Online Harassment in Elementary Schools

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Technology has long been integrated into the educational world, but it has become a necessity since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Educators have devoted a lot of time to teaching students how to use educational technology for their schoolwork, but did they properly prepare students for how to socialize through technology? This question is emphasized when considering cyberbullying. Cyberbullying incidents have increased as the use of technology is increasing among younger and younger children. It impacts all students involved and can continue to impact these students after their school career ends; therefore, it is important for schools and parents to work together to provide a united front against cyberbullying. Teachers may ask to what extent our responsibility goes to raise awareness of and prevent cyberbullying. Answering this question begins by studying existing research and prevention strategies.

Research summarized by the PACER Center (2020) indicates that online harassment has become increasingly more common in elementary schools, yet for the most part, students have not received more information about it. While using educational technology, students have been caught sending hateful messages in chat boxes, hacking other students' accounts to get them in trouble, and impersonating adults online. Students can create false profiles and hide their identities, enabling them to say anything to others without facing a consequence (Donegan, 2012). If they are using social media, it can be extremely difficult for accounts to be verified, as this only works for well-known celebrities (Karmaker & Das, 2020). It is important for educators and communities to ask themselves, how do we fix this behavior or prevent it from happening altogether?

This chapter will explore various bullying intervention and prevention strategies, with a particular emphasis on cyberbullying and challenges related to the increase in online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Elementary School Bullying

Through guidance lessons, elementary school students are frequently taught the importance of being kind to others and the hurtful damage caused by bullying. These lessons are important because elementary students often do not understand the emotional effects of their words. While these lessons have been geared towards in-person situations and learning, the shift toward remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic demands the inclusion of these lessons as they apply to online learning. Throughout the pandemic, students have been moving in and out of quarantine and have been expected to interact with teachers and peers through online platforms. In elementary school, many students do not understand the effects their harsh words can have during face-to-face interactions, so it is even harder for them to identify their own behavior as bullying when they are able to hide behind a computer screen.

For adults, identifying bullying before it becomes a problem is difficult. According to Fienberg and Robey (2009), students are often reluctant to share bullying issues with teachers or parents "because they are emotionally traumatized, think it is their fault, fear retribution, or worry that their online activities or cell phone use will be restricted" (p. 2). While there are technological aids to identify and stop bullying, they only really work for school-issued equipment. For example, there are platforms for middle and high schools–such as Veyon, Kickidler, Classroom Spy, and NetSupport– that allow educators to see the computer screens of their students, and elementary schools tend to block certain websites to prevent access to applications like YouTube (Lynch, 2018). However, these measures do not fully prevent students from bullying, accessing inappropriate websites, and completing unrelated school activities, especially since schools have no control over students' personal devices at home.

One difficult issue is that the school environment is fluid: students move through different classrooms each day, different grade levels with different teachers each year, and eventually to different schools. Each educator or school only has a limited time to stop or slow the bullying that is occurring. In addition, students are at home in different types of life situations, which can influence how they behave in all other environments. Students come from a range of family types, including traditional, single parent, blended, or grandparent families. Despite all the different variables involved, research does show that talking about bullying and how it is not allowed or tolerated can prevent students from partaking in bullying behaviors (Donegan, 2012).

