

Cyberbullying: What Middle School Students Want You to Know

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Abstract

Cyberbullying is a growing concern because youth are technologically savvy. Much is to be learned about this pervasive phenomenon, especially during the middle school years when cyberbullying often peaks. This focus group study examined cyberbullying attitudes, beliefs, and opinions among middle school students in Alabama and describes conversations middle school students shared in the interviews.

Cyberbullying: What Students Want You to Know

Cyberbullying is an emergent 21st century dilemma, largely because of the increased use of online and mobile technologies among school-aged youth (Cassidy, Jackson, & Brown, 2009; Li, 2006; 2007; Mishna, McLuckie, & Saini, 2009; Slonje & Smith, 2008; Vandeborsch & Van Cleemput, 2008). Described as the "...most insidious aspect of modern technology in the schools" (Beale & Hall, 2007, p. 12), cyberbullying has gained momentum while simultaneously challenging the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation act that requires a safe learning environment for all students (U.S. Department of Education, 2001) and the American School Counselor Association's (ASCA) position statement on "Bullying, Harassment, and Violence Prevention Programs: Supporting Safe and Respectful Schools" (ASCA, 2005, p. 5).

Defining Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying often leads to traumatic experiences and a myriad of troubling physical, cognitive, emotional, and social consequences for school-aged youth (Carney, 2008; Casey-Cannon, Hayward, & Gowen, 2001; Patchin & Hinduja, 2006). In contrast to bullying, cyberbullying can reach deeper into the lives of youth because of the ease and convenience of technology and the anonymity, imparting menacing forms of teasing and taunting (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010) that did not exist in previous decades. Defined as "...bullying through the e-mail, instant messaging, in a chat room, on a website, or through digital messages or images sent to a cell phone" (Kowalski & Limber, 2007, p. 822), cyberbullying is challenging to monitor because it often takes place in "private chat messages, groups, closed forums, personal SMS texts, and other forms of communication that cannot be viewed by any parent" (Moire, 2012).

Pervasiveness of Cyberbullying

Studies have shown that approximately one in four students will be cyberbullied (Li, 2006; Wright et al., 2009) and about one in six students will cyberbully others (Li, 2006). While these statistics offer information about the prevalence of cyberbullying, other studies have noted that cyberbullying records are “underestimated” (Dehue, Bolman, & Vollink, 2008; Kowalski & Limber, 2007, p. 526).

Cyberbullying-related suicides exemplify the magnitude of cyberbullying and underline the need for immediate attention. During the past five years, reports of suicides have persisted in the media. In 2009, two female students found cyberbullying-related taunting at school so severe and unbearable that they committed suicide (i.e., Jesse Logan [Starr, 2009] and Hope Witsell [Inbar, 2009]). In 2010, Phoebe Prince, killed herself after taunting at school and on Facebook (McCabe, 2010; McNeil, Herbst, Mascia, & Jessen, 2010). In 2011, cyberbullying suicides continued. For example, Tyler Clementi, a student at Rutgers University jumped off a bridge after a video of him was released (Freidman, 2011), while Natasha MacBryde stepped in front of a train (Loveland, 2011) and Amanda Cummings stepped in front of a bus (Calabrese, 2012). Britney Tongel also killed herself after peers suggested on a website for her to kill herself (Leskin, 2011). These given deaths underline the need for cyberbullying intervention and education (Li, 2006, 2007) and the criticality for “... swift and decisive action” (Beale & Hall, 2007, p. 12) among counselors and other helping professionals.

Challenges

Because cyberbullying profoundly affects youth and impacts the framework of 21st century schools (Wright, Burnham, Inman, & Ogorchock, 2009), counselors, teachers, and parents need to be aware of the current cyberbullying challenges. Cyberbullying challenges were identified by Hinduja and Patchin (2010). The leading researchers stated, “First, many people don’t see the harm associated with it” (p. 2). Secondly, Hinduja and Patchin asserted that another challenge is finding people who are “willing to step up and take responsibility for responding to inappropriate use of technology” (p. 2).

