

Cyberbullying a social problem education essay



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An old school yard problem has taken on a new electronic face for the twenty first century. No longer is the bully confined to the halls of the high school, they are now going home with students in their cell phones and in their computer monitors. Cyberbullying has become a new trend with terribly destructive consequences. The effects of cyberbullying have been linked to negative academic, social and mental consequences for targets and perpetrators alike.

Due to the fresh nature of the problem, schools and parents have had difficulty in developing programs and policies that effectively deal with these behaviors at home and at school. The following paper provides a sound discussion of this new phenomenon and offers proposals for educators and parents on how to address and prevent cyberbullying among youth. It is time we combat this social problem and take a stronger stand against cyberbullies.

Definition and prevalence

Cyberbullying is the willful and repeated harm inflicted through the medium of electronic communication (Hoff & Mitchell, 2008). Victims of cyberbullying are targeted with threatening, degrading and/or sexually explicit messages and images in chat rooms, blogs, social networking sites, cell phones, instant messaging, etc. (Katzner, Fetchenhauer, & Belschak, 2009). Recent studies have found that 95 percent of American teenagers between the ages of 12 and 18 have access to the Internet and 75 percent own cell phones (Cox Communications, 2009). Of these teens, 20 percent report experiencing some form of cyberbullying during their school careers. (Hinduja & Patchin, 2007). The increased access and anonymity provided by these technologies

have made it possible for perpetrators to easily harm a person's social standing, peer relationships and physical safety. Children are not the only ones affected by cyberbullying where adults are increasingly targeted by perpetrators. Cyberbullies have been known to create "slam sites" where individuals are ridiculed or rated in insulting ways, gather private financial details, and share personal information with organizations that advocate for child molestation. Cyberbullies also remotely access webcams and secretly record individuals without their knowledge or permission. These behaviors are increasingly pervasive and have consequences for every member of society if action is not taken.

Costs of cyberbullying

The costs of ignoring and failing to prevent cyberbullying have proved immense. Targets of cyberbullying display increased signs of anger, depression, anxiety and emotional distress (Smith, 2008). Victims may also exhibit signs of failing health and decreased academic performance. In extreme cases victims have dealt with their frustration through school shootings or by committing suicide. According to research, victims of cyberbullying are almost twice as likely to attempt suicide compared to those who have not endured such bullying (Hinduja & Patchin, 2007). Children who cyberbully others have difficulty in communicating their emotions and lack appropriate methods of relieving aggression. Contrary to popular belief, cyberbullies are known to have high self-esteems and bully others in order to establish dominant social roles (Agatston, Kowalski & Limber, 2007). This creates a power differential where cyberbullies feel superior to others who are unable to defend themselves. These children are

more likely to engage in other forms of anti-social behavior such as vandalism, fighting, dropping out and using drugs (Hinduja & Patchin, 2007). Nearly 25 percent of school bullies will also be convicted of a criminal offense in their adult years (Juvonen & Gross, 2008). For the school, cyberbullying has been attributed to high absentee rates, poor student performance, low teacher morale and negative perceptions from the community. Schools have been targeted for failing to provide a safe learning environment and in some cases have been held responsible for the suicides of students who have been victimized (Hoff & Mitchell, 2008). The most significant cost for schools are the lost opportunities of children that are affected by cyberbullying.

Suggestions for schools.

Schools must establish that any type of bullying is unacceptable and perpetrators will be punished. By adding cyberbullying into student codes of conduct, educators and students enter a contractual agreement where penalties can be applied. Currently it is difficult for teachers and administrators to punish cyberbullies so adding this definition to student handbooks will give educators cause for suspending or expelling offenders (Calhoun & Daniels, 2008). This sends the message that this type of harassment will not be tolerated. Most policies involving cyberbullying are reactive and do not address why these behaviors occur. Schools are encouraged to employ programs that openly discuss the dangers of cyberbullying and what targets can do when they become victimized. The goal is to take a proactive step and prevent cyberbullying from ever occurring.

In order for students to take a proactive stance on cyberbullying they must be educated that their online interactions have real life consequences.

School officials can help by adding cyberbullying to existing curriculum in health classes and allowing law enforcement officials to speak at assemblies about the legal implications of cyberbullying. Informing students on how to deal with cyberbullies in a legal sense will likely deter students from engaging in cyberbullying (Smith, 2008). Schools can also implement further programs that discuss critical thinking and the dangers of bullying behavior. This can come in the form of assemblies with guest speakers that offer a message of hope for targets as well as bullies. Students will be provided with information on how to get help and how to prevent this type of treatment.

These programs can also offer tips on how to avoid becoming a target for cyberbullying. Students are encouraged to never reveal personal information to anyone that they do not know. Cyberbullies have been known to pose as trusted friends online and trick targets into revealing potentially embarrassing information. Also, students will be informed of the potential legal implications of sending or transmitting nude pictures of minors under the age of 18 through cell phones or e-mail messages in what is known as “sexting” (Cox Communications, 2009). Teaching students how to protect themselves though smart usages of technology decreases the chance that they will be victimized in the future.

