

# Chapter 16

## Cyberbullying: Definition, Description, Characteristics, and Consequences

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### ABSTRACT

*Although children's and adolescents' use of technology has many benefits, there is also a darker side to youths' electronic interactions: cyberbullying. Cyberbullying has become a major focus of not only youths, educators, and researchers, but also among the general population due to high profile cases of cyberbullying victimization involving suicide and the increasing prevalence of these behaviors. Due to the ability to remain anonymous, the cyber context offers flexibility to cyberbullies, allowing them to harm their potential victims without the constraints and many of the repercussions associated with traditional face-to-face bullying. Cyberbullies can also target the victim or victims quicker, more often, and involve multiple bystanders in the bullying situation. The purpose of this chapter is to review research on cyberbullying by drawing on studies from a variety of disciplines and utilizing a variety of research designs.*

### INTRODUCTION

Time spent using electronic technologies, such as cell phones, gaming consoles, and computers, has increased among children and adolescents in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Such utilization of electronic technologies has many benefits, including the ability to connect and communicate with family and friends and having access to an assortment of information at one's fingertips. Although children and adolescents benefit from electronic technologies, they are also exposed to various risks. These risks include identity theft, sexual predation, hate speech, graphic, gory, or disturbing content, and using fake or untrue information for their coursework. Another risk associated with children and adolescents use of electronic technology is cyberbullying. Children and adolescents can experience and/or witness cyberbullying through various electronic technologies, such as gaming consoles, email, instant messaging, chatrooms, social networking websites, and text messages via mobile devices.

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The purpose of this chapter is to define and describe children's and adolescents' exposure to cyberbullying. The psychological, behavioral, and social consequences associated with their cyberbullying involvement will also be discussed. The chapter concludes with future research directions and concluding remarks regarding children's and adolescents' cyberbullying perpetration and victimization. The literature in this chapter draws on research studies from a variety of disciplines, including psychological, communication and media studies, social work, education, sociology and computer science. The studies employ different research designs, such as cross-sectional, longitudinal, and mixed-methodologies.

## **BACKGROUND**

Cyberbullying involves the use of electronic technologies to harm others using hostile, embarrassing and intimidating repetitive behaviors (Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2007; Ybarra, West, & Leaf, 2007). Described as an extension of traditional face-to-face bullying, cyberbullying includes an imbalance of power between the bullying (Olweus, 1999). Furthermore, cyberbullying behaviors usually involve deliberate and intentional acts that are carried out with malicious intent. Like traditional face-to-face bullying, cyberbullying behaviors have face-to-face equivalents, such as spreading a rumor, harassment, physical threats, social exclusion or rejection, humiliation, gossiping about a victim to get others not to like the person, and verbal insults. There are also physical forms of cyberbullying, such as hacking. Other cyberbullying behaviors involve making anonymous phone calls, theft of identity information by pretending to be someone else, distributing explicit videos via various websites, and harassment using instant messenger, social networking websites, and text messages through mobile phones (Wolak et al., 2007; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004). Happy slapping (e.g., slapping someone while filming the attack and then posting the video online for others to see) and flaming (e.g., posting mean or controversial information online to purposefully get others to respond) are other forms of cyberbullying behaviors (Smith et al., 2008). Cyberbullying involves various technologies, with the most frequently utilized to harm others including instant messaging tools and social networking websites.

Many studies have been conducted to understand what aspects of electronic technologies breed cyberbullying. One proposal is that electronic technologies provide cyberbullies with the means to hide their identities, furthering the power differential between the victim and the bullying (Wright, 2013; Ybarra et al., 2007). Being able to remain anonymous through many electronic technologies relates to children's and adolescents' perpetration of cyberbullying (Dehue, Bolman, Vollink, & Pouwelse, 2012; Wright, 2014a; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004). In her research, Wright (2013; 2014a) found that adolescents and young adults who felt more confident in their ability to remain anonymous through electronic technologies engaged in more cyberbullying. Furthermore, electronic technologies provide the ability for cyberbullying to occur frequently and be repeated with ease, prolonging the harassment (Wright, 2014a; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004).

## **The Prevalence of Cyberbullying**

Once researchers recognized children's and adolescents' involvement in cyberbullying, they directed their attention to understanding how frequently children and adolescents are involved in these behaviors. In one of the earliest studies on cyberbullying in the United States, Wolak et al. (2007) found that 50% of children and adolescents sampled in their research self-reported cyberbullying victimization. Other

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