

REFEREED ARTICLE

The Effects of Cyberbullying on Students and Schools

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Abstract

Cyberbullying is a problem that affects students and schools. As more children and adolescents have contact with devices, the likelihood of cyberbullying has become more prevalent. Cyberbullying affects the learning of children within class, as the students become self-conscious or distracted. Schools should have clear directives for taking cyberbullying action, and should support professional development for teachers so they can learn what they can do to when dealing with cyberbullying in their classrooms. To reduce cyberbullying, classrooms should celebrate and support student diversities, and students should be taught about how to be caring when interacting with others online.

The Effects of Cyberbullying on Students and Schools

Cyberbullying is a serious problem that must be addressed in schools. Cyberbullying is a form of bullying that has become more prevalent as technology advances, and it is difficult to escape from. Cyberbullying is similar to bullying in that it is repeated harm, but it comes in the form of emails, texts, direct messages, public messages, or sending photos. A problematic part of cyberbullying is that information can be distributed to anyone who has access to technology, and can be viewed as many times as the recipient wishes. Due to the accessibility of technology, many youth are choosing to bully online and it has become a form of bullying that is always present because adolescents are always in contact with their electronic devices. While cyberbullying can be difficult to deal with, for both student and teacher, cyberbullying can be managed when knowledge is shared with school staff, and school staff work as a unit.

How Cyberbullying Affects Children in School Settings

School personnel know the importance of bringing awareness to cyberbullying and the effects on those involved. Schools always attempt to make the school setting safe from cyberbullying, which can lower self-esteem, compromise mental health, interrupt sleep patterns, and cause weight gain. Schools are often seen as safe places where bullying is less abundant because of the constant presence of adults, and because of school-proposed network blockages (Kowalski et al., 2012). However, network blockages do not always protect students from receiving demeaning text messages. This is problematic, because adolescents have a dependency on technology for communication with their peers (Mishna et al., 2010). When they have access to their devices, students can easily use a quarter of their time in class checking their phones (Kim et al., 2019). If students were receiving upsetting text messages during class time, they would be unable to escape from the cyberbullying because students feel the need to check their phone every three to four minutes (Kim et al., 2019). With this kind of negative bombardment, students would not have a proper mindset to learn within class. Cyberbullying distracts students and has negative effects on student learning and grades (Kates et al., 2018). Now that most students have devices, cyberbullying has become problematic within schools.

Cyberbullying often has negative impacts on a child's self-esteem. Cyberbullying often occurs during a developmental time when adolescents are experimenting with who they want to be as people, and "when social status and popularity are increasingly important" (Holfeld & Mishna, 2019, p. 567). Adolescents who struggle to keep friends and positive peers are often

the targets for cyberbullying (Holfeld & Mishna, 2019), which then lowers personal self-esteem. Students who come to school with low self-esteem due to cyberbullying will be distracted, and not mentally prepared to learn within class. Being involved with cyberbullying affects the self-esteem of not only the victim, but bystanders and the perpetrator also demonstrate lower amounts of self-esteem than those who are not involved with cyberbullying in any way (Aliyev & Gengec, 2019). Self-esteem, of all parties involved, is affected by cyberbullying.

Cyberbullying is similar to traditional bullying, because victims of cyberbullying often report mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, feelings of alienation, reduced concentration, and suicidal thoughts (Kowalski et al., 2012). Children who are victims of cyberbullying can also develop substance abuse, skip school, become aggressive, and commit crimes (Diaz & Fite, 2019; Mishna et al., 2010). These attitudes and actions are not helpful within classroom settings, and often cause students to fall behind in class, or drop out of school. Mental health is important for children who are going through their formative years, yet adolescents who are being cyberbullied have a decreased sense of mental health and emotional well-being.

The physical effects of cyberbullying include disrupted sleep patterns and weight gain. Sleeping poorly affects children within school settings because they struggle to concentrate in class and to act positively with their peers. The resultant negative attitude can cause the children to become targets of more cyberbullying (Waasdorp et al., 2018). Children who are cyberbullied may also respond to their emotions by over-eating. This creates a pattern of increased bullying as a result of gaining weight, because children who weigh more tend to experience more bullying than children who are less obese (Waasdorp et al., 2018). Furthermore, children who are larger tend to spend more time online, which negatively affects sport participation and proper eating – and makes them even more vulnerable to cyberbullying (Waasdorp et al., 2018). Thus, physiological consequences such as sleeping poorly and gaining weight exacerbate the psychological effects of cyberbullying.

