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Cyber bullying: An old problem in a new guise?

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Abstract

Although technology provides numerous benefits to young people, it also has a 'dark side', as it can be used for harm, not only by some adults but also by the young people themselves. Email, texting, chat rooms, mobile phones, mobile phone cameras and web sites can and are being used by young people to bully peers. It is now a global problem with many incidents reported in the United States, Canada, Japan, Scandinavia and the United Kingdom, as well as in Australia and New Zealand. This growing problem has as yet not received the attention it deserves and remains virtually absent from the research literature. This article explores definitional issues, the incidence and potential consequences of cyber bullying, as well as discussing possible prevention and intervention strategies.

Historically bullying has not been seen as a problem that needed attention, but rather has been accepted as a fundamental and normal part of childhood (Limber & Small, 2003). In the last two decades, however, this view has changed and schoolyard bullying is seen as a serious problem that warrants attention. Bullying is an age-old societal problem, beginning in the schoolyard and often progressing to the boardroom (McCarthy, Rylance, Bennett, & Zimmermann, 2001). It may be defined as the abusive treatment of a person by means of force or coercion. It is aggressive behaviour that is repeated over time, is intentionally harmful and occurs without provocation (Peterson, 2001). Bullying may be physical, including behaviours such as hitting, punching and spitting, or it may involve language that is browbeating using verbal assault, teasing, ridicule, sarcasm and scapegoating (DiGuilio, 2001; Slee & Rigby, 1993). It involves a minimum of two people, one the perpetrator and the other the victim. However, a large number of people may be involved in an indirect manner as an audience. These bystanders may be other students who witness the bullying event but remain uninvolved. They are frequently afraid of becoming the next victim if they do interfere. They often feel powerless and show a loss of self-respect and self-confidence (Harris & Petrie, 2002).

In recent years however, a new form of bullying has emerged which makes use of the diverse range of technology that is now available. Cyber bullying, as coined by Canadian Bill Belsey (www.cyberbullying.ca), or bullying using technology, is a phenomenon that children and adolescents seem to be increasingly using to harm others (National Children's Home, 2002). Cyber bullying using email, text, chat rooms, mobile phones, mobile phone cameras and web sites, is surfacing as a new medium used by bullies. Methods include texting derogatory messages on mobile phones, with students showing the message to others before sending it to the target; sending threatening emails, and forwarding a confidential email to all address book contacts, thus publicly humiliating the first sender. Others gang up on one student and bombard him/her with 'flame' emails (Snider & Borel, 2004). Another way to cyber bully is to set up a derogatory web site dedicated to a targeted student and emailing others the address, inviting their comments. In addition, web sites can be set up for others to vote on the biggest geek, or sluttiest girl in the school (Snider & Borel, 2004). In one widely reported incident, a self-made film of a 15-year-old Quebec boy emulating a Star Wars fight was posted on the Internet by his classmates. Millions of people downloaded the film, with the media dubbing him the Star Wars Kid (Snider & Borel, 2004). In another incident an overweight boy was photographed by a mobile phone camera in the school change room and the picture posted on the Internet (Mitchell, 2004). Cyber bullying can also be carried out in chat rooms with the participants slugging a targeted student or continually excluding someone (Williams, Cheung, & Choi, 2000).

The Internet has been described as transforming society by providing person-to-person communication, similar to the telegraph and telephone; as well as operating as a mass medium, like radio and television before it (Bargh & McKenna, 2004). Human behaviour on the Internet and related technologies, such as mobile phones, has been found to have both positive and negative consequences. Positive aspects such as socially-anxious individuals being able to communicate better and deeper self-disclosure between people have been claimed (Kraut et al., 2002; McKenna & Barge, 1999). However, negative consequences of this technology use, such as the encouragement of antisocial behaviour and increased loneliness, have also been reported (Donchi & Moore, 2004; Lee & Leets, 2002). Speed of communication and accessibility of information are seen as beneficial, but the Internet also has a 'dark' side with the availability of child pornography and the use of the technology for bullying.

