

Chapter 6

Moving from Cyber–Bullying to Cyber–Kindness: What do Students, Educators and Parents Say?

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this chapter is to explore cyber-bullying from three different, but interrelated, perspectives: students, educators and parents. The authors also explore the opposite spectrum of online behaviour - that of “cyber-kindness” - and whether positive, supportive or caring online exchanges are occurring among youth, and how educators, parents and policy-makers can work collaboratively to foster a kinder online world rather than simply acting to curtail cyber-bullying. These proactive efforts tackle the deeper causes of why cyber-bullying occurs, provide students with tools for positive communication, open the door for discussion about longer term solutions, and get at the heart of the larger purposes of education – to foster a respectful and responsible citizenry and to further a more caring and compassionate society. In the course of this discussion, they highlight the findings from two studies they conducted in British Columbia, Canada, one on cyber-bullying and a later study, which addressed both cyber-bullying and cyber-kindness.

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INTRODUCTION

The proliferation of electronic media in recent years has allowed children and adolescents to take schoolyard bullying to an entirely new level – into the realm of cyber-bullying. Cyber-bullying in the school context involves using emails, websites, text messaging, camera phones, blogs, YouTube, Facebook and other forms of social networking technology to spread hurtful, nasty, derogatory, vulgar or untrue messages to or about other students, teachers or acquaintances. Cyber-bullying typically threatens the reputation, wellbeing, security and/or safety of the targeted victim. Unlike face-to-face bullying, which typically happens at a given location, in a particular moment in time, and by a perpetrator that is known or seen by the victim, messages posted online can be spread globally, can exist in perpetuity, and the cyber-bully can hide his/her identity by using an avatar. Cyber-bullying can impact the victim in serious ways: low self-esteem; inability to concentrate on schoolwork; anger; anxiety; depression; and even suicide (Brown, Jackson & Cassidy, 2006; Gradinger, Strohmeier & Spiel, 2009; Willard, 2006; Ybarra and Mitchell, 2008).

Unfortunately, cyber-bullying has expanded into a global phenomenon (Kowalski et al, 2008), while educators, parents, and policymakers struggle to develop effective solutions (Campbell, 2005; Shariff, 2005; Belsey, 2006; Brown et al. 2006; Willard, 2006). While most of the attention in the current literature has been on trying to understand cyber-bullying, the cyber-bully and the impact on the victim (Beale & Hall, 2007; Brown et al. 2006; Li, 2007; Patchin & Hinduja, 2006; Shariff, 2008; Smith et al. 2008; Willard, 2007; Worthen, 2007; Ybarra, Diener-West and Leaf, 2007), little or no attention has been given to examining whether technology is also being used by youth to communicate thoughtful, kind and caring messages (Cassidy, Brown & Jackson, 2010; Cassidy, Jackson & Brown, 2009; Jackson, Cassidy & Brown, 2009a; Jackson, Cassidy &

Brown, 2009b). Further, the focus in schools primarily has been on punishing the cyber-bully and implementing anti-cyberbullying programs, rather than on developing holistic solutions that cultivate more respectful on-line exchanges and build a more caring school culture.

While it is important to understand why young people cyber-bully, the extent of cyber-bullying, and the characteristics of perpetrators and victims, it is equally as important to investigate whether cyberspace is also being used in positive ways. Do children and adolescents use technology in ways that communicate care and kindness to one another and foster peers' self-esteem? Can young people's negative exchanges be re-directed in more positive ways that assist parents, educators, school counselors and other professionals in diminishing the potential risks associated with hurtful cyber-bullying victimization?

Green and Hannon (2007) suggest that digital technologies offer a "third space" (p. 60) between official and informal contexts, where young people can "create portfolios of digital media, engage in peer teaching and develop their confidence and voice" (Sharples, Graber, Harrison & Logan, 2009: 72). Ybarra et al. (2007) agree that online access can afford positive initiatives for youth, providing important information on a range of questions and concerns. Certainly children and adolescents are using the Internet as a positive and interactive venue for creating blogs (journaling), social dialoguing, sharing of ideas, and engaging in scholastic endeavours or innovative pursuits (Dowell, Burgess and Cavanaugh, 2009). As a result, the Internet offers potential for positive, helpful and caring communications between youth - or what we have termed "cyber-kindness."

This chapter examines the spectrum of students' on-line exchanges, from cyber-bullying to cyber-kindness, highlighting information from two research studies we conducted in British Columbia, Canada. In our first study (2005-2007), we examined 11-15 year old (Grades 6 to 9) students' perceptions and experiences with

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