Differences in Cyberbullying

Bullying is a common issue in many schools across the world and can take various forms including verbal threats, physical assaults, and online insults (Storey & Slaby, 2013). Cyberbullying is defined as the transmission of harmful or cruel text or images online using internet platforms, such as social media or online forums, or digital devices using direct messages. It can be presented as flaming, harassment, stalking, impersonation, gossip, outing, or exclusion (Feinberg & Robey, 2009). Cyberbullying can often cause more damage than traditional bullying due to the unlimited access to people online and a lack of adult supervision. Paek et al. (2022) discuss how a lack of parental supervision is a noticeable predictor for online victimization. This type of bullying does not depend on environmental influence or motivation as the perpetrator can be anyone, even someone the student does not know. In many cases, there is no specific reason behind cyberbullying other than opportunity (Notar et al., 2013). Cyberbullying can render specific negative impacts on students due to the added vulnerability of the online environment. Donegan (2012) explains that "online publication of personal information is dangerous because it allows many people to see a side of a person more often kept private in a face-to-face interaction. This vulnerability puts many teens in a position, as either the victim or active offender, to partake in cyberbullying actions" (p. 35). Elementary-age children are particularly unaware of their online vulnerability and how much more of themselves may be exposed online than through in-person interactions (Donegan, 2012). These younger students may also be unaware of how many people have access to their online content.

Incidents of cyberbullying among students have been increasing due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Karmaker & Das, 2020). During this time, schools went completely online for virtual learning and younger students, many for the first time, were taking technology home to use. Students now had access to communication with other students, and several students have used the technology to bully others. For instance, Karmakar and Das analyzed public tweets from January to July 2020 and found "a clear telling effect of COVID- 19 on worsening cyberbullying incidents as reported and discussed through tweets" (2020, p. 2). Kee et al. (2022) also reported an increased use of social media during COVID-19 leading to an increased risk of cyberbullying. This study found that the COVID-19 pandemic caused a distinct increase in cyberbullying among the youth surveyed.

Conversely, Mkhize and Gopal (2021) found evidence of more children and youth becoming involved in social media during this time but not concrete evidence of an increase in cyberbullying. However, more exposure to online communication means more risk of cyberbullying. Patchin (2021) found that face-to-face bullying significantly dropped while cyberbullying remained consistent. Despite the different conclusions as to whether cyberbullying remained stable or increased, there is agreement among these studies that more children are being exposed to online experiences, and children need to learn about appropriate online communication and how to handle cyberbullying should it occur.

Social Media's Effect on Bullying

Social media use continues to grow, and many elementary-age children are using it to engage in communication. Several

young students are on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, or TikTok. While using these accounts, students witness adult language and content because most of the online platforms do not have a way to select age-appropriate content. Although unrestricted social media sites typically have minimum age requirements, it is easy for younger users to manipulate this by claiming to be an older age (Pasquale et al., 2020).

These students are subsequently exposed to cyberbullying and inappropriate content through these platforms. In fact, it could be the presence of these younger children that contributes to a more hostile online environment, as several researchers have noted that elementary students display cyberbullying behaviors more often than older students (Biggs et al., 2010).

While the age limit on some of the platforms is not stopping all cyberbullying, it can be an extra defense to slow it down. Oftentimes, students are not being supervised while they are on these platforms, and parents are unaware of how exposed their children are online. These online platforms can make bullying easier and affect school behavior if they are not properly monitored. For example, TikTok challenges that have been promoted in the 2021-2022 school year have involved vandalizing schools, slapping teachers, and bringing weapons (Walie, 2021). How do schools and educators teach the negative effects and repercussions on the topic of online harassment when this type of behavior is encouraged on the social media students are accessing at home? During the COVID-19 pandemic, students were accessing more social media while parents were still busy working, either in person or online, and not able to constantly supervise their children (Agostinelli et al., 2022).

Social media makes it easier for bullying to happen "because airing one's opinion, sending hate mails, recording videos and uploading photos are easier, [so] ridiculing someone is also easier, especially [on] social media" (Santiago, 2015, p. 96). It is also important for students to know that what is written on the internet can rarely be erased, and it can be shared and accessed by anyone. This relationship between social media and cyberbullying is only getting worse, as social media is more frequently used for negative influence.

