

# **The Evolution of Bullying to Cyber Bullying: An Overview of the Best Methods for Implementing a Cyber Bullying Prevention Program**

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## **Abstract**

Tragic stories of cyber bullying among children and young adults are getting more frequent. As a result, federal, state, and local governments are focusing their efforts on the importance of addressing this issue by modifying laws and increasing funding. The results of this study provide some of the best methods for implementing a cyber bullying prevention program for teachers and parents.

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If only he had told us, if only we had known how desperate he was, maybe we could have done something to help him. Following the suicide of their son, a mother and father sit and wonder how things may have been different had they known how helpless their son felt as a result of being harassed by his peers on the Internet and social networking sites. Tragic stories of cyber bullying among children and young adults are getting more frequent. According to the Secretary of Education Arne Duncan,

Cyber-bullying, as you know, is a new and especially insidious form of bullying. In 2007, more than 900,000 secondary students reported being cyber-bullied. Cyber-bullying allows bullies to do their work at a distance, outside of schools, in front of a broad audience and sometimes under the protection of anonymity. New technologies provide bullies with new tools to hurt students in old ways. (U.S. Department of Education, 2010, para. 28)

This is not just a problem in America either. Cyber bullying is an issue in many countries across the globe. For example,

In South Korea, a female college student was riding the train with her dog when it defecated on the floor of the subway car. After the girl refused to clean up the mess, another passenger on the train took her picture using her cell phone and posted it online. In the months to follow, it became an Internet sensation in South Korea and “Dog Poop” girl became the target of extreme harassment. Individuals found out her name and address and soon she was forced to withdraw from school and move to another part of the country. (“Stories of Cyber Bullying,” 2008, para. 5)

### **Purpose of the Article**

Victims of cyber bullying are often afflicted with intense emotional and psychological pain. In many instances, this has led to tragic acts of physical violence. Many of the victims experience at least one or a combination of feelings of isolation, embarrassment and shame. The media has reported on some of the most appalling situations of cyber bullying that resulted in suicide. These reports are alarming for concerned parents and educators looking for answers. Therefore, this study was conducted to provide teachers and parents an overview of some of the best methods for implementing a cyber bullying prevention program. To begin this study, the evolution of bullying and its relationship to cyber bullying was analyzed.

### **Cyber Bullying Explained**

Bullying is a demonstration of antagonistic and premeditated malicious activities. According to Dake, Price, and Telljohann (2003, p. 173), bullying occurs when “the affliction of injury or discomfort is perpetrated upon another person.” The emotional and physical damage bullying has caused demands for society to take legal action. Bullying has evolved from a few hurtful remarks communicated in person to multimedia interaction that can be communicated via

multiple electronic sources. The evolution of electronic communication is the foundation of cyber bullying. Cyber bullying occurs through mobile phones via text messages, Twitter, and the Internet. According to Hinduja and Patchin (2011),

Kids have been bullying each other for generations. The latest generation, however, has been able to utilize technology to expand their reach and the extent of their harm. This phenomenon is being called cyberbullying, defined as: “willful and repeated harm inflicted through the use of computers, cell phones, and other electronic devices. (para. 1)

In addition, the enhanced communication social network has been a recent blistering topic in the media regarding schools and the workplace. Although it seems that bullying has been in existence since the beginning of time the publicity has been emphasized with the increase of homicides and suicides related to cyber bullying.

The media frequently issues “breaking news reports” and special programming alerts regarding cyber bullying. For example, ABC News recently aired a 20/20 two hour special titled “Bullied to Death in America’s Schools” (Dubreuil & McNiff, 2010). This documentary reported that at least 14 teenagers had committed suicide in the past year as a result of being bullied. Dilmac (2009) has conducted several surveys that have shown cyber bullying is an international problem, not just isolated in North America. Government agencies, schools and other places of employment have attempted to put policies into place to protect against such acts. The purpose of this article will show the concept of how bullying has evolved into the cyber world of technology.

The researcher Dan Olweus, considered a pioneer in the research of bullying, has been cited in many studies based on his expertise in this field. Olweus published his first book in 1973 titled, “Aggression on the Schools: Bullies and Whipping Boys”. This launched his forty plus years of studying bullying problems in the United States and other countries. In his findings, according to Hamarus and Kaikkonen (2008, p. 334), “Olweus argued that bullying involves an imbalance of power.” Olweus is noted as the first to implement an anti-bullying program (Carey, 2003). His anti-bullying design covers procedures in classrooms and may also be used in the workplace to help diffuse bullying activities. In the early 1980s, Olweus began a campaign to formulate laws against bullying in schools, which have since been signed into law. Due to his work, some schools have experienced a 50% reduction in bullying. Administrators and other educators have stated the work done by Olweus has certainly earned its merits and improved student protection.

