

# Students Hurting Students: Cyberbullying as a Mobile Phone Behavior

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## INTRODUCTION

Cyberbullying is defined as the use of technology to bully a target or targets. While students in past years primarily used desktop computers or laptops to cyberbully, the increased affordability and accessibility of mobile phones equipped to access the internet has enabled students to reach targets with unparalleled ease. Text, talk, and video features of the new mobile phones, and the ability to upload images to the internet, can be used to harass and intimidate victims.

As opposed to face-to-face bullying, where the perpetrator is in a superior position compared to the target, either physically bigger or stronger or more favorably situated socially and/or psychologically, a reversal of power can occur in cyberbullying. The anonymity of mobile phone technology can mean that the student who cyberbullies a teacher, school administrator, or peer may be an individual of far less stature, smaller, weaker, perhaps also in a “get even” mode for some perceived slight or wrong.

The students most likely to be involved in cyberbullying are those in “middle school,” children typically 11-12 years of age to 13 or 14. However, as mobile phone technology moves into elementary schools and becomes simpler to access, students younger than 11 are demonstrating that they, too, can cyberbully. Even high school and post-high school students also use mobile technology to cyberbully.

## OVERVIEW

The current author, Kathleen Conn, was one of the first legal and educational scholars to recognize the potential impact of the internet on students, schools, and school personnel, and the publication of her book by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, *The Internet and the Law: What Educators Need to Know* (2002), stirred great interest. That book was followed two years later by *Bullying and Harassment: A Legal Guide for Educators* (2004). Conn’s third book, *Bullying and Cyberbullying: Policies and Tools for Administrators* (2010), authored in collaboration with Travis Hicks, former editor of the *Educators’ Guide to Controlling Sexual Harassment*, published by Thomson Publishing Group, offered model policies for school administrators. In 2014, Conn authored the final chapter in *Sexting and Youth*, edited by Todd Hiestand and Jesse Wiems, and published by Carolina Press.

Other leading scholars include Nancy E. Willard, J.D., Director of the Center for Safe and Responsible Internet Use, Willamette University, WA, author of *Cyberbullying and Cyberthreats: Responding to the Challenge of Online Social Aggression, Threats, and Distress*; Associate Professor Justin W. Patchin, Ph.D., University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, WI, and Associate Professor Sameer Hinduja, Ph.D., Florida State University, FL, both of whom author and maintain the website of the Cyberbullying Research

Center at (<http://cyberbullying.us/about-us>); and Associate Professor Shaheen Sharif, Ph.D., McGill University, Montreal, Quebec, Canada, who has conducted and reported research with Canadian students.

### **CURRENT SCIENTIFIC KNOWLEDGE IN CYBERBULLYING**

Interestingly, one privately endowed foundation has led the research effort into the nature and prevalence of students' use of technology to bully and cyberbully, the Pew Foundation. The Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project is an authoritative source on the evolution of the internet through surveys that demonstrate how Americans are using the internet and how the internet affects their lives. Their report, *Teens, Social Media, and Privacy*, indicates that American teens are intensely interested in communicating about their daily activities with peers using social media (Madden, et al., 2013). However, a companion Pew report, *Teens and Technology 2013*, reports that, at the time of the study's conclusion, 78% of teens had mobile phones, and of these, 47% had smart phones with which they could access the internet. One in four teens reported that they are "cell-mostly" internet users, meaning that their preferred access to social media is through their mobile phones (Madden, Lenhart, Duggan, Cortesi, & Gasser, 2013). As time passes, these percentages likely will increase.

Another private foundation tracks and assesses the status and quality of state laws involving bullying and cyberbullying. The organization is Bully Police USA, a volunteer advocacy group whose website provides the text of state laws prohibiting bullying and cyberbullying, at (<http://www.bullypolice.org>). These laws generally mandate that public school districts adopt and implement anti-bullying policies, and many include electronic bullying in their statutes. However, these state

laws are of little use to parents whose children are either bullied or cyberbullied; they contain no private right of action, meaning that individuals cannot sue in court to enforce the laws or hold school districts liable for violations (Conn, 2010).

Funding to implement the mandates of the state anti-bullying statutes is often an afterthought or no thought at all. Only eleven states identify a source of funding, and of those, only six provide for state appropriations and the other five rely on private donations (Sacco, et al., 2012). Two states, Delaware and Florida, established sources of funding, but funding is contingent on the school districts' adoption and implementation of satisfactory anti-bullying policies.

Contrary to the states, the U.S. federal government in 2010 invested heavily in developing a web-based resource for parents, students, and school personnel interested in combatting bullying and cyberbullying, (<http://www.stopbullying.gov>). This federally-sponsored website provides an excellent source of information about dealing with bullying and cyberbullying on an individual and systemic level. President Barack Obama has fully supported efforts to remove the perception among many that bullying is simply "a rite of passage," and he and first lady Michelle Obama hosted the first-ever White House Conference on Bullying Prevention in 2011 (Shepherd, 2011).

### **Bullying and Cyberbullying Defined**

Cyberbullying cannot be defined in isolation. It is simply technology-enabled bullying, or, using a medical metaphor, "bullying on steroids." The basic elements of bullying are (1) that the perpetrator is stronger, either physically or in terms of social capital or psychological strength, (2) the perpetrator lacks empathy, and so does not care about bullying's effect on the target, (3) the target is in constant fear of the perpetrator. Bullying is repetitive and unremitting behavior that seeks dominance over other individuals.

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