Cyberbullying Has a Broader Impact than Traditional Bullying

Cyberbullying, 2012

Yalda T. Uhls, a developmental psychology student at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), conducts research with the Children’s Digital Media Center. Psychology in Action, the website from which the following viewpoint is taken, is a project of UCLA psychology doctoral students whose goal is to communicate psychological research to those outside the field.

Significant differences between cyberbullying and traditional bullying make the impact of cyberbullying more severe. While victims of traditional bullying might feel safe at home, cyberbullying victims can be attacked from anywhere at any time. The audience for cyberbullying attacks is also much larger. Moreover, because electronic communication distances the cyberbully from the victim, the cyberbullies may not fully understand the impact of their behavior on their victims. While research shows higher rates of depression among cyberbullying victims, the results also show that cyberbullying is not as prevalent as traditional bullying. Nevertheless, cyberbullying victims and offenders alike agreed that the best solution was to prohibit access to social networking sites and take away computers and cell phones.

The suicide of a young girl named Phoebe Prince in January of 2010 received a great deal of media attention. Phoebe was the victim of bullying, manifested online by classmates who posted disparaging remarks about her on Facebook. A few months ago, digital bullying was again in the news when Tyler Clementi, an 18-year old college student, threw himself off a bridge [on September 22, 2010] after his roommate and a friend posted a webcam video of Tyler’s sexual liaison with another man. Both of these deaths were featured in cover stories of People magazine, the second top consumer magazine in the United States (People.com). Because digital media tools allow bullying to happen beyond the schoolyards, twenty four hours a day, seven days a week, youth were using the tools to torment victims, who allegedly saw no choice for escape except to kill themselves. Journalists began writing about a bullying pandemic. Did technology unleash these forces, thus taking typical adolescent behavior and amplifying it to the point whereby drastic action needs to occur in order to address a pressing social problem?

When one inputs teenage suicide into the search engine of People magazine, many articles come up beginning from 1978. One can also view a 1985 cover story about teen suicide with a picture of the then popular teenage actress Molly Ringwald entitled "Why are our children dying?:" Indeed, teenage suicide has been portrayed as a serious issue, long before Internet access and use exploded. Nevertheless, the website suicide.org, which reports suicide rates, found that in 2003, rates grew for youth 15-24. This was the first increase in the suicide rate for young people since 1980. Perhaps cyber bullying contributed to this increase?

[Cyberbullying] victims can be bullied anytime and from anywhere because most children have access to digital devices outside of school.

Comparing Cyberbullying and Traditional Bullying

Cyber bullying is defined as electronically mediated behaviors among peers such as making fun of,
telling lies, spreading rumors, threats and sharing private information or pictures without permission to do so. One of the most consistently found differences between traditional bullying and cyber bullying is that victims can be bullied anytime and from anywhere because most children have access to digital devices outside of school. As such, it is difficult to escape this type of bullying, as long as one makes use of a mobile phone or computer. In addition, the Internet allows children access to a much larger community than in the past. Hence, a bully can torment a victim in front of a virtual audience of many people, such as a group of peers on a social networking site. The Internet also allows anonymity, and a bully can target a victim while shielded behind a computer screen or mobile phone. Finally, the asynchronous nature of electronically mediated communication allows for actions to be separated from consequences. In this manner, a person who bullies on a screen rather than face to face may not clearly understand how their behavior affects the victim. All of these unique aspects of cyber bullying may contribute to its potential effects.

Research scientists have begun to measure and disentangle where and how different kinds of bullying occur. Bullying is complex. First, several different kinds of bullying have been identified including physical and relational or social bullying. Second, prevalence rates change depending on frequency of the behavior. Third, separating out the location of the bullying is difficult as the overlap between victimization in and out of school is extensive. And finally, with respect to cyber bullying, different forms may lead to different effects.

