

Chapter 3

Cyberbullying: Safety and Ethical Issues Facing K–12 Digital Citizens

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ABSTRACT

This chapter describes cyberbullying with a focus on K-12 students. Cyberbullying has evolved with the increased use of information and communication technology. As electronic information becomes more a part of everyday life, there has been a negative aspect to the use of computers and mobile technology. Cyberbullying presents a complex set of issues that can negatively impact students' safety and wellbeing. Cyberbullying includes many of the same issues as traditional bullying but extends the aggression beyond the physical schoolyard. In addition to the cyberbully perpetrator, these aggressive acts include cybervictims and often find the cyberbully-victims who move from victim to perpetrator. This chapter explores the safety and ethical issues facing K-12 schools and the challenges associated with this electronic form of aggression.

INTRODUCTION

The effects of bullying on children have been well-documented (Graham, 2016; Salmivalli, 2010; Zych, Ortega-Ruiz, & Del Rey, 2015). Bullying has been a part of the human experience since our earliest ancestors and is an element of group culture not confined to the human experience as bullying behaviors are demonstrated

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by many different species (Sherrow, 2011). In modern society, bullying has been documented in print as early as the 18th century (Koo, 2007) and continues to be a global concern (Gorzig & Frumkin, 2013; Zych, et al., 2015). As the internet and electronic media have become a pervasive part of global cultures, information and communication technology has been used as a format for bullying. The face-to-face, traditional schoolyard bullying still exists. However, an additional form of willful and repeated aggression now uses electronic transmission to deliver threats. Cyberbullying is currently a threat to the physical and emotional safety of K-12 students, and schools have an ethical obligation to create environments that reduce the instances of all forms of willful and repeated aggression.

BACKGROUND

The contemporary research on bullying has its origins with groundbreaking studies conducted by Olweus (1994), in the 1970's. Beginning with Olweus' early research, there has been a proliferation of studies on the topic (Zych et al., 2015). According to Olweus (1994), "A student is being bullied or victimized when he or she is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other students" (p. 1173). Another essential element of bullying includes an imbalance of power (Olweus & Limber, 2017). Bullies are thought to be motivated by status within the peer group (Salmivalli, 2010). The bully personality has been described as aggressive, impulsive, lacking empathy, having a desire to dominate others, and a positive attitude toward violence (Olweus, 1994). Victims have been characterized as anxious, insecure, or are victimized just because they are different (Graham, 2016). Bullying is a dynamic concept that involves more than the bully and victim. As research in the field expanded, a third category of bully-victim has emerged that describes those children who have been victims and who, in turn, bully others (Buelga, Martinez-Ferrer, Cava, 2017; Kochel, Ladd, Bagwell, & Yabko, 2015; Salmivalli, 2010). The traditional concept of bullying usually describes a schoolyard experience in which the bully and victim are in close physical proximity (Kowalski, Morgan, & Limber, 2012). However, as the 20th century came to an end, the internet added a new dimension to the schoolyard bullying problem.

The internet has changed many facets of our lives. With the ubiquitous influx of personal media in the 1990's a new delivery formats for bullying began to evolve. Email, texting, instant messaging, social media, social networks, digital video hosting, digital imaging, and other media sharing networks provided limitless platforms and formats for inappropriate aggressive behavior. The term that evolved to describe bullying through information and communication technology is cyberbullying. William Belsey is credited with coining the term at the turn of this century (Gregoire, 2013).

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