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School Counselors and the Cyberbully:

Interventions and Implications

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Abstract

Cyberbullying, the act of using technologies such as e-mails, cell phones, or text messaging with the intent of causing harm to others, is akin to traditional bullying in many aspects. This article offers a review of the current literature on the topic of cyberbullying, a comparison of traditional bullying and cyberbullying, and suggestions for school-wide interventions.

School Counselors and the Cyberbully: Interventions and Implications

Ten years ago in his State of the Union address, President Bill Clinton stated that “Every classroom in America must be connected to the information superhighway with computers and good software and well trained teachers” (Clinton, 1996). By 2002, 99% of the public schools in America reported having computers with Internet access (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002). With the current availability of computer technology in schools, parents and educators have found themselves unprepared for the task of monitoring students’ Internet use and misuse (Franek, 2002).

Cyberspace has provided students a new territory for abuse of their peers (Strom & Strom, 2005). Cyberbullying is one of the most prevalent forms of harassment among students in grades six, seven, and eight (Blair, 2003; Crawford, 2002). It is a type of bullying in which an individual uses technology to bully individuals or groups. Cyberbullies harass, stalk, defame, impersonate and threaten their victims through e-mail, cell phone text messaging, instant messaging and various forms of technological communication (Willard, 2006). According to Paulson (2003), the University of New Hampshire’s Crimes Against Children Research Center, reported in the year 2000 that one in 17 children had been bullied online and approximately one-third of those incidences were deemed extremely upsetting by the victims.

Kowalski and Limber (2005) conducted a study examining cyberbullying and its prevalence among 3,767 middle school students from several cities and communities in the southwestern and southeastern United States (1,915 girls and 1,852 boys). Results indicated that eighteen percent of students (25% of the girls and 11% of boys) reported having been cyberbullied at least once within the last two months. Of those students,

53.2% reported being cyberbullied by a student at school, 37% reported being cyberbullied by a friend, and 13% reported being cyberbullied by a sibling. Forty-eight percent of the students reported they did not know the identity of the person who had cyberbullied them. Eleven percent of the students (13% of the girls and 8.6% boys) reported cyberbullying someone else at least once in the previous two months. Of those students who reported cyberbullying others, 41.3% reported bullying another student at school, 32.7% reported bullying a friend and 12.6% reported bullying a sibling.

Traditional Bullying versus Cyberbullying

Bullying has been a topic of concern for educators over the past several years (Crawford, 2002; Garrity et al., 1997). Traditional bullying behaviors can be categorized into two broad categories of behavior, direct and indirect (Quiroz, Arnette & Stephens, 2006). Direct bullying tends to be more physical in nature than indirect bullying behavior and includes behaviors such as hitting, tripping, shoving, threatening verbally, or stabbing. Indirect and direct bullying includes behaviors such as excluding, spreading rumors, or blackmailing (Willard, 2006). Male bullies tend to engage in direct bullying whereas female bullies tend to engage in indirect bullying (Crawford, 2002; Hazler, 2006; Quiroz, Arnette & Stephens, 2006).

Cyberbullying behaviors can also be both indirect and indirect and Willard (2006) provided examples of each. Flaming is an indirect form of cyberbullying and was defined by Willard as an argument between two people that includes rude and vulgar language, insults, and threats. Examples of direct cyberbullying include harassment, exclusion, and denigration. An individual victimized by online harassment may receive constant hurtful messaging through various forms of technology. Online exclusion occurs when victims

are rejected from their peer group, and left out of technological communications. Finally, denigration occurs most frequently by students against school employees. Students who are angry with an administrator or teacher may create a web site designed to ridicule their chosen victim. One of the primary purposes of denigration is to damage the reputation of the victim (Long, 2006).

Bullying at school in the traditional manner is done by someone who harms individuals or groups intentionally and repeatedly by using physical strength, age, and power (Quiroz, Arnette & Stephens, 2006). Identification of the bully is typically easy. Since face to face contact with the victim is unnecessary, cyberbullies may hide in anonymity making the identification of these bullies more difficult (Strom & Strom, 2005). Willard (2006) described school students who most often engage in cyberbullying as *social climber bullies*. “‘Social climber bullies’ are upper social class students who bully within the context of the interrelationships of the ‘in-crowd’, the ‘wannabes’ (those who want to be a part of the ‘in-crowd’), and the ‘losers’ (as defined by the ‘in-crowd’) (p.20).” Willard indicated that these types of bullies are often overlooked because they are leaders in the school and are looked upon with favor by administrators, teachers, and counselors. In addition, students classified as ‘wannabes’ and ‘losers’ typically do not report cyberbullying to adults in the school because tattling would remove ‘wannabes’ from ever gaining desired social status and ‘losers’ fear retaliation. Victims of cyberbullies are often fearful of telling adults because they fear the bullying will become more harmful and intense. In addition, cyberbully victims fear that adults will take away their Internet access, mobile phone, or computer (Belsey, n.d.).

