

Exploring and Mitigating the Impact of Cyberbullying on Adolescents' Mental Health

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Abstract

There are many unique characteristics of cyberbullying that are impacting adolescents in many negative ways. The anonymity, 24/7 invasion of privacy, and the vast audience that the perpetrator takes advantage of have taken bullying to a new level. With greater access to advanced technology and youths' obsession with it, cyberbullying is on the rise, and its effects on youth are being seen at school and at home in devastating ways. Fortunately, there are many strategies that all those concerned can take to combat the rise of cyberbullying and its impact on adolescents.

Over the past decade, the world has witnessed advances in technology that have brought wonderful opportunities. However, with these opportunities come risks that can be devastating. Recently, Canadians have been shocked by the tragic, high-profile stories of Amanda Todd and Rehteah Parsons, who ultimately committed suicide as a result of cyber attacks (MacDonald, 2014). Although suicide is not the final outcome for all victims, cyberbullying brings a whole new set of characteristics that are powerful and widespread, and the predictions are that with improved technology and greater access (Holladay, 2012), the impact of cyberbullying on adolescents will only become worse (Baek & Bullock, 2014). The trend of cyberbullying is on the rise; therefore, it is crucial that youth, parents, schools, and the community at large are equipped with strategies to deal with this crisis before more innocent youths fall victim to cyberbullying.

The Characteristics of Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying is distinctly different from traditional bullying in several ways. First, the internet allows anonymity, which could serve to embolden the cyberbully. Second, the unlimited access that perpetrators have to the internet enables a 24/7 invasion of the victim's privacy (Gordon, 2014; Swearer, 2012). Finally, cyberbullying has a potentially infinite audience, which could give it an immeasurable reach (Uhls, 2014). These characteristics are not only distinct from traditional bullying, but they also make cyberbullying a formidable force that can be better understood by the examination of its key features.

Anonymity of the Perpetrator

The anonymity of cyberbullying allows the perpetrators to disconnect and de-individualize, thereby voiding any empathy and criticism that could make them question their conscience. As a result, cyber attacks can be very vicious (Alexander, 2012). For example, anonymous cyberbullies often post harsh insults (Hoffman, 2012), disclose personal information, post inappropriate images and video clips (Papatraianon, Levine, & West, 2014), and stalk, lure (Hinduji, & Patchin, 2010) and harass their victims (Gillespie, 2006). The possibility of anonymity may also encourage people who would not normally engage in bullying to do so online because they become invisible (Cassidy, Faucher, & Jackson, 2013), "allowing their actions to be separated from the consequences" (Uhls, 2014, p. 30). Indeed, new apps such as Burn Book and Yik Yak are being created for the sole purpose of anonymous cyberbullying (Elliott, 2015). Cassidy and her colleagues (2013) stated that because the internet is such a global resource, authorities can not supervise its usage, which enables perpetrators to go undetected and to pursue their victims for an extended period of time, making the attacks more harmful. All of

these characteristics combined not only make cyberbullying a very powerful force, but they also let the perpetrator take advantage of the internet which is fertile ground for an unprecedented rate of invasion of privacy and harmful attacks.

Invasion of Privacy

Today, bullying goes beyond the school yard and into victims' homes where they once felt safe (O'Brien & Moules, 2012; Papatraianon et al., 2014). While traditional bullying often starts at school, the brunt of it can now continue in the form of cyberbullying outside of the school, invading the victim's home from near and far via digital devices. Consequently, the ubiquitous attacks that surround the victims can cause increased fear and stress, since they feel that the attacks are inescapable (Baek & Bullock, 2014). Finally, once cyber attacks are initiated and perpetuated, the victim will likely feel threatened, vulnerable (Cassidy et al., 2013), and afraid to ask for help.

Vast Audience

The extensive audience to which cyberbullies have access adds another dimension to their power (Hoffman, 2012). Youth around the world are absorbed in electronics such as phones, computers, and iPods (Holladay, 2012). Students spend extensive time interacting, communicating, and being entertained online. As a result, when a message is sent via social media, it can reach millions of people, it can travel internationally in minutes, and it can invite many to participate in whatever comes next (Holladay, 2012). In the past, the malicious note that was passed around the classroom stayed in the classroom. Today, written attacks reach far and wide and become permanent in seconds. More specifically, the first person to send a message may do so only once. The message can be potentially shared by their friends and their friends and so on, growing exponentially until it becomes viral (Cassidy et al., 2013). Compared to a single classroom perpetrator, a malicious anonymous viral mob can wreak devastation on a victim's life.

