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Cyberbullying and Sexting: Technology Abuses of the 21st Century

Many young people cannot remember a time before Instant Messaging (IM), cell phone text messaging, video conferencing, blogging, e-mailing, and MySpace and Facebook postings existed. Thanks to the ubiquitous nature of technology in the 21st century, digital natives are accustomed to seeing, and being seen, on a scale that was unimaginable by their parents and teachers. This limitless access to information, peers, and even strangers around the globe brings with it a new set of safety concerns for parents and school personnel. Although schools have made concerted efforts to curb Internet abuse by developing acceptable use policies and installing filtering software for websites, expanded forms of technology and differing formats of information presentation have surfaced, and they warrant a new discussion of digital safety, abuse, and bullying.

Bullying, and being bullied, has a long history in schools. How does giftedness relate to bullying and being bullied? In a recent survey of fifth-grade students, Estell et al. (2009) found that academically gifted students and general education students were less likely than students with mild disabilities to be viewed as bullies by their peers. Teachers also rated academically gifted students as less likely to bully or be bullied than both general education students and students with mild disabilities. Key factors in being perceived as a bully were associations with aggressive and popular peers. Social isolates were the most likely to be bullied. Whereas gifted students are less likely to bully or be bullied according to this research, bullying is still a factor in their lives.

Peterson and Ray (2006) surveyed eighth-grade gifted students and found that bullying tended to peak in sixth grade, although females reported that bullying remained steady or increased through eighth grade. Almost half, 46%, of gifted students reported that they were bullied in sixth grade in some way, and 67% of the students said they had been the victim of some type of bullying in their first 9 years of school. Eleven percent of these students were bullied repeatedly. Name-calling was the most prevalent form of bullying these gifted students experienced. They also reported that they bully. Over one fourth (28%) of gifted eighth graders said they had bullied someone during their first 9 years of school, and 16% reported bullying someone while they were in eighth grade. The most prevalent bullying tactic was name-calling, which increased from 4% in kindergarten to 14% in eighth grade.

The Internet and other technology-related devices are particularly suited to nonviolent types of bullying such as name-calling. Gable, Ludlow, Kite, and McCoach (2009) studied the prevalence of cyberbullying with a general population of seventh and eighth graders. The researchers classified students into one of four categories: neither bullies nor victims of cyberbullying (74%), victims only of cyberbullying (5%), only cyberbullies (6%), and both bullies and victims of cyberbullying (15%). Although three quarters of the students had no involvement with cyberbullying, one in five had been digitally bullied and one in five had digitally bullied others. Unfortunately, those who bullied or were victims said they were less likely to notify adults about Internet bullying than those who were not bullied. Bullies

and victims also said their parents were less aware of their Internet activities. High-frequency Internet users were more likely to be both bullies and victims than low Internet users. An AP/MTV (2009) survey found that 47% of teenagers surveyed have experienced digitally abusive behavior.

So what is cyberbullying? Willard (2007) described it as "being cruel to others by sending or posting harmful material or engaging in other forms of social aggression using the Internet or other digital technologies" (p. 1). She listed eight different forms of cyberbullying:

1. **Flaming:** Online fights using electronic messages with angry and vulgar language.
2. **Harassment:** Repeatedly sending nasty, mean, and insulting messages.
3. **Denigration:** "Dissing" someone online. Sending or posting gossip or rumors about a person to damage his or her reputation or friendships.
4. **Impersonation:** Pretending to be someone else and sending or posting material to get that person in trouble or danger or to damage that person's reputation or friendships.
5. **Outing:** Sharing someone's secrets or embarrassing information or images online.
6. **Trickery:** Talking someone into revealing secrets or embarrassing information or images online.
7. **Exclusion:** Intentionally and cruelly excluding someone from an online group.
8. **Cyberstalking:** Repeated, intense harassment and denigration that includes threats or creates significant fear. (pp. 1–2)

Goodstein (2008) remarked:

In many ways cyberbullying has democratized bullying because you don't have to be able to physically overpower your victim—a person can simply log on, create a new identity, and bully away. . . . Instead of whispers behind teens' backs, the insults are posted for everyone to read. Instead of one . . . silently listening in on a phone conversation, two . . . can watch incriminating IMs from an unsuspecting "buddy" pop up on a computer screen. Instead of a clique not letting . . . [someone] sit with them at lunch, a group of friends can decide to keep . . . [that person] off everyone's buddy lists. (p. 1)

According to an AP-MTV (2009) poll, more than 75% of 14- to 24-year-olds believe that digital abuse is a serious problem for people their age. Yet, only about half believe that what they post online could come back to hurt them. This is at a time when 24% of 14- to 17-year-olds report having been involved in some type of naked sexting. *Sexting*, which is sending or forwarding nude, sexually suggestive, or explicit pictures on a cell phone or online, was listed as *Time* magazine's number one buzzword of 2009 (Stephey, 2009). Females are more likely to have sent naked photos of themselves, and males are more likely to have received them. Well more than half (61%) of those who send naked photos of themselves have been pressured by someone else to do so at least once. Nearly one in five who receive sext messages pass them along to someone else (AP-MTV, 2009).