Just as victims of traditional bullying experience academic and personal/social problems, victims of cyberbullies also often experience negative outcomes (Garrett, 2003; Harris & Petrie, 2003). Victims of the cyberbully may withdraw from school activities, become ill, depressed or suicidal (Willard, 2006). Due to the harmful nature of threats, verbal harassment, and denigration associated with cyberbullying, these behaviors can be viewed along the same continuum of violence as traditional bullying (Hazler, 2006). The need for administrators, teachers and school counselors to develop strategies for prevention and intervention of cyberbullying is becoming more evident as the number of students affected increases.

School Policies, Awareness, and Interventions

Schools are being challenged to develop ways both to prevent and to intervene with cyberbullying. School policies, awareness campaigns, and school counseling interventions have all been recommended as important components of bully prevention and intervention programs. As student advocates and collaborative consultants, school counselors can play important roles in the design and implementation of these initiatives.

First, Dyrli (2005) stated that each school district is in need of clear policies regarding cyberbullies, both at school and away from school. If there is not a school policy in place in regard to the cyberbully, focusing on the cyberbully begins with the creation of or updating of school policy. School counselors could suggest the use of a policy as described by Franek (2006), stating that all forms of cyberspace harassment either during school hours or after school hours should not be tolerated. School sanctions for violating this policy may include but are not limited to the loss of computer privileges, detention, suspension, or expulsion. Additionally, school policies should

outline procedures so that students can report cyberbullying anonymously (Aftab, n.d). The cyberbully should know that communication in cyberspace is not anonymous (Barrett, 2006; Franek, 2006).

Once school policies are established and reporting procedures are in place, school counselors can address awareness and intervention strategies for school personnel, students, and parents. In some cases, school counselors may not be qualified to provide training for faculty and staff, but they should be able to bring about a heightened awareness of cyberbullying. Limber (2004) suggested that bullying prevention and intervention best practices include training school personnel about the nature of bullying and its effects, how to respond if bullying is detected, and methods of reporting bullying incidents. Possible intervention strategies may include teaching students how to identify cyberbullying both at school and away from school, discussing school policy with students, providing students with methods of reporting cyberbullying, and increasing supervision in areas of schools where cyberbullying is likely to occur. For example, school media specialists are likely to witness misuse of the Internet because casual use of the Internet typically occurs in the media center (Willard, 2006). As such, school media personnel should be particularly aware of cyberbullying.

Next, Skiba and Fontanini (2000) stated that awareness is one of the keys in reducing or eliminating school bullying and parental awareness of cyberbullying can help aid school counselors' efforts to eradicate cyberbullying. Parents may be unaware of their child's online behavior and need to know they have a legal obligation to monitor their child's online activities. It is possible that some of the cyberbully's words and acts of cyber abuse may be punishable by law (Franek, 2006). If parents suspect their child is

being cyber bullied, Meadows, et al. (2005) suggested that they always should print and save any cyberbullying messages, and check their child's online activity.

In addition to helping make parents become more aware of how to recognize cyberbullying, school counselors can provide them with suggestions for prevention. The Center for Safe and Responsible Internet Use (2004) published a guide for parents to cyberbullying and cyber threats. Included in this guide are suggestions such as being aware of secretive behaviors surrounding the computer (e.g. rapidly switching screens) and installing key stroke monitoring hardware. Additionally, Chu (2005) suggested that parents talk to their children so that open lines of communication exist and teach children what they should not do off-line, should not be done online. Furthermore, Chu recommended that parents strive to seek a balance of safety and trust with their children.

Finally, counseling and support should be given both to the victim and to the cyberbully. School counselors could provide training for bullies which includes recognizing legal and personal consequences of cyberbullying, developing a more positive self-concept, improving social problem-solving and anger management skills, and increasing the ability to empathize with victims (Hazler, 2006). Support could be offered both individually and in small group sessions. Victims could be offered training in increasing assertiveness skills, developing a more positive self-concept, increasing social skills and reducing social isolation, and practicing positive behaviors which reduce the risk of further victimization (Harris & Petrie, 2003).

Summary and Conclusions

Students today often are better prepared than adults in communicating technologically (Blair, 2003). Technology and its misuse by students create challenges

for school counselors, teachers, administrators and parents (Franek, 2006). School counselors are not the only persons in the school who are responsible for the safety of students, but they may be the primary contact person for parents and students seeking information or help. Providing leadership for students, faculty, administrators, and parents in addressing the topic of cyberbullying may be an important step in ensuring students' safety. Advocating for the implementation of school policies with regard to cyberbullying and collaborating with other school personnel to design and implement prevention and intervention programs may serve to strengthen school counselors' efforts in preventing cyberbullying.

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