With the combination of the anonymity, the invasion of privacy, and the vast audience that digital technology affords its perpetrators, cyberbullying has become a very powerful avenue to attack victims. Realizing that the characteristics of cyberbullying are unique from those of traditional bullying is prerequisite to understanding the power of such attacks.

The Effects of Cyberbullying

When malicious online posts are directed at already vulnerable adolescents, the results can be grave (Gordon, 2014). For example, depending on the motive behind the attack, victims of cyberbullying can experience low self-esteem, poor concentration, headaches, sleep problems, anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation (Cassidy et al., 2013). Adolescence can be a tough time, and the added pressures of cyberbullying can make it even more overwhelming both at home and at school.

At School

Victims of cyberbullying are often too embarrassed and afraid to attend school, for fear that the the entire student body is witness to the attacks on them. Moreover, because of the anonymity of cyberbullying, the victim often has no idea who the perpetrator is or how many are involved (Gordon, 2014). As a result of cyberbullying, victims are often truant from school (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010). When a victim of cyberbullying does attend school, it is often difficult for him/her to concentrate because of his/her pre-occupation with what has happened which often contributes to poor grades (Cassidy et al., 2013). Teachers and friends often notice the

victim's withdrawal from sports and other extra-curricular activities (Cassidy et al., 2013). The effects of cyberbullying have the power to transform a normal school experience into something dreadful.

At Home

Victims of cyberbullying often demonstrate atypical and even abnormal behaviour at home. For example, parents of children who are cyberbullied often notice their children withdraw and disconnect from regular family routines (Kouri, 2012). The children may retreat to their rooms for extended periods of time, on a daily basis, in an effort to avoid family and friends. Parents have also noticed emotional changes such as depression and sadness. In extreme cases, the children turn to drugs and alcohol to relieve the pain and to escape the stress of the cyber attacks (Cassidy et al., 2013). In addition, youth affected by cyberbullying may inflict self-harm such as cutting and suicide attempts. Leiden University researchers found that adolescents who had been cyberbullied were 3.2 times more likely to consider suicide than those who were not cyberbullied (MacDonald, 2014, para. 3). While other issues may contribute to the completion of suicide, cyberbullying is a significant contributor and may exacerbate the victims' preexisting mental health problems (Hinduja & Patchin, 2012; Reinberg, 2012; Swearer, 2012). While the range of behaviour of victims of cyberbullying may go from mild to extreme, the warning signs are often apparent in the adolescents' home life.

Reducing the Impact of Cyberbullying

Perhaps due to their stage of incomplete brain development, adolescents are more apt to participate in risky online activity without considering the outcome. When cyberbullying is the outcome, victims often do not know where to turn and do not have the strategies to lighten its impact. Cassidy (2013) stated that it is society's responsibility to provide training, strategies, and support for reducing the risk and impact of cyberbullying on adolescents who engage in online activities. Essentially, it is crucial for parents, school staff, and the broader community to become cyber smart and to collaborate to provide students with strategies to protect themselves from the harmful effects of cyberbullying.

Why Adolescents Avoid Parents and Adults

Depending on the relationship that a parent has with an adolescent child, the parent may not always be the first person the adolescent will turn to when he/she has been cyberbullied. Studies have found that 32% of children reported being victims of cyberbullying, but only 11% of their parents were aware of it (Cassidy et al., 2013, p. 592). Fear of losing privileges such as phones or access to technology (Cassidy et al., 2013; Kouri, 2012), and being blamed and punished, are common reasons why a child would not turn to a parent. For many youth, access to technology is a lifeline to their social world and entertainment. Holladay (2012) stated that 93% of youth use some form of electronic device such as computers, phones, iPods, and iPads (p. 41). Many adolescents have become so attached to this type of communication that they will risk dealing with the attacker secretly or without proper direction and support, rather than losing their electronic privileges. Some youth lack faith in their parents' ability to intervene, because they believe that they are technologically illiterate (O'Brien & Moules, 2012). In addition, some children view their parents as controlling and invasive, and they therefore hesitate to trust their parents with such sensitive issues (Hoffman, 2012; Swearer, 2012). Consequently, adolescents who are victims of cyberbullying often turn to friends for support, instead. However, teenage friends are often not equipped with strategies required to solve the problems caused by cyberbullying (Cassidy et al., 2013). To overcome the obstacles that stand

in the way of children's safety in this domain, it is important for parents and adults to be open minded, to act rationally, and to develop strategies to understand such issues

