Sex, Cyberbullying, and the Mobile Phone

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INTRODUCTION

Cyberbullying is about an imbalance of power. It is an aggressive act involving one or more individuals who are targeting someone who is not in a position to defend him/herself. This is usually part of a pattern of repeated aggressive behavior. Cyberbullying is bullying using electronic means. Children and teens who engage in cyberbullying use electronic forms of communication to spread false rumors, gossip, and make verbal attacks (D'Antona, Kevorkian, & Russom, 2010). By definition, sexting is the sending of sexually explicit messages or images usually by cell phone and is a form of cyberbullying.

Cyberbullying can occur through social networks, email, and texts; all are easily accessible through a mobile phone. There are many things to consider when providing children or teenagers with a mobile phone. Mobile phones, when used inappropriately, can cause heartbreak, humiliation, suicide, depression and can lead to legal consequences. When in the wrong hands the mobile phone becomes a tool for child predators and other criminals. Unfortunately, it can even be used by adults in various cruel ways, resulting in different and often devastating situations.

The phenomenon of cyberbullying is relatively new. In fact, it was first seen as a threat in 2002, when 9% of schools reported it as a problem. By 2008, that number increased to 32% (Smith et al 2013). Today, online communication is a central component for many, including young people, most of whom have grown up in a world of instant cyber connections. In fact, electronic communication is an integral part of how youth learn to navigate and negotiate through social situations. (Johnson, 2014.) Electronic communication includes connecting through social media. My Space, Facebook, and Instagram are examples of currently utilized social media outlets, but the choices for social media continue to expand rapidly. Even though some social media websites require a minimum age for participation many children and teens still obtain their own access, leaving them vulnerable for cyberbullying, including sexting.

At its core, sexting is the sending, forwarding, or receiving of sexual images by electronic means. As of 2014, several states including Arizona, Connecticut, Florida, Hawaii, Louisiana, Nevada, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, and Vermont have laws that specifically address sexting. In other states, sexting is included under pornography laws.

There is an entire generation of people who have grown up in a world of instant mobile communication. Online behaviors as well as their emotional, social and legal consequences are discussed, including a section with solutions to protect against cyberbullying, including sexting.. The goal is to promote responsible behavior that allows your mobile phone to keep you connected in a safe and secure environment without crossing the X-rated line. The solutions will be grounded in current research.

MOBILE PHONE

Mobile phone usage is about much more than talking; these are mini-computers that take the user online and allow communication in any place and at any time. Do not ignore online behaviors or have rules and regulations that focus only on computer usage. It would be difficult to find something you could not do on your mobile phone that you could not do on your personal computer. There are many things to consider when monitoring and supervising mobile phone use. The easy problems are those charges associated with overuse and finding a plan that works in your budget. The real issues are understanding accessibility and how to keep children and teens safe.

PREVALENCE OF CYBERBULLYING

It is important to understand who engages in cyberbullying and what research says about that. There is a clear connection in the profiles of those who cyberbully and those who use traditional non-physical bullying. Research suggests that those behaviors are not mutually exclusive. In fact, both forms of bullying are associated with families where there is some level of violence and low parental monitoring. This really means that when adult supervision is low and the adults model aggressive and/or violent behavior, the frequency of both bullying and cyberbullying increases (Low & Espelage, 2013).

For many reasons, it is difficult to ascertain the exact prevalence of cyberbullying and sexting behaviors among youth. Technology is constantly evolving and youth have unprecedented access to the online world. There are new websites and applications for cell phones developed a daily basis. In 2013, Apple announced that there were 1,000,000 apps available in their store. Since this generation is electronically adept, they are aware of the latest popular technological advances and are quick to adopt them.

There also is a cloak of secrecy surrounding cyberbullying and in particular, sexting activities. Even when youth have been victimized in these situations, they demonstrate a reluctance to report anything because of a fear that they will lose access to the world of electronic communication. Since texting is central to social connection, many to choose to remain silent about their dilemma for fear of losing privileges. (Ahern & Mechling, 2013)

How well someone controls personal data can be a predictor of cyberbullying, as it is linked to high-risk behavior online (Bonanno & Hymel, 2013). When youth take unnecessary or unusual risks they are more likely to delve into aggressive behaviors online, particularly since there is little accountability for their actions. Often youth will behave in ways that they would never think of when someone is watching. The ensuing result is the creation of situations where aggressive behavior can go undetected. This behavior is called moral disengagement and it occurs when people engage in activities that are in contrast to their personal values. In making the choice to engage in these activities, they rationalize the behavior to avoid feeling guilty (Lazuras, Barkoukis, Ourda & Tsorbatzoudis, 2013). For example, the thinking could be: "It is only a text" or "Everyone is doing it."

Researchers have suggested that one of the underlying causes for bullying and aggressive behaviors is a narcissistic vulnerability that leads to anger and trauma. When a person feels threatened physically, socially, or emotionally, it can lead to feelings of helplessness. The resulting response to feeling helpless is most often aggression (Smaller, 2013). In the ease of electronic communication, it makes sense that some researchers consider cyberbullying and sexting on the scale of an epidemic and to have very serious consequences.

IMPACT OF CYBERBULLYING

Heavy mobile cell phone usage may make a user more vulnerable to cyberbullying. Victims of

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