

Prevent Cyberbullying: Suggestions for Parents

By Michelle K. Demaray & Christina F. Brown

The school, playground, and neighborhood often come to mind when one thinks about bullying that occurs among children and teens. However, given the significant role technology plays in the lives of today's youth, the potential of these media to function as a venue for social interaction that includes victimization, or cyberbullying, also needs to be considered (David-Ferdon & Hertz, 2007; Huesmann, 2007). Cyberbullying can be defined as "an individual or a group willfully using information and communication involving electronic technologies to facilitate deliberate and repeated harassment or threat to another individual or group by sending or posting cruel text and/or graphics using technological means" (Mason, 2008, p. 323). Current estimates indicate that 20% to 35% of children and adolescents experience cyberbullying (Diamanduros, Downs, & Jenkins, 2008; Kowalski & Limber, 2007). Because a significant amount of cyberbullying occurs outside of school, school psychologists need to be knowledgeable about suggestions for parents who should intervene with this problem behavior at home. Given that cyberbullying is a relatively new research area, there are no empirically validated interventions. However, initial research and suggestions aimed at parental monitoring of electronic communication are an important starting point for prevention/intervention efforts regarding cyberbullying. Thus, the goal of this article is to discuss the role of the school psychologist in working with parents and summarize suggestions aimed at parents to deal with cyberbullying at home.

Importance of a Positive Caregiver-Child Relationship

Preliminary research has documented that the caregiver-child relationship is an important consideration in the likelihood that a child will be involved in cyberbullying. Ybarra and Mitchell (2004b) found that poor caregiver-child relationships were significantly related to online harassment. Forty-four percent of students classified as Internet harassers in their study described their relationship with their caregiver as "very poor" (compared to 19% of nonharassers). Even after controlling for all other significant characteristics associated with cyberbullying, a poor caregiver-child emotional bond was associated with a two times greater likelihood of harassing others online (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004a). This is important information for school psychologists to recognize, as many suggestions for reducing cyberbullying rely on parents. If there are concerns about the caregiver-child relationship, it may be important for the school psychologist to focus directly on the youth with their information and interventions regarding cyberbullying.

Importance of Parental Monitoring

Although more work is needed on this topic, initial research makes it clear that parental monitoring must occur to reduce the incidence of cyberbullying. For example, Ybarra and Mitchell (2004a) found that infrequent caregiver monitoring was associated with increased likelihood of children's Internet harassment activity. Thus, it is important for parents to monitor their children's behavior, including electronic communications. Research suggests that students do not typically seek help from others after they have been harassed online. Slonje and Smith (2008) found that 50% of victims reported not telling anyone about their cyberbullying experiences, 35.7% told a friend, 8.9% told a parent, and 5.4% told someone else. Given these results, parents and caregivers need to be aware of cyberbullying and take a proactive approach to monitor youth for experiences with it. Of concern is the fact that many children and adolescents log onto the Internet from locations other than home, thereby reducing opportunity for their parents to monitor their online usage (Hertz & David-Ferdon, 2008). Approximately one fourth of students involved in cyberbullying reported logging onto the Internet from school, libraries, or a friend's house. Still, parental monitoring is a critical starting point for prevention and intervention aimed at cyberbullying. Several general recommendations in the literature are provided below.

General monitoring. Several simple suggestions have been provided to allow parents to monitor their children's online behavior. First, parents should keep the child or family computer out in the open at home so that parents can determine when the child is online and monitor his/her behavior (Lenhart, Madden, & Hitlin, 2005; Willard, 2007c). Parents should discuss with their child what s/he likes to do online, ask about online friends, and discourage secretive behavior. Willard (2007c) recommends even more intrusive monitoring of children's online usage. She suggests that parents learn their child's username and check their

child's profiles, webpages, and blogs. She recommends that parents inform their children that their computer webpage history, friend lists, and communications are being monitored. It is also suggested that parents help children distinguish between personal information that should and should not be disclosed online (Willard, 2007c).

Creating rules and discussions about electronic communication. Hertz and David-Ferdon (2008) recommend that parents develop rules with their child regarding safe behavior for all electronic media. They also emphasize talking with children about what to do if they become a victim or witness another person victimized by cyberbullying. Hinduja and Patchin have several helpful online tools to aid in creating rules and engaging in discussions regarding electronic communication. For example, they have a Family Cell Phone Contract (2009c), Family Internet Use Contract (2009d), and a Cyberbullying Fact Sheet (2009a) with parental scripts to promote parent and child discussion about electronic communication. These tools could be used to create family rules about electronic media and promote discussion. Interestingly, Ybarra and Mitchell (2004a) found that caregiver-reported use of household rules about Internet behavior was not related to significant differences in likelihood of cyberbullying. Thus, exactly which specific components of parental monitoring designed to deter cyberbullying behavior are effective needs to be better understood.

Blocking software. Blocking software is a possible intervention to restrict children and adolescents' Internet usage. Willard (2007c) suggests the use of keystroke monitoring software that not only blocks certain websites and information, but also allows parents to see every keystroke the child has made while on the computer. This type of monitoring software may create trust issues, and Willard suggests a discussion with the child surrounding this form of monitoring and why it became important (e.g., the child has been acting secretly online). Although a logical recommendation, blocking software will not solve the cyberbullying problem. First, it only addresses online behavior and not other forms of electronic media, including cell phones or instant messaging. In addition, many students log onto the Internet from locations other than home (Hertz & David-Ferdon, 2008). Lastly, preliminary research has not found that blocking software actually leads to significant differences in likelihood of cyberbullying (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004a). However, the use of blocking software could create an avenue for parents to demonstrate they are monitoring their child's online behavior at home and to initiate conversations about Internet behavior with their children.

Reduce time spent online. Ybarra and Mitchell (2004a) found that youth who reported Internet usage 6 days or more a week were at least three times more likely to be a cyberbully or cybervictim. In addition, youth who reported daily Internet use of 3 or more hours a day were 2.5 times as likely to become a cyberbully/victim rather than cyberbully only. It is not assumed that reducing time online will solve the problem, but in general, it reduces exposure and sets limits. It may be helpful for parents to set limits, just as with TV or computer games, regarding the amount of time allowed for online activities, cell phone use, texting, or other electronic media.

Awareness of Cyberbullying

An important first step for school psychologists is to help parents become aware of cyberbullying and the potential important role they should play in monitoring their children's electronic communications. Many parents may not realize the dangers associated with electronic media or the potential for cyberbullying. School psychologists are in an ideal position to educate parents about the risk of cyberbullying and methods they can use at home to prevent or intervene with cyberbullying behaviors. This information could be delivered to parents via a variety of methods, including workshops, online training, brochures and pamphlets, Parent-Teacher Organization meetings, or via a newsletter that is sent home with children (Diamanduros et al., 2008). There are helpful handouts on the Internet that include a Cyberbullying Fact Sheet handout (Hinduja & Patchin, 2009a) and a Cyberbullying Warning Signs handout (Hinduja & Patchin, 2009b) that could be downloaded and handed out to parents. Willard has a Student Guide (2007a), Parent Guide (2007c), and Educator's Guide to Cyberbullying (2007b) that are available for download and are helpful resources for promoting awareness of cyberbullying with youth, parents, and educators.

Conclusions

Given the significant role that technology currently plays in the lives of children and adolescents, cyberbullying is a growing problem that needs to be addressed. Although much more work needs to be done to develop empirically supportable interventions aimed at cyberbullying, initial suggestions directed to parents are an important first step.

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