Strategies for Parents and Adults

Many effective strategies are available for parents and children who are dealing with cyberbullying. The most helpful first option may be for a child to tell an adult; however, most adolescent victims are reluctant to do so. If a child decides to confide in an adult, the adult should then initiate and maintain an open dialogue with the child regarding his/her online activity. Additionally, it is important for all parents to educate their children about using technology cautiously and safely (Hinduja & Patchin, 2013), because the internet provides a haven for cyberbullies, predators, and other criminals. Furthermore, being pro-active can also be an effective approach to combating cyberbullying. The onus is on the parents to become aware of abnormal changes in their child's behaviour that may require further investigation and intervention (Kouri, 2012). It is also crucial for parents and adults to preserve cyberbullying evidence (Hoffman, 2012). In addition, in order to reduce the risk of attacks by predators, it is important to block messages and set alerts to monitor devices involving questionable and suspicious activity (Hoffman, 2012). Finally, many parents and adults may be relieved to know that formal programs and strategies exist that can help them to become better skilled at dealing with cyberbullying issues (Cassidy et al., 2013).

School Strategies

Specific strategies can be effectively used by school staff to defeat cyberbullies (Cassidy et al., 2013). First, guidance counsellors should provide ongoing assessment of the victim, share their expertise, and collaborate with parents and police. Second, since they are often very literate in terms of social media, it could be helpful to have other students actively involved in co-constructing criteria for intervention strategies. This involvement could foster pride among students and help to decrease the occurrence of cyberbullying and risky online activity. Additionally, all students must be made aware of policies and the consequences of cyberbullying, such as loss of technology privileges and school suspensions. Finally, in order to encourage students to feel safe and comfortable when seeking support from staff, providing a positive school environment is very important.

Physician Intervention

There is an increasing need for physicians to become involved in supporting victims of cyberbullying. Due to the increase in the prevalence of cyberbullying noticed by mental health care workers, they are encouraging physicians not only to screen for victims of cyberbullying, but also to educate them (Moyer, 2012). Physicians are in a good position to screen patients by looking for signs of depression and suicide ideation (MacDonald, 2014), through questions such as "Do you use the internet and if so how often? What kind of activity do you engage in online? Do you use social media? Have you ever felt threatened?" and finally, "Have you ever bullied?" (Moyer, 2012, p. 65). Once it has been determined that there has been cyberbully involvement or effects, the doctor can then engage the parent or guardian and other appropriate resources, to collaborate in supporting and educating the patient (Moyer, 2012). Physicians can be an important part of a support network for victims of cyberbullying.

Authority Intervention

When students, parents, schools, and physicians are ineffective in dealing with severe cases of cyberbullying, it may be necessary to engage legal authorities. Because intimidation,

harassment, intent to harm, and other such attacks overstep the right to freedom of speech (Murphy, 2012), a perpetrator can receive sanctions including imprisonment for cyberbullying attacks (Baek & Bullock, 2014). For example, in Canada Bill C-13, known as the *Protecting Canadians from Online Crime Act*, came into force on March 10, 2015. This bill grants police more authority to search and seize personal internet data, and to impose penalties of up to five years in prison for perpetrators who expose intimate pictures of others online without their consent (*Bill C-13*, 2014). In cases such as those of Amanda Todd and Rehteah Parsons, wherein the severity goes beyond what typical intervention is capable of dealing with, this amendment to the Criminal Code of Canada better aligns the law to the reality of cyberbullying.

Adolescence is a stage wherein many youth feel invincible and are more apt to take online risks that may lead to negative and permanent effects caused by cyberbullying. These occur on a continuum ranging from mild to severe. Therefore, it is important that any support person on the intervention spectrum be well versed in the dangers of cyberbullying and how to help adolescents protect themselves from online perils.

Conclusion

Youth are absorbed in technology and social networking, and cyberbullying can be an unfortunate result of this means of interaction. When cyberbullying does take place, mental health in youth is negatively impacted. Recognizing the power of 21st century technology that is in the hands of adolescents, and equipping them with effective and positive ways to use it, requires a broad-based effort by society. Early detection and intervention of any incidence of cyberbullying by students, parents, schools, and the community will help to decrease the harm that it may cause the victim. Finally, for the safety of adolescents' online activity, and for the sake of cyberbullied victims like Amanda Todd and Rehteah Parsons, finding ways to decrease cyberbullying is essential to secure opportunities that the internet and technology offer this generation of adolescents and those to come.

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Raising three boys put Patricia Goodine's idea of completing her M.Ed. on hold until she moved to Dauphin with her husband who is an RCMP officer. When BU brought the graduate program to Dauphin, Patty jumped on board and started her M.Ed. in counselling.