Looking at Bullying Statistics

A recent study which separated different types of bullying was completed in 2005 in a survey of 7200 US 6-10th grade students; this study found that over a 2 month period, 13.3% of the students reported that they had bullied others at least once physically, 37.4% verbally, 27.2% socially, and 8.3% electronically. The prevalence rates for one time victimization in the last 2 months were 12.8% for physical, 36.5% for verbal, 41.0% for relational, and 9.8% for cyber forms. When asked about more frequent cyber bulling, defined as more than 2-3 times a month, 4.3% of the children reported being victims. Further analysis of the same dataset by the same research scientists found that the cyber bullying victims exhibited higher rates of depression regardless of frequency. Another study of US children completed in 2005 found that 13% reported being cyber bullied more than 4-6 times in the past year.

As might be expected, given that most schools do not allow unstructured access to technology during school hours, being a victim of cyber bullying occurs to a greater extent outside of school compared to inside school. In a recent study in Sweden, 16.2% of the children reported being a victim of cyber bullying outside of school, 9% in the school, while the total prevalence, % combining inside and outside of school, was 17.6, thus indicating a substantial overlap between the two. Most studies have found that the majority of victims of cyber bullying know the perpetrator, with many bullies being peers from school. The Swedish study separated the kinds of cyber bullying into text (email and text) and visual (video and phone). Text based cyber bullying was perceived to have a less severe impact than traditional bullying, but visual felt more severe than traditional bullying.

In certain forms, cyberbullying does seem to have more impact than other forms of bullying and can lead to a significant increase in depression for victims.
Examining Prevention Strategies

Given that peers from school are involved in most cyber bullying incidents, educators, compelled by legislation such as "Protecting Children in the 21st Century Act" are experimenting with different anti cyber bullying strategies. A recent study asked 713 middle and high school students which of 14 different cyber bullying prevention strategies would be the most effective in deterring bullies. The strategies ranged from curtailing an offender's access to computers both at home and school, to an offender doing a presentation about cyber bullying, to taking away the offender's extracurricular activities. The study also collected information on whether or not the student had been a cyber bully or victim in order to compare their perspectives of the most effective consequence. In fact, the top two perceived best strategies were the same for victims and offenders. These were "no access to social networking sites for the offender" and "parents taking away the offender's computers and cell phones." It's interesting to note that both of these strategies require parents to commit to the discipline of their children with respect to online behavior.

Cyber bullying does seem to be a new challenge for youth. The good news is that it does not appear to be highly prevalent among youth, especially after one takes into account the frequency of the bullying behavior. The bad news is, in certain forms, it does seem to have more impact than other forms of bullying and can lead to a significant increase in depression for victims. One can speculate as to why cyber bullying may feel more distressing to victims. The larger audience, the around the clock availability of digital media, and the ease of dispersing embarrassing photos or videos, all of these affordances may contribute to a larger and more severe impact of cyber bullying over traditional bullying. The issue is still of great concern and research continues, as a cover story of last Sunday's [December 4, 2010] NY Times entitled "As Bullies Go Digital, Parents Play Catch Up" suggests.

Further Readings

Books

Periodicals and Internet Sources


- Lauren Collins "Friend Game: Behind the Online Hoax That Led to a Girl's Suicide," *New Yorker*, January 21, 2008.


- *Current Events* "Your Space: Schools Struggle to Find Ways to Curb Cyberbullying without Violating Student Rights (Debate)," October 25, 2010.


- Lindsay McIntosh "Children Facing New Torment As Bullies Move from the Playground to Cyberspace," *Times* [London], January 26, 2011.
- Prevention Reader "Remaining Safe and Avoiding Dangers Online: A Social Media Q & A with Kimberly Mitchell," December 2010.


- Sara Stroud "Fight Fire with Fire: School Districts Are Turning the Tables against Cyberbullies, Using Technology to Flush Out and Crack Down on Online Harassment," THE Journal [Technological Horizons in Education], October 2009.


Source Citation