The United States Secret Service submitted a report investigating the characteristics of students who have committed criminal offenses and discovered bullying as one of the key factors leading to the criminal activities (Dake, Price, & Telljohann, 2003). In 12 of the 15 campus shootings during the 1990s, the shooters had a history of being bullied. In the past, bullying consisted of intimidation, manipulation, and physical aggressiveness against the weaker opponent. Bullying was most prominent in schools or during the day (Dilmac, 2009). The outcomes led to championship of the stronger opponent and sometimes the confiscation of someone’s lunch money.

However, in today’s world of cyber bullying the victim is often publicly humiliated. As a result, some victims devise a plan to get even by committing a stronger, negative action towards the bully or others as discussed above.

Within seconds, a rumor can circulate around the school or community before anyone has verified its validity. Information can spread so rapidly that millions of people across the world can view it before it can be removed. For example, a few years ago a Rutgers University freshman student jumped from the George Washington Bridge because his sexual activities with another male were unknowingly video taped and placed on the Internet (Rochman, 2010). The accusers for this heinous crime may have considered their actions as mere fun or bashing of homosexual activities. However, the ramifications were devastating for them and the victim.

### **The Evolution of Bullying to Cyber Bullying**

Schoolyard bullying has increased in the United States over the past thirty years which can be linked to the rising numbers of suicide and homicide cases in some areas. When reflecting over the motive for bullying; the reason is normally something about the victim that they could not change or correct. Examples would be dislike persons for their hair color, sexual orientation, body size or their economic status. According to research by “Fight the Crime Teen” data, some primary reasons for cyber bullying centers around interest in a male or female, appearance, race or ethnicity, and sexual orientation (Raskauskas, 2009). Safran and Safran (2008) cite The Social Skills Deficit Model, which theorizes that bullies victimize others in order to keep their power and social status.

The variations of victimization from elementary, middle and secondary schools are conflicting in physical, psychological and behavioral characteristics. Elementary students may indulge in simple name calling and hitting of each other. The middle school students have been given the opportunity to have cellular phones purchased by their parents usually at the urging of the child. The use of computers in schools for elementary students may consist of navigating through educational programs; while middle schools and high schools use computers for development of programs, papers and have more freedom to interact with various websites. The difference in grade levels shows the needs for each group of children to be aware of computer etiquette and misuse.

Despite the grade level, children from various age ranges may be affected by bullying. This fact has been researched since the late 1960s (Carey, 2003). Due to the limited access of electronic devices in elementary schools these students were confined to physical and verbal bullying of their peers. In middle and high schools students have access to electronic devices to instigate cyber bullying.

### **Cyber Bullying Not Just an American Problem**

However, bullying is not just a problem for children. Many adults experience bullying in the workplace and the effects are just as damaging. Today schools and places of employment issue a “zero tolerance” toward bullying in any form. In the workplace bullying, is often subtle and undetected for some time. Bullying in the workplace can lead to increased turnover and decrease the commitment of employees (Hutchinson, Vickers, Jackson, & Wilkes, 2006). The negative impact is not only harmful to the individual or victim; it also has the ability to affect the productivity in the workplace. In the health care arena, nurses are often treated with less respect

by physicians and asked to perform tasks that are not considered “other duties as assigned.” According to Hutchinson, Vickers, Jackson, and Wilkes (2010), “bullying can cause not only psychological harm to those targeted, but also physical illness” of the employee (p. 26).

Some employees will use deceptive measures in order to gain status in the workplace. Workplace bullying has been used in political maneuvers as an attempt to elevate oneself up the corporate chain (Hutchinson et al., 2010). An example of workplace bullying would be derogatory emails or verbal confrontations to a peer.

Research on bullying transcends international boundaries. According to Slee and Rigby (as cited in Carey, 2003, p.17), “bullying is defined as deliberately intending to hurt by repeatedly taking advantage of superior strength, either physical or psychological.” Gregor reported workplace bullying is the top OSHA (Occupational Health and Safety Act) issue in Australia (2004).

In New Zealand, cyber bullying has become a growing concern due to the prominence of mobile phones among the youth. A total of 1,530 students were surveyed in a recent study conducted among youth ranging in age from 11 to 18. The study found that 43% of the participants reported having some incident of cyber bullying (Raskauskas, 2009).

In the United Kingdom, a research study was conducted with 1,429 students regarding their aggressor’s intent and the power imbalance between themselves and the aggressor (Hunter, Boyle, & Warden, 2007). The ages of those interviewed were between the ages of 8 and 13 years. They described their lower methods of coping against being bullied. The United Kingdom has conducted studies showing the growing problem of bullying in the schools as a subcategory of aggressive behavior (Jennifer, Cowie, & Bray, 2006). A conflict resolution animation film called “Bully Dance” was shown in British schools to identify bullying behaviors and coping strategies for school age children.