With the enthusiasm behind social media, teachers have begun using sites like Facebook to provide an engaging educational experience for students when they are not at school (Diamanduros, 2008). This extension of the classroom will require students to “friend” the site giving teachers access to

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student accounts. The point here is not to spy, but to create an online presence for teachers which sends the message that students will be held accountable for their online behavior just as in real life. This will allow administrators to appropriately handle internet interactions that are in violation with the updated student codes of conduct. By creating an online learning environment students are encouraged to participate and share their ideas while refraining from acting irresponsibly.

To prevent cyberbullying while at school, school computers must be updated with recent firewall software and search restrictions. Each computer should require that students login with their real names (not pseudonyms or handles) to ensure that violators can be easily traced. Any attempt to disable protective software or damage networks should be viewed the same as destruction of other school property and handled accordingly. Computers and technology access are a privilege at school and violations of these policies can result in these privileges being removed. Students should be informed that any electronic transmission created at school is subject to school rules including text messages, e-mails and phone calls.

Ultimately, the lines of communication must be kept open between students and teachers. Students will be more willing to report cyberbullying if they know that school officials will actually do something about it (Diamanduros, 2008). Teachers need to be informed on how to handle bullying they witness in person and how to report it to the proper authorities. It is important that teachers also ask the assistance of school counselors who can get involved with a student's parents and the situations they face at home. These measures will ensure that students remain willing to contact trusted adults

when their efforts at defusing potentially dangerous situations are unsuccessful.

Suggestions for parents.

Parents must learn to recognize the warning signs that their child is a perpetrator or target of cyberbullying. Common characteristics of perpetrators include frequent computer use, especially at night, combined with loud bursts of laughter. Cyberbullies tend to be secretive and attempt to disguise what they were doing when adults enter the room (Dehue, 2008). Targets are known to become noticeably sad or angry following computer use and may abruptly stop using the computer. Additional signs of bullying victimization are the avoidance of friends, family and school (Hoff & Mitchell, 2008). Parents should be aware of these signs and maintain a dialogue with children about what their lives are like and what happens to the child on a day to day basis.

In the ever evolving social lives of youth it is important to allow children to continue use of electronic forms of communication. This has become an essential way for them to organize events and stay in contact. For this reason a child may be less willing to report instances of cyberbullying for fear that parents will restrict Internet or cell phone access (Hinduja & Patchin, 2008). It is therefore important to not restrict use, but to set rules on appropriate online behavior and internet safety. This will make children more willing to report cyberbullying to trusted adults and authority figures. To further ensure that children are not engaging in cyberbullying parents need to make use of search filters and website blockers that restrict offensive material. An additional step would be to place the computer in a

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common area of the house. Upon learning of of cyberbullying, parents are encouraged to openly discuss what happened and the child's role in the situation. It is necessary to keep these lines of communication open to prevent future instances of cyberbullying.

Parents are further encouraged to inform school officials and law enforcement of potential abuses of electronic communication. The school officials are trained to take the appropriate actions in dealing with bullying behavior and may provide useful suggestions. Since cyberbullying is often an extension of pre-existing traditional bullying at school, it is important that parents are willing to communicate with the school officials (Juvonen & Gross, 2008). In cases involving threats of violence, sexual content, and other illegal activities parents should notify law enforcement. Internet service providers and cell phone companies can be used to provide evidence to report illegal and malicious content (Cox Communications, 2009). Even if these companies are able to obtain transmissions parents should encourage their children to save all e-mail and text messages that contain harmful content to further support criminal investigations. In addition, when a parent informs the community that their child has been a target of cyberbullying, it would likely make other parents more willing to monitor their child's electronic transactions.

In order to fully grasp the complexities of electronic communication parents should create a presence online by using social media for their own uses. By parents creating a Facebook or MySpace page of their own, it may create a disincentive for children to engage in cyberbullying. This will familiarize parents with this type of communication and give them a chance to keep an

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eye on their child's internet activity. Most social networking sites provide tips for parents and children on internet safety, user agreements and how to report pages with malicious content. These pages are then removed and offenders are denied access. The more time that a parent spends educating themselves on electronic communication, the more tools they will have in preventing cyberbullying.

Conclusion

The best way to address and prevent the issue of cyberbullying is to take the appropriate measures when children are still in school. Providing them with the tools of how to be respectful and the consequences of cyberbullying will dissuade them from engaging or continuing these behaviors in adulthood. Educators and parents must be willing to take a stronger stand against this form of harassment and challenge the idea that bullying of any kind is “ a normal part of growing up.” We have reached the point where we can no longer claim unfamiliarity with technology. We must be willing to embrace electronic communication to gain a better understanding of the issue. Computer and electronic competence are the most effective tools in combating cyberbullying.