Just Turn the Darn Thing Off: Understanding Cyberbullying

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Understanding Cyberbullying

Elizabeth Englander and Amy Muldowney

In 2004 Elizabeth Englander, Professor of Psychology at Bridgewater State College, was the first Presidential Fellow at Bridgewater State College. During that year she established the Massachusetts Aggression Reduction Center (MARC) and launched its model programs to serve the Massachusetts K–12 educational community. When MARC goes into a school, it focuses on providing and implementing anti-bullying services. MARC works intensively with administrators, classroom teachers, support staff, students and parent and community groups.

The recent suicide of 15-year-old Phoebe Prince of South Hadley, Massachusetts, brought into sharp focus the desperate seriousness of bullying among young people. She had been taunted and threatened incessantly by her classmates in person, via text messages and on the social networking site Facebook. The cyberbullying to which Phoebe Prince was subjected is the newest form of an abusive pattern of behavior that has always existed among young people, and which has recently been increasing alarmingly in both frequency and severity.

Bullying and aggression in schools in Massachusetts today has reached epidemic proportions. Abusive bullying behaviors begin in elementary school, peak during middle school, and begin to subside as children progress through their high school years. Nationwide statistics suggest that somewhere between one in six and one in four students are frequently bullied at school. The 2005 Youth Risk Behavior Survey in Massachusetts found that 24% of Massachusetts teenagers reported being bullied at schools in the year before the survey. In a December 2006 survey conducted by the Massachusetts Aggression Reduction Center (MARC), one-fourth of Massachusetts schools characterized the bullying in their school as “serious” or “extremely serious.”

WHAT IS BULLYING?
Bullying refers to the physical and/or psychological abuse, perpetuated by a powerful child upon a less powerful one, with the intention to harm or dominate. Typically, bullying is repetitive, intentional, and involves an imbalance of power. 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.

It is unfortunate that adults often consider bullying an inevitable and even normal part of childhood. This belief undoubtedly stems from memories of the qualitatively different 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 was, as they recall it, an unpleasant but infrequent childhood behavior. One result of this attitude is that adults sometimes fail to intervene, resulting in the victim feeling powerless and hopeless in a situation that is torturous in nature. If children feel powerless in situations that adults perceive yet dismiss, how much more powerless must they feel when they are victimized in a way adults cannot even begin to comprehend?

WHAT HAS CHANGED?
Bullies today can be popular and socially successful in a way that they have not been in past generations. 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. 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 lacked 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 abusive-ness 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 of it 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. Only 8% 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. Anecdotal evidence suggests that being a victim of offline bullying may increase the probability of becoming an online cyberbully. Schools in Massachusetts have reported that many offline bullies operate online as well, 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 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 weeks 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. Anecdotal cases support that possibility, such as in the case of Ryan Halligan, the 13-year-old from Essex Junction, Vermont, who committed suicide in 2003 after being cyberbullied by his classmates.

DIFFERENT TYPES OF BULLIES
Many theorists have offered typologies of bullies. The following typology has been utilized in response to the advent of cyberbullying and the resulting comparisons which now occur between traditional school yard 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. So, 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.

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. 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 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. 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.

EGGERS. “Eggers,” sometimes also referred to 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 is Floaters. Floaters are not regular friends of bullies, but 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 silent bystanders, while in others, they may actively assist the bully (e.g., by laughing at a victim). Like all eggers, they minimize the damage their behavior causes and try to avoid self-confrontation regarding their own role in bullying. Floaters may also be “unintentional cyberbullies,” as discussed below.

ALL-AROUND BULLIES are school-yard Bullies who are widening their bullying activities into the electronic realm. Their motivation and modus operandi is the same as Bullies; they simply regard the electronic realm as a new arena of opportunity to continue their abusive activities.

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 are 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 (see 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, and it is reasonable to assume that children make similarly poor judgments.

In our work with schools, MARC has developed some concrete recommendations for educators in their efforts to prevent cyberbullying. Here are some of them.

Be up to date regarding information technology and its misuses. This is not a reference to traditional knowl-
Working with schools for the last five years has revealed what we in MARC think are some important elements of successful efforts to prevent bullying.

**Element #1**: Acknowledge that educators are overwhelmed and 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. 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.

**Element #2**: Use 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.

**Element #3**: Use research to inform practice. Research on traditional bullying abounds while research on cyberbullying is yet to be developed. 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**: Distinguish between bullying and conflict. 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. Unlike the case in equal-power conflicts, the bully has little or no incentive to “settle” the conflict. Rather, he or she may be invested in its continuation. This is an important reason to avoid mediating bullying conflicts, since successful mediation requires both parties to have some motivation to end the conflict in question.

**Element #5**: Produce innovative programming that addresses persistent obstacles. No cyberbullying program can, or should, remain static for three or more years. The field evolves rapidly and our curricula is updated monthly to reflect that. This is not an argument that outcomes research should not occur; it is merely an acknowledgement of the difficulty faced in this area.

**Element #6**: Address school climate. This means that everyone, including 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.

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