Lasting Effects of Bullying

Cyberbullying has several negative effects on students of any age, and they can carry these effects with them into adulthood. The first negative effect is more violence and more bullying. Children who are the victims of bullying often bully other students as a result (Rigby & Slee, 1999). Studies have also shown that a large percentage of bullying victims feel vengeful afterward (Donegan, 2012). In addition to unleashing violent anger on others, many children have committed suicide after being harassed online (Santiago, 2015). Lack of adult supervision and easy access to social media make it easy for students to go from victim to bully, with severe results. Paek et al. (2022) find that parental supervision can help reduce cyberbullying victimization and aftereffects, such as mental health consequences.

When thinking of the effects of cyberbullying on schools today, people often think of middle school and high school students who have more access to technology. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2022), approximately 16% of 9th to 12th graders had experienced cyberbullying in the recent school year. Adding in middle schoolers, the Pew Research Center found that more than half of 13–17-year-olds (59%) had been the target of some form of cyberbullying, with offensive name-calling and rumor-spreading topping the list of most common incidents (Anderson, 2018). And on the youngest end of the scale, one in five tweens (20.9%), defined as ages 9-12, has been a victim, perpetrator, or witness to cyberbullying (Patchin & Hinduja, 2020).

While the emotional effects of cyberbullying vary by individual, they also tend to vary by age group. While some older students may respond with frustration and have a drive to prove themselves to competitors, elementary students more often become sad, occasionally leading them into depression or anxiety (Donegan, 2012; Doumas & Midgett, 2020). Students who are victims of bullying can begin to feel withdrawn from school. Their self-esteem drops the more they are

bullied, and they can feel like they no longer belong at school. Students can become dejected while at school and this can affect the friendships victims have with others (Holder & Coleman, 2008; Torres et al., 2019). They can also experience mental health concerns, including depression and anxiety (Doumas & Midgett, 2020). Depression and anxiety can impact these students and their relationships with others long after they are out of school and can manifest in many adult traits such as shyness, low self-esteem, and withdrawal (DePaolis & Williford, 2015).

The effects of cyberbullying can also lead to academic concerns for victims throughout their school careers. This is partly because students who are bullied often try to miss school to avoid being a victim, which naturally causes a decline in academic performance (Rivers, 2000). These repeated absences can affect student motivation and commitment to learning, despite any natural academic abilities and previous achievements. Peled (2019) recognizes the importance of motivation and commitment by saying, "motivation to learn, taking actions to meet academic demands, a clear sense of purpose, and a general satisfaction with the academic environment are also important components of the academic field" (p. 7).

As previously noted, bullying affects not only the victim but also the bully and bystanders. Rigby and Slee (1999) state that young people who bully as well as their victims are at an increased risk for suicidal thoughts, suicide attempts, and completed suicides. Bystanders of cyberbullying are also at a risk for mental health concerns, including "depressive symptoms and social anxiety over and above the effects of witnessing school bullying and bullying victimization" (Doumas & Midgett, 2021, p. 4) This could be due to students feeling more helpless when reporting cyberbullying because the perpetrator can be unknown, and the bullying could happen at any time (Feinberg & Robey, 2009). Therefore, the bully could be hiding their identity and posting harsh words towards the victim essentially 24 hours a day.

Intervention

Because of the pervasive use of technology both in and outside of school, it is nearly impossible to prevent cyberbullying from occurring altogether. Therefore, since so many students may one day experience cyberbullying, schools and parents need to be aware of intervention and treatment programs. The treatment process depends on the victim's mental health concerns, whether that is emotional, mental, or psychological. All victims could be treated for possible depression, anxiety, and self-esteem, as these are the more common outcomes (Doumas & Midgett, 2021).

One good intervention is teaching victims how to deal with cyberbullying should it occur in the future (Doumas & Midgett, 2021). For shy students who may become victims, they can be taught how to assertively use the word "no," while potential bystanders need to work on problem-solving skills to stand up for the victim and help stop the incident without being aggressive (Storey & Slaby, 2013; Thornberg et al., 2012). Those who display bullying behaviors need practice with social skills, such as empathy. There are several skills to help students act in appropriate ways as victims or bystanders that can decrease depression and anxiety after cyberbullying. Students need to have options on how to respond to bullying incidents in the future. The number of students experiencing or witnessing cyberbullying is exceptionally high, so it would be a disservice to students to not prepare them.