Incidence

Numerous surveys of students have found that face-to-face bullying by peers in school is a frequent experience for many children (Genta, Menesini, Fonzi, Costabile, & Smith, 1996; Kumpulainen et al., 1998; Whitney & Smith, 1993). One in six children report being bullied at least once a week (Rigby, 1997; Zubrick, Silburn, Teoh, Carlton, Shepherd et al., 1997) although that figure was as high as 50% if the duration of the bullying is taken as lasting only one week (Smith & Shu, 2000). In another study, 40 percent of adolescents reported having been bullied at some time during their schooling (Mynard, Joseph, & Alexander, 2000). However, the percentage of students who have reported longer term bullying of 6 months or more decreases to between 15% and 17% (Slee, 1995; Slee & Rigby, 1993).

Young people are increasingly using technology, with Australians known as early adopters and young people being labelled 'the digital generation' (Livingstone, 2003). In the United Kingdom, 75% of 7-16 year-olds have used the Internet (Wigley & Clarke, 2000) with young people reporting that they integrate on- and off-line communication in order to sustain their social networks (Slater, 2002). The

National Children's Home (2002) study in Britain found that one in four children reported being bullied by mobile phone or on the Internet, while in an Australian study of 120 students in Year 8, over a quarter said they knew someone who had been bullied using technology (Campbell & Gardner, 2005). The figures were lowered (6%) when students were asked in England if they received threatening email or text messages when at school (Rivers, 2003). Ybarra and Mitchell (2004) in the United States reported that 15% of their sample identified themselves as Internet bullies while 7% said they had been targeted on line. This compares to the Brisbane students, 11% of whom identified themselves as cyber bullies and nearly 14% as targets (Campbell & Gardner, 2005). Most targets were bullied by texting, followed by chat rooms then by email in both the United Kingdom and Australian studies (Campbell & Gardner, 2005; National Children's Home, 2002). It seems also that cyberbullying is growing problem. The growth of cyberspace harassment has been recognised as far back as 1999 with a report from the United States Attorney General to the Vice President Al Gore, suggesting that incidents were an increasing problem for law enforcement officials (Beckerman & Nocero, 2003). Australian principals have also indicated that it is an increasing problem in schools (Beckerman & Nocero, 2003) and there is much anecdotal, though not as yet any research, evidence (Blair, 2003). With the number of adolescents who have access to the Internet and mobile phones expected to rise from 745 000 to 1 million in 2005 (Lee, 2005), it could be predicted that the number of incidents of cyber bullying will also rise. Indeed, over half the students in the Brisbane study reported that they thought cyberbullying was increasing (Campbell & Gardner, 2005).

For face-to-face bullying most studies have shown that boys and girls report similar levels of victimisation (Crick & Grotpeter, 1996; Smith & Shu, 2000). However, some studies report more boys being bullied than girls (Hazler, Hoover, & Oliver, 1992; Rigby, 1997; Rigby & Slee, 1991). In the case of cyber bullying it seems that girls could be more involved than boys, as they are more likely to communicate regularly by email and texting (Blair, 2003). However, there is no evidence as yet. While younger children in primary school report more face-to-face bullying by peers than do adolescents in secondary school (Rigby, 1997; Rigby & Slee, 1991), it would also seem that cyber bullies are older, as younger children do not use the technology for communication with their peers as much as do older students.

Consequences

The consequences of face-to-face bullying have been shown to be increased levels of depression, anxiety and psychosomatic symptoms in victims (Kaltiala-Heino, Rimpela, Rantanen, & Rimpela, 2000; Kumpulainen et al., 1998; Neary & Joseph, 1994; Roland, 2002). The bullied students also feel more socially ineffective and have greater interpersonal difficulties (Craig, 1998; Forero, McLellan, Rissel, & Baum, 1999), together with higher absenteeism from school and lower academic competence (Rigby, 1997; Zubrick et al., 1997). However, it is still unclear if these symptoms are antecedents or consequences of bullying (Hodges & Perry, 1999; Roland, 2002). Thus the direction of causality may be both ways (Kaltiala-Heino et al., 2000).