Call for Action in Middle School

Cyberbullying has infiltrated into schools and homes of elementary, middle, and high school students. In one study, over 45% of the students were aware of cyberbullying incidents among their peers, while roughly 30% of the students were victims of cyberbullying (Wright et al., 2009). No age is safeguarded against cyberbullying because technology continues to be “embraced at younger ages” and is “becoming the dominant medium” for interaction with peers (Mishna et al., 2009, p. 1224). Thus, the gap for youth vulnerable to cyberbullying has widened. Nevertheless, of the school-aged students, many view the middle school years as the most favorable time for cyberbullying to take place (Cassidy et al., 2009; Hinduja & Patchin, 2008; Kowalski & Limber, 2007). Researchers with The National Survey of Children’s Exposure to Violence (NatSCEV) study (Finkelhor, Turner, Ormrod, Hamby & Kracke, 2009), which involved nearly 5,000 youth, posited that the “peak risk period for Internet harassment was ages 14 to 17,” with more cyberbullying among girls than boys (p. 5).

In response to Hinduja and Patchin’s (2010) challenge (i.e., readiness “to step up and take responsibility” [p. 2]) and the ASCA Position Statement (2012), “Bullying, Harassment, and Violence Prevention Programs: Supporting Safe and Respectful Schools” (2005, p. 5), counselors need to inform youth about cyberbullying. Yet, prior to educating youth about cyberbullying, helping professionals may need additional knowledge and skills as cyberbullying quickly invades into the lives of students, likely not

diminishing in the years ahead (Kowalski & Limber, 2007). By describing the conversations middle school students shared, this study examined cyberbullying.

Method

Participants

After Internal Review Board approval (IRB) was granted, data were collected quantitatively and qualitatively in fall 2008 and spring 2009. The students who participated were from low income and high income families, based on available data from one school system. For the quantitative study results (Wright et al., 2009), 114 students participated in Grades 7 and 8 in five middle schools in one school system. For the qualitative study, the researchers returned to two of the five middle schools for focus groups. Twenty students were invited to participate in the focus groups; 13 agreed to participate (65%). One focus group had 4 males and 3 females. The racial backgrounds included: 1 White student, 5 African American students, and 1 Hispanic/Latino student. The other focus group had 4 males and 2 females. The racial backgrounds included: 4 White students and 2 African American students.

Procedures

The aim of the focus groups was to add student feedback about cyberbullying beyond the information gathered from the Cyberbullying Survey (Li, 2007), (i.e., quantitative survey administered the prior semester [see Wright et al., 2009]). The research team (the authors and two graduate assistants) led the focus groups in pairs. The focus group interactions lasted approximately 60 minutes and followed a Cyberbullying Focus Group Guide.

At the two schools, written parental consent and verbal assent from the students was received prior to beginning the group activities. Once assent was secured, the researchers followed the procedures in the Cyberbullying Focus Group Guide.

Instrument

The Cyberbullying Focus Group Guide was written for this qualitative study. The Cyberbullying Focus Group Guide included introductory remarks to the middle school students, ground rules, taping procedures, a confidentiality explanation, and a series of questions about cyberbullying. The guide was used to ensure consistency across the focus groups. Sample focus group questions included open-ended queries such as: "If you have been cyberbullied, did you know who was cyberbullying you? Was it a friend, just someone you knew, an adult, or did you ever find out?", "What did you do immediately after you were cyberbullied? Did you tell someone? Retaliate online? Anything?", "When you were cyberbullied, where were you? (at school, home, a friend's house?), and "What should adults know and do about cyberbullying?".

Results

The focus group conversations with middle school students offered insight into their feelings about cyberbullying, the causes of cyberbullying, and where this phenomenon takes place. In addition, the focus groups allowed time for the students to tell how they dealt with cyberbullying and what they wanted educators and parents to know about cyberbullying. Quotes from the 7th and 8th grade students are presented in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1 offers the students' perspectives after cyberbullying incidences. For example, the students discussed the initial affect after cyberbullying (e.g., anger, worry, and confusion), the causality (e.g., gossiping, misunderstandings), and identified that they are more likely to be cyberbullied at home than at school. Also from the students' voices, Table 2 offers suggestions to adults to consider as they help with cyberbullying concerns.

Overall, three themes emerged from this study, based on the focus group discussions. The themes indicate that middle school students: (1) are frustrated with cyberbullying, (2) will seek help with cyberbullying concerns, and (3) see ineptness among many adults (teachers and parents) to deal with cyberbullying issues.

Discussion

With students' increased access to technologies, such as online social networks and cell phones with Internet access, coupled with a lack of communication between adults and youth, we investigated middle school cyberbullying to raise awareness of cyberbullying. In an effort to explore cyberbullying in depth, this study focused on the feelings related to cyberbullying, the causes, where cyberbullying occurs, and positive and negative ways to deal with cyberbullying.