School guidance counselors are a natural resource for teaching social skills and implementing anti-bullying programs. One way that counselors can help students is through what might be called a "lunch bunch" (Woolf, 2022). The purpose is to have lunch with a small group of students and help them grow a friendship. This time can be used for small group intervention skills, which can be helpful for bullies, victims, and bystanders. These learned skills are also helpful for victims with social anxiety and students who have started to depersonalize from school, as interactions with smaller groups can help these students build confidence. This may help students break away from the vicious exhausting depression cycle or provide students with a group to share and create friendships.

Guidance counselors can use their "lunch bunch" groups to deploy two main strategies to help intervene with

cyberbullying. The first strategy is to implement a program that provides students with social skills and problem-solving behaviors. The skills are focused on improving poor social skills and developing interpersonal skills (Woolf, 2022). The second strategy is to provide skills for coping as a victim of bullying. These skills range from thinking positively to analyzing an issue. Both sets of skills are essential for all students because negative emotions can hinder academic achievement (Torres et al., 2019). Accordingly, parents should be informed of students who may have experienced cyberbullying and the effects it can have on their academic performance.

Extracurricular activities are another promising strategy to improve socialization among students. These activities can be highly encouraged for students, and in some schools, it may be mandatory for students to participate in at least one. The schools must be able to provide options and opportunities for these activities due to the socialization benefits. These activities can help victims of bullying feel more productive and more confident in their social abilities, and they can help the bullying perpetrators, too, by encouraging them to make new friends. As students are engaged in more constructive activities, their negative online encounters may decrease (Santiago, 2015). These beneficial activities can be extracurriculars taking place both in and outside of schools.

Last, one final intervention is simply talking about and making students aware of cyberbullying. Students need relief from the emotional impacts of this issue; however, since they are unlikely to find relief from mentors, they are often left feeling helpless (Donegan, 2012; Storey & Slaby, 2013). The more schools, parents, and communities discuss the harm caused by bullying, the more comfortable students may feel coming forward. Students need a safe space, free of threats, where they feel able to seek help from all adults. This can come from a consistent intervention program, in which the students receive time to talk to an adult, work through the incident, and discuss how to fix it in a safe environment (Caines, 2021). As the school environment becomes more caring and safer, educators, parents, and students can work together to increase student success (Coloroso, 2016).

Prevention

Donegan (2012) notes that the bullying and cyberbullying problem is so scary because it can never fully be stopped, in part "due to how deep seeded [the problems] have become in our competitive society" (2012, p. 39). Such competition is a part of all stages of American life, from college applications to the corporate world. This is the harsh reality, and the use of social media adds to this type of pressure, making bullying possible worldwide, day or night (Doumas & Midgett, 2021). Pre-teens and teenagers are especially susceptible to this because of the vulnerability they show online.

Schools need to work harder to end cyberbullying, especially during times of greater online activity, such as the period since COVID-19 began. So how is this possible? Providing intervention and prevention policies can be a step towards making the idea of a threat-free school a reality. Donegan (2012) gives educators hope by discussing how prevention programs are becoming more effective as educators are learning specific bullying tactics and the reasoning behind the bullying.

One way to promote prevention is by utilizing the guidance counselor. These counselors are an asset due to their experience with providing social skills, building relationships, helping students feel safe, and their knowledge of bullying. These experts play a major role in the prevention, intervention, and after-effects of bullying. Doumas and Midgett (2021) point out that school personnel can be essential for providing information on the importance of education for witnessing cyberbullying, bystander behavior, and how to report this type of bullying. It is equally important for these school personnel to inform parents about bullying for victims and witnesses (p. 632). This stresses the importance of using counselors and letting them work with students for the prevention of cyberbullying issues. These findings also show schools and parents how important it is to talk about cyberbullying and its negative impact on all parties involved (Health Resources & Service Administration, 2022).