Even though the consequences for the victims of cyber bullying have not yet been researched, it would seem that they could be even more severe than those of face-to-face bullying. Although bullying by physical violence can only be threatened, not conducted, by technology, research has shown that verbal and psychological bullying may have more negative long term effects (Reid, Monsen, & Rivers, 2004). In addition, in cyber bullying there is a potential for a much wider audience to be aware of the incident than in schoolyard bullying. For example, emails could be forwarded to all the student's contacts and web sites could be created that millions of people could visit. Furthermore, there is the power of the written word. When bullies abuse verbally, the victim might not remember every word, but in the case of emails and text, chat rooms and web sites the targeted student can read what the bully has said over and over. Written words seem more concrete and 'real' than spoken words. In addition, there is less escape from the bullying, as it can happen anywhere and at any time. Furthermore, the cyber bully can sometimes be anonymous, meaning that some students could be emboldened to cyber bully when they would not bully face-to-face.

Prevention of cyber bullying

From the last 20 years of research into the prevention of face-to-face bullying, there are four areas that have been shown to reduce the incidence of bullying in schools.

Awareness raising

One of the first steps in any prevention program is to ensure that people are aware of the problem. A difficulty with preventing bullying in schools has been (and in some cases still is) that schools deny any incidence of bullying (Besag, 1989). In addition, there are myths about bullying that are perpetuated in school communities and need to be addressed. For example, some people hold that bullying is a childhood rite of passage, that it is a normal part of growing up or that it is just teasing and playful, or that bullying is in fact 'character-building'. Teachers, parents and students need to be made aware of cyber bullying in particular as well as bullying in general. Professional development for teachers is needed, explaining what cyber bullying is and the real consequences of severe and continuous cyber bullying. This awareness-raising among teachers needs to be continuing, and is especially important when inducting teachers to the school. Parents also need to be made aware of cyber bullying methods, such as students texting on mobile phones under the bedcovers in the middle of the night and sending hurtful emails from the computer in their bedroom. Parents and teachers need to discuss cyber bullying with students. As shown in the Brisbane study, many Year 8 students believe that adults have no knowledge that they have on-line lives, one even commenting that teachers could do nothing about SMS bullying because they don't have mobile phones (Campbell & Gardner, 2005). Schools can include coverage of cyber bullying when conducting workshops to raise awareness of face-to-face bullying, or cyber bullying could be used as a new angle on the bullying phenomena in reviewing general awareness.

Whole school policies

Whole school policies have been shown to be effective in reducing face-to-face bullying. In fact, it is the single most effective action a school can take (Smith & Sharp, 1994). However, each policy needs to be individualised for that school and not taken in whole from another school. The process or the journey of making the policy is as important as the end product. Perhaps for some schools its inclusion could be a useful revision to their existing policies. Additionally, unless the policy is translated into transparent daily use bullying will not be reduced.

In some communities, bullying policies have been adopted beyond the school. In 2002, Cochrane in Alberta, Canada, issued a proclamation, displayed at the four town entrances and at all schools, that it is a bully-free community (Tracey, 2004). The mayor says the town is proud to be the first community in Canada to recognise bullying as a societal problem.

Supervision

It is known that adult supervision in the playground decreases the incidence of face-to-face bullying (Smith & Shu, 2000). Schools that increase the number of adults who are watchful in the playground and who intervene on any suspicion of bullying reduce the incidents of bullying in their school. Teachers also need to be aware that bullying happens with technology and take the same steps to intervene in any suspected incidents. Teachers are already very cognisant of their duty of care with students using computers, because of the need for protection from pornography, and do supervise students carefully (Kerawalla & Crook, 2002). It is possible that parents will have a greater role to play in supervision to prevent bullying by technology. This may be difficult for some parents as they find the technology difficult. Parents sometimes struggle to develop strategies to manage the technology while children and teens deploy tactics to thwart them, suggesting a 'digital generation gap' in which children explain the technology to their parents (Ribak, 2001). Parents and children relate to the technology differently (Snider & Borel, 2004). Adults approach computers as a practical tool while young people see the Internet as a lifeline to their peer group. At home, the location of the computer is an issue that parents need to consider carefully (Pew, 2001). Parents need to take back the power to control the technology, as they do other issues (Snider, 2004). Schools could assist in parent education to this end and encourage parents to talk to young people about the technology. This way young people are made aware that adults do know something about the technology and they can seek help from adults when they need to.