The voices of the students were articulated in Table 1 as they candidly described cyberbullying. Based on Table 1, the students acknowledged the affective side of cyberbullying (e.g., anger, confusion, worry, depression, suicide). The middle school students appeared to illustrate the multitude of emotions often experienced by youth and reported in the cyberbullying literature (Carney, 2008; Casey-Cannon et al., 2001; Patchin & Hinduja, 2006). The cyberbullying-related deaths that were prominent in recent years (Freidman, 2011; Inbar, 2009; Loveland, 2011; McCabe, 2010; McNeil et al., 2010; Starr, 2009) remind educators to be aware of the emotional aspects involved in cyberbullying and how quickly problems accelerate. This study, as well as the literature, underlines the need for educators and parents to watch for signs of trouble and distress among the student body at school. Several of the girls who committed suicide (after being cyberbullied) alerted school officials of peer issues prior to killing themselves. Adults must be prepared to listen, to intervene appropriately, and to make referrals to professional service providers (e.g., counselors, psychologists, community mental health agencies), when indicated.

Second, Table 1 offers insight about how cyberbullying happens. In this study, the different schools had unique cyberbullying offenses. For example, in one school, with limited access to technology, gossiping through cell phone text messaging started the majority of the cyberbullying-related offenses for the girls. In these situations a pattern ensued. The pattern was: (1) gossip spread quickly via text messages, (2) the text messages were strong and harsh with emotional impact, (3) anger built up among the girls, and (4) threats of physical and emotional harm often developed as a way to "get even."

On the other hand, in the more affluent school where students had access to computers, the methods of cyberbullying included more computer-based cyberbullying (i.e., Facebook, MySpace, and computer gaming). The students also offered different cyberbullying solutions. For example, the students at the second school talked more frequently about blocking or reporting the cyberbully, rather than physical fighting.

Third, the students from the focus groups reported that cyberbullying took place at home more than at school. Cyberbullying was also most likely to occur on social networking sites, through text messages, or with email. These findings reiterate that technology can be mishandled by middle school-aged students (e.g., text messages, Facebook and MySpace) and underlines that social networking accounts and other forms of technology should be monitored by adults, especially at home (i.e., where and inverse relationship occurs -- cyberbullying is more prevalent and fewer parents closely monitor online interactions).

Table 1

Listening to the Voices of Middle School Students: Student Perceptions of Cyberbullying

Related Feelings:

- Our initial feelings after being cyberbullied were: “angry, mad, ready to fight, worried, shocked, and confused...”
- “Depression, pain (both physical and mental), and increased chances of suicide...” are cyberbullying consequences faced by students.

What Causes Cyberbullying?

- “Threats, insults, and name calling.”
- “We see tons of people cyberbullying each day, especially on Facebook. Whether it is sending a person a message, commenting on a photo . . .”
- “...Gossip” is a leading reason why girls cyberbully.
- “Misunderstandings often dominate cyberbullying.”

Where is Cyberbullying?

- “Home is the most likely place to be cyberbullied” because of technological access.”
- “We experience cyberbullying on Facebook, MySpace, phone (text messages), and email.”

How Do You Deal with Cyberbullying?

- The “best thing is not saying anything, the worst is taking matters into your own hands and paying them back.”
 - “Least helpful responses to cyberbullying... letting it get to you, keeping it all inside... dealing with it by yourself, arguing with the person, continuing the talk.”
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The middle school students talked about ways to assist adults with cyberbullying concerns (see Table 2). In this aspect of the study, the students recommended steps to limit cyberbullying. They suggested: “warn students that cyberbullying may happen,” “give ways to effectively deal with it,” “educate

students,” and, “get someone who can really help.” Students communicated the need for educators and parents to proactively equip themselves with information and techniques to educate and raise awareness (Wright et al., 2009) about cyberbullying in the schools. Table 2 also offers additional information about cyberbullying and what middle school students think.