Guidance counselors can provide information on the effects of academic performance and mental health. They can also share the school prevention plan and state bullying/harassment laws, which provide procedures and measures for a school district to address bullying incidents and how to report them (Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs, 2021). Donegan (2012) shows educators how helpful this is by saying, "if American communities and schools address the issue with a clear preventative program that keeps each level of prohibition on the same page, children will in turn receive a consistent message from a young age, which will presumably resonate effectively" (p. 39). This echoes the importance of sharing information and providing consistency on cyberbullying so that students can begin to understand consequences, the impact bullying has on other children, and that the school is on a team to help students feel safe.

The last way to utilize guidance counselors is by letting them implement programs for preventative measures and teaching lessons on this topic. Figure 1 shows an example of guidance lessons taught for the entire school year in the author's elementary school in Tennessee.

Table 1

Elementary Guidance Lessons in a Tennessee School

Kindergarten and 1st	2nd and 3rd	4th and 5th
Bullying	Bullying	Bullying
Tattling	Citizenship	Problem Solving
Accepting Others	Coping Skills	Kindness Matters
Trustworthiness	Prioritizing Work over Play	SMART Goals
Good touch/bad touch	Study Skills	Study Skills
		How to do Homework
		How actions/choices lead to consequences

Notice that cyberbullying is not explicitly addressed, possibly due to the assumption that students in middle and high school are facing more cyberbullying than younger students. However, as mentioned earlier, the number of students online in elementary school is growing, and they may even engage in more cyberbullying than older students with a higher impact (Biggs et al., 2010; Chen & Cheng, 2017). Therefore, lessons about cyberbullying should begin sooner. The first lesson on bullying is strictly focused on in-person, face-to-face instances. Cyberbullying, along with traditional bullying, needs an independent lesson at the beginning of the year in grades third through fifth, due to cyberbullying being more prevalent in these grades (Wilkey Oh, 2019). Coping skills, problem-solving, and how actions lead to consequences would integrate into these lessons.

The final prevention tactic is from Karmakar and Das (2020), who discuss possible defenses against cyberbullying as technical mitigation techniques, organizational policies, and user perspective. Technical mitigation techniques seek to detect cyberbullying and intervene before it goes too far. One possible solution is a dashboard teachers can use to monitor interactions on school devices using natural language processing. Keywords and phrases would be flagged as potential bullying incidents. Organizational policies focus on social media and how to protect the victims of cyberbullying on these sites. While it is tricky to police behavior that happens off school grounds and platforms, clear school policies can make it possible to provide consequences, and even bring in law enforcement backup when necessary. User perspective involves research on the perpetrators of cyberbullying. This emphasizes finding the motivational reason behind the bullying to find prevention strategies.

Conclusion

In closing, it appears that the rise in online schooling caused by COVID-19 correlates to an increase in cyberbullying. Cyberbullying is known to have negative emotional and social impacts on countless children, and those effects can persist long-term. This problem is growing as social media use increases among younger students. The use of technology in and out of the school environment is constantly growing as well, thus leading to more opportunities for students to become involved in cyberbullying as bullies, victims, and bystanders. Cyberbullying prevention must be a priority due to the possibility of students having mental health concerns, including depression and suicidal thoughts. Santiago (2015) reaffirms this point saying, "children might take this behavior with them even after they leave schools, so teachers should apply policies that will improve the safety and happiness of the students, and to show bullies that any of these acts are unacceptable in schools" (p. 98). If parents and the community present a united front, students will have support once they leave the school atmosphere. Ultimately, schools should be a safe space for students to grow in knowledge and maturity, and this is achievable through utilizing parent help, guidance counselors, and all school personnel in the fight to keep schools free of bullying.

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