How Schools Can Respond to Cyberbullying

Teachers are important when it comes to managing cyberbullying, because students need to know that an adult will support them (ConnectSafely, 2018) by teaching them appropriate behaviours and by addressing inappropriate bullying behaviours as they occur in school. Teachers are often the first adults that students approach when they are being bullied (Wachs et al., 2019). Teachers who demonstrate and promote positive, healthy relationships, and create positive classroom climates, are in an important position when it comes to putting an end to cyberbullying. Teaching etiquette for digital conversations should accompany teaching appropriate behaviour for classroom conversations. Students need to learn on the proper way to interact online, and how language can affect the feelings of others (Cassidy et al., 2012). Students need to have support from teachers and other school staff, and should be directly taught behaviours for use online.

When educators teach students what behaviours are deemed as appropriate and resilient, they can prevent students from participating in cyberbullying. Students who have more internal assets, defined as having “social competencies and positive identity” (Fredkove et al., 2019, p. 883), than other students will be better equipped to refrain from becoming cyberbullying targets or participants. Tapping into internal strengths empowers students in becoming more resilient in relation to bullies, and this will increase individual self-esteem, which will decrease the bullying behaviours against them (Aliyev & Gengec, 2019). If students feel strong, powerful, and positive, are successful in school, and feel socially accepted, then they will feel better about themselves, which will deter cyberbullying activities (Aliyev & Gengec, 2019). Schools and teachers should ensure that they are supporting students so they can learn not to participate in cyberbullying.

Students need to learn how to accept differences within others, because cyberbullying often comes from a “lack of understanding or insecurity” (Dove, 2016, *Daring to be Different*

section, para. 2) in relation to diversity. Because students in middle school are struggling to find their place within society, they tend to connect with peers who are similar to them. This means that if bullies perceive someone as different, they will begin to target that person (Dove, 2016). Classrooms and schools therefore need to become rooms that accept all types of students and opinions. Student diversities should be integrated within classrooms so that students learn how to maintain “healthy and diverse peer relationships” (Holfeld & Mishna, 2019, p. 577). When students are more understanding and secure with diversity, cyberbullying becomes less likely (Dove, 2016). Celebrating differences within schools and classrooms can reduce cyberbullying.

School administrators should ensure that there are clear cyberbullying directives for teachers to follow, because teachers say that current directives are vague and they are unsure of how to handle cyberbullying claims (Cassidy et al., 2012). When teachers feel that they are unable to assist in a bullying situation, then they are likely to ignore the situation instead of intervening (Wachs et al., 2019). If teachers feel uncomfortable intervening when there is a cyberbullying situation at school, then students will begin to see their teachers as an unhelpful source, which then creates a school environment that is not nurturing or safe for children. Administrators need therefore to provide teachers with “theoretical knowledge and practical skills” (Wachs et al., 2019, p. 663) for addressing cyberbullying. This professional development should include opportunities to learn about behaviours that are associated with bullying (Ong, 2017), so that staff are trained in how to assist in scenarios where there is cyberbullying.

Cyberbullying is not considered a criminal offence in many places, so teachers and schools need to come up with their own ways to address cyberbullying concerns (Ong, 2017). Schools that enforce the supportive-cooperative intervention strategy are most successful in intervening in cyberbullying situations in schools (Wachs et al., 2019). With this strategy, the teacher does whole-class instruction about the effects of cyberbullying. The teacher also includes conversations with parents and other outside professionals, and establishes actions with the class that should be taken when there are cyberbullying situations (Wachs et al., 2019). Following the large-group instruction, open communication between victim and perpetrator, their families, teachers, and other professionals, is a successful way to tackle cyberbullying in schools (Wachs et al., 2019). Students having a say, and an active role in how to prevent further cases of cyberbullying (Ong, 2017), can put the power of change into the hands of students, and they may have less desire to participate in cyberbullying. Schools and teachers need to create ways to address concerns related to cyberbullying, in addition to reinforcing directives that are already in place.

Conclusion

Cyberbullying significantly affects school children. Cyberbullied children can struggle in school, because they are distracted or self-conscious. Children who are being targeted online are unable to escape the tormenting because youth have an attachment to their electronic devices, which causes the negative comments to always be present. To combat cyberbullying, schools need to support teachers’ actions, and provide some guidance of what actions can be taken to address the cyberbullying concern. Professional development sessions on how to address cyberbullying should be a priority for school staff. Overall, schools and classrooms need to have accepting and supporting environments. If students are encouraged to build upon their strengths and to celebrate everyone’s differences, they may have less desire to participate in cyberbullying. All children should be part of an inclusive and supportive classroom, where kindness, caring, and proper communication skills are taught. If children are taught from a young age that all people need to be treated with kindness, then maybe they will be less inclined to cyberbully in their future. Once school staff become united on how to manage cyberbullying, and provide safe and diverse environments for their students, then cyberbullying may impact fewer students.

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