Table 2

What Middle School Students Think about Cyberbullying

- Remind teenagers that “cyberbullying can happen, watch the websites we go, and provide ways ... to deal with cyberbullying.”
 - “... we [often] go to friends to see what we could do about cyberbullying before we go to our parents.”
 - You can decrease cyberbullying by:
 - “Stopping cyberbullying before it happens”
 - “Restricting sites”
 - “Monitoring sites visited”
 - “Understanding what the technology offers (such as blocking techniques)”
 - “Parents overreact about cyberbullying.”
 - “Do not lash out”
 - “Consider blocking the site”
 - “Consider talking to parents of bully”
 - “Consider reporting the bully”
 - During cyberbullying, student concerns were:
 - “How and why did the cyberbullying get started?”
 - “Who started the cyberbullying?”
 - “How do I end the cyberbullying?”
 - What can educators do about cyberbullying?
 - “Find out who is doing the cyberbullying.”
 - “Find out where cyberbullying happens.”
 - “Warn students that cyberbullying may happen; and, give ways to effectively deal with it.”
 - “Educate students.”
 - “Get someone who can really help.”
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Three themes emerged from the study. First, students were frustrated with cyberbullying. The students formulated causes for cyberbullying in our conversations and outlined steps to stop cyberbullying. However, from the conversations, we observed inconsistent behavior among the students (i.e., they can articulate what to do about cyberbullying, but applying wisdom and insight in the heat of the moment is

difficult). At times, middle school students fall victim to impulsivity or “getting even.” In addition, numerous middle school discussions centered on confusion (i.e., in the eyes of students some of the cyberbullying incidents were misunderstandings or jokes that got out of hand, implying that many times malicious intentions did not exist, but once escalation started, cyberbullying became inevitable). This pattern suggests that educators and parents must consistently remind students of the inherent dangers of online interactions and how comments they make can be misinterpreted.

Second, based on our focus groups, students will seek help for cyberbullying. However, this study and the literature (Mishna et al., 2009) suggest that students “...go to friends before parents” for cyberbullying concerns. This leads us to believe that educators and parents may not be consulted about some cyberbullying issues until the issues have accelerated. The students prefer to go to peers first for advice and consultation.

Third, the students were frank about educators’ and parents’ understanding of cyberbullying (i.e., believing that they are often inadequate or inept in dealing with cyber issues and not technologically savvy). Students noted that some educators and parents were too overwhelmed to help and others were emotionally unavailable. Consequently, when adults are inept or ill-equipped, students will confide in peers rather than adults.

Conclusions

This exploratory study examined cyberbullying attitudes, beliefs, and opinions among middle school students. Because this study involved two schools in one school system, generalizability to other middle schools is unclear. Similar studies in other middle schools in Alabama and in other regions of the U.S. are needed to offer further insight about cyberbullying. With the limitations in mind, this study revealed several findings that can offer assistance to educators and parents as they strive for a safe and supportive school environment.

For the educator or parent that believes he or she is inadequate with cyberbullying concerns, there were encouraging comments from the middle school students in this study. The middle school students reiterated the need for guidance and direction (with cyberbullying) from trustworthy sources. The results suggested that they want you to listen and to assist with this widespread issue. As a matter of fact, the students pointed out problematic traits that drive students away from confiding in adults during troubling times (i.e., overreacting, getting angry, being punitive rather than resourceful when students confide) and offered solutions to this problem (see Table 2). Students prefer adults that listen and facilitate their growth, rather than those that attempt to solve their problems or overreact.

Educators and parents must be informed about cyberbullying. While the students verbally formulated causes of cyberbullying and steps to prevent cyberbullying (Tables 1 and 2), their comments also suggested that educators and parents must be proactive in cyberbullying prevention. School professionals should educate and raise awareness of cyberbullying (Wright et al., 2009), enforce zero tolerance to cyberbullying, and find ways to intervene and prevent cyberbullying in the future, aligning with NCLB legislation (2001) and the ASCA Position Statement (2005) about Bullying, Harassment, and Violence Prevention Programs: Supporting Safe and Respectful Schools.

In addition, as students seek help, educators and parents must reinforce problem-solving and conflict resolution skills for middle school students in addition to teaching tolerance and empathy toward others. Such skills can be integrated into guidance lessons with the school counseling program. School

officials often need to initiate training to educate teachers, counselors, administrators, and parents on cyberbullying intervention and prevention methods.

To be effective in preventing cyberbullying in middle schools, all personnel at school (e.g., teachers, school counselors, and administrators) and parents must be on the forefront. Informed educators and parents can be better prepared to educate, lead the fight against cyberbullying, and provide a safe place to talk when cyberbullying becomes troublesome.

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