, reported being a cyberbullying victim. Similar numbers were found for third and fourth graders. *This suggests:* parents who are considering buying their elementary-aged child a smartphone should be offered both the benefits, and the risks, associated with children's usage.

6. When comparing Grades 3, 4 and 5, traditional in-school bullying was far more common than cyberbullying. However, both types of bullying increased across the three years. Just being a victim actually decreased from third to fifth grade; however, the percentage of children who *both* bully and are victims (“bully/victims”) increased from 15% in third grade to 21% in grade five.

7. In third grade, 72% of cyberbullying victims said that the bully online was anonymous. However, that percentage dropped to 64% by grade 5. (That trend continues through high school.) *This suggests:* as children grow, cyberbullying increasingly reflects a dynamic between a target and a bully who know each other, usually from school.

8. Experiencing one episode of bullying is more common than experiencing bullying repeatedly. This was true for both victims and bullies. *This suggests:* efforts to control bullying may often be successful. It is also possible that many children learn, from one episode, how to avoid future episodes.

9. Cyberbullying education appears to be having an impact in Massachusetts. The proportion of children who could not define *cyberbullying* declined from 24% in 2010 to 10% in 2012. Non-bullies were more likely than bullies to report that their class had been offered education about bullying and cyberbullying (especially among fifth graders). Children who were repeatedly mean online reported the lowest level of education. *This suggests:* elementary education and awareness about cyberbullying can be can be successful.

10. Between 2010 and 2012, children were increasingly likely to claim that they had reported cyberbullying. Furthermore, reporting to both adults and peers increased similarly. *This suggests:* cyberbullying programs appear to be successfully increasing the rate at which children report cyberbullying.

Dr. Elizabeth Englander
Director, Massachusetts Aggression Reduction Center
Professor of Psychology
Bridgewater State University
Bridgewater, MA

Webpage: <http://www.MARCcenter.org>

Email: marc@bridgew.edu

Phone: 508-531-1784

Text Messaging: 508-955-0270