Some common mistakes victims typically make are that they fail to disclose to a person of authority that they have been bullied. Some victims perceive that electronic communication is not traceable when they are anonymous so there is no need to report the offense. According to Juvonen and Gross (2008, p. 503), “in theory, electronic communication tools enable bullies to remain anonymous.” However; in today’s technological world many auditing programs have devised methods of tracing anonymous transmissions. Many victims attempt to conceal the events from the proper authorities or those who care about them for fear of future retaliation by the perpetrator or ridicule by peers who would view in a negative manner (Juvonen & Gross, 2008).

Smith et al. (2007) provided suggestions to stop cyber bullying that include blocking or ignoring the bully, not retaliating, and always notifying someone of authority. Other suggestions include posting the incident and placing information regarding potential consequences and campaigns against bullying on your message board. The survey also listed the suggestion to “fight back” along with “staying away from school” as the least favorable options. Awareness is a key identifier of cyber bullying prevention. According to Diamanduros, Downs, and Jenkins (2008) “it is important for parents and teachers to educate their children on the impact that online chats, instant messaging, text messaging and social networking sites such as MySpace can have on their social lives” (p. 695).

### **Cyber Bullying in Pop Culture**

This issue has become so relevant that pop culture has embraced it. A recent episode of *Glee*, *On My Way*, (Aguirre-Sacasa & Buecker, 2012) highlighted the harmful affects of cyber bullying when one of the characters was bullied for being found out to be homosexual. The Trevor Project Web Site, a national organization that helps LGBT suicide prevention, saw a 300 percent increase in visits after this episode aired (Mann, 2012). The ABC Family Movie “Cyber Bully” (Booth & Biname, 2011) documented how a young girl’s character was damaged due to a misunderstanding with her friends. This illustrated the harmful affects of cyber bullying on the victim, the perpetrator, and others in the community. Everyone was affected in a negative manner including those who were not directly involved. The victim experienced a drop in her social status in school. During this time her parents were filing for a divorce. Through a series of events, the victim deliberately deceived her mother and arranged to meet with new friends she found on the Internet friends. These friends eventually turned on her and began cyber bullying her. The victim sadly planned her death as the only means to escape her deep emotional pain. According to Flaspohler, Elfstrom, Vanderzee, Sink, and Birchmeier (2009), “victims of bullying are more likely to report physical and mental health problems and to contemplate suicide compared with non-victims” (p. 638).

The movie revealed several issues where prevention methods could have been deployed. When the mother gave her daughter a computer with Internet access, she should have taught her online etiquette and safety guidelines. Research has shown an increase in victimization occurring with home internet and other electronic communication devices (Juvonen & Gross, 2008). When the detrimental postings appeared she failed to inform her parents, teachers or someone in authority. According to some attorneys, "parents of bullies may be sued for defamation of character, invasion of privacy, physical and emotional distress" (“Schoolyard E-Bullies,” 2005, p. 10).

### **Bullying Prevention**

The need for anti-bullying intervention programs is essential to eradicate this destructive behavior. Therefore, polices have been developed within local and state governing bodies to address this social problem. Mandated reporting laws place school professionals in positions to protect children. In addition, the Anti-Bullying Act was implemented to enforce strict guidelines against bullying of all forms (Sherer & Nickerson, 2010).

The European Commission has developed strategies to help safe guard their Internet sites. Their design is to educate users. This safety measure was developed for students, teachers, and parents (Riva, 2010). Schools must implement protocols and training for teachers and students and provide guidance for parents (Smith et al., 2007).

In Texas, school districts have adopted and implemented a “Zero Tolerance Bullying Policy”. The Fort Worth Independent School District in Texas has started the “It’s Not Okay Campaign”. This initiative was designed to support victims as well as encourage others to speak up about inappropriate behaviors they witness. The program teaches students to identify sexting, cyberbullying, dating violence and other awareness topics (Fort Worth Independent School District, 2011). Teaching appropriate student conduct is important in building self-esteem, self-

efficacy, and trust within the social setting (Sherer & Nickerson, 2010). Many companies have subscribed to employee assistance programs that address one on one counseling services for anger management, stress, domestic violence and problems in the workplace (Hutchinson et al., 2010).

### Conclusion

Bullying has evolved from schoolyard fist fights to electronic character assassination. The need and development of electronic communication etiquette has also been tated to protect victims. The need for students, parents, teachers, employees and others to report abuse is a major factor to assist in reversing the incidences of cyber bullying in America and around the world. Cyber bullying may be frightening for many parents or older adults because the lack of computer skills and knowledge; therefore it is important to enhance their learning as a means of empowerment. The bullying prevention programs are designed to detect and redirect such victimization of the innocent.

The effectiveness of these policies are continually being evaluated. Federal, state, and local governments continue to focus on the importance of addressing social problems by modifying laws and increasing funding. These efforts should aid in the fight against bullying. As social networking sites continue to develop and communication advances in other countries, it is imperative to stay vigilant in safeguarding our children against cyber bullying. The consequences of cyber bullying have devastating affects on families and communities.

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