Programs

There are two kinds of programs that have been shown to reduce the incidence of face-to-face bullying - social programs and curriculum programs.

Bystanders, usually peers, play an important role in perpetuating the cycle of bullying. Thus bullying, by whatever means, is a social problem and needs to be solved in a social context. To do this the key is creating empathy in students, so that the bystanders speak out against bullies and do not silently condone the practice (Noble, 2003). This would seem to be the same for cyber bullying. In Canada thousands have logged onto the web site to make a promise to stick up for kids who are being bullied (Tracey, 2004). Peer helper programs, buddy programs and transition programs all support the ethos of a school to help one another. Curriculum programs incorporating the direct teaching of values education, empathy training and the use of stories and drama embedded in the curriculum, as well as direct teaching of 'netiquette', could all help to reduce cyber bullying.

In summary it would seem that the prevention of cyber bullying could be very similar to the prevention of face-to-face bullying. However, research into the area is needed.

Intervention in schools

One of the first reactions of many adults, teachers as well as parents, is to punish cyber bullies. In fact, both Education Queensland (Gregory, 2004) and New South Wales Education Department ('U R out!', 2004) have released policies on cyber bullying stating only that punishments of suspension and exclusion are the only options for these bullies. While most research has shown that the no-blame interventions work best for face-to-face bullies (Young, 1998) the seemingly 'get-tough' approach is the one that is opted for, presumably to appease adults.

However, there are many obstacles to even putting this punitive approach into practice. One of the difficulties is the fact that many victims will not report bullying to adults, with less than a quarter of bullied students ever telling a teacher (Rigby, 1997). It is known that there are many reasons why young people do not tell adults (Petersen & Rigby, 1999). They feel too humiliated and embarrassed. In addition, many young people think that either their report will not be believed or that the incident will be trivialised by adults, or that they will be made feel that they are responsible for being bullied. They also do not have much faith that adults can solve the problem and fear that adults might make it worse (Petersen & Rigby, 1999). One student even said that teachers don't have mobile phones, so how could they understand? In addition, cyber bullied students fear that adults will take the technology away from them, that they will lose their mobile phone or be forbidden to use the Internet. In the National Children's Home (2002) study, nearly 30% of cyber bullied students told no-one. To increase the likelihood of reporting there are many things that schools and parents can do. The first is to believe the reporter and not to trivialise any comments but to take them seriously. There needs to be confidentiality in reporting (as much as possible) and solving the problem should be a joint affair between students and adults, who do not immediately take a punishing role. The school policy should set out the clear and transparent steps of what will happen after the reporting.

Another obstacle to taking a punitive approach is the question of a school's right of censure if the cyber bullying is occurring outside the school, or with students from another school. In the United States, court rulings have held that even the most provocative Internet bulletin boards cannot be held liable for their content if there is no attempt to edit the site, so web sites owners cannot be sued for what appears (Guernsey, 2003). When cyber bullying takes place in private homes on weekends and in the evenings, does the school have a role to intervene? Can schools take away students' mobile phones if they have been given to the children for safety reasons? Can schools refuse to allow a student access to the Internet or a computer if it interferes with a student's learning? A further obstacle is the anonymity that students can have using technology to bully. Students can use another's phone or email account, use an alias or contribute anonymously to a web site. The perpetrators therefore can often not be identified.

In conclusion cyberbullying would seem to be an increasing problem for young people with possibly even more dire consequences than schoolyard bullying. While prevention measures could be similar to face-to-face bullying reduction, intervention measures might need to be reconsidered.

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