The snowballing effect of forwarded sexting can be dire. An 18-year-old Ohio girl committed suicide after her ex-boyfriend shared a digital nude photo of her from the neck down that she had sent to him. He shared the image with other students in her school, who in turn distributed it widely. After the Ohio girl sought to have the distribution of the image stopped by reporting it to authorities, students allegedly escalated their harassment of her. Her parents are currently suing the ex-boyfriend, several former high school classmates, and the school for failing to stop the harassment (Zetter, 2009).

Parents and educators play an important role in helping young people understand the consequences of poor decisions in a digital age where favorable, as well as unfavorable, text and images spread exponentially.

The media surrounding this, and other incidents, has prompted a national movement to address the issue of digital abuse. MTV has organized a year-long campaign called "A Thin Line" to empower young people to identify, respond to, and stop the spread of digital abuse in their lives and their peers' lives (A Thin Line, 2009). This campaign included an MTV television special dedicated to the topic on Valentine's Day in 2009. A dozen other organizations have joined this timely project.

Parents and educators play an important role in helping young people understand the consequences of poor decisions in a digital age where favorable, as well as unfavorable, text and images spread exponentially. Hinduja and Patchin (2009a, 2009b) of the Cyberbullying Research Center have an extensive website (http://www.cyberbullying.us) dedicated to this topic. The following tips to parents and

educators for preventing cyberbullying are adapted from material on their site (Hinduja & Patchin, 2009a, 2009b):

- Establish that **all rules for interacting with people in real life also apply for interacting online or through cell phones. Convey that cyberbullying inflicts harm** and causes pain in the real world as well as in cyberspace and **all forms of bullying are unacceptable** and behavior that occurs away from school also can be subject to school sanctions.
- **Make sure the school has Internet Safety educational programming** in place. This should not solely cover the threat of sexual predators, but also how to prevent and respond to online peer harassment, interact wisely through social networking sites, and engage in responsible and ethical online communications. Schools should survey their students about the extent of digital abuse among students. This information will be useful when planning strategies to educate students and faculty.
- **Educate young people** about appropriate Internet-based behaviors. Explain to them the problems that can be created when technology is misused (e.g., damaging their reputation, getting in trouble at school or with the police). This can **include peer mentoring**, where older students informally teach lessons and share learning experiences with younger students—to promote positive online interactions.
- **Model appropriate technology usage.** Don't harass or joke about others while online, especially around young people. Don't text while driving. Young people are watching and learning.
- **Monitor young people's activities** while they are online. This

can be done informally (through active participation in, and supervision of, the young person's online experience) and formally (through software). Use discretion when covertly spying on young people. This could cause more harm than good if they feel their privacy has been violated. They may go completely underground with their online behaviors and deliberately work to hide their actions.

- **Use filtering and blocking software** as a part of a comprehensive approach to online safety, but understand software programs alone will not keep kids safe or prevent them from bullying others or accessing inappropriate content. Most tech-savvy youth can find ways around filters very quickly.
- **Look for warning signs** that something abnormal is occurring with respect to their technology usage. If children become withdrawn or their Internet use becomes obsessive, they could either be a victim or a perpetrator of cyberbullying.
- **Utilize an "Internet Use Contract" and a "Cell Phone Use Contract"** to foster a crystal-clear understanding about what is appropriate and what is not with respect to the use of communications technology. To remind young people of this pledged commitment, these contracts should be posted in a highly visible place (e.g., next to the computer).
- **Cultivate and maintain an open, candid line of communication** with children, so that they are ready and willing to come to you whenever they experience something unpleasant or distressing in cyberspace. Victims of cyberbullying (and the bystanders who observe it) must know for sure that the adults who they tell will intervene rationally and logically, and not

make the situation worse. **Schools should consult with their school attorney before incidents occur** to determine what actions they can or must take in varying situations.

- **Teach and reinforce positive values** about how others should be treated with respect and dignity. Schools can **cultivate a positive school climate**, as research has shown a link between a perceived "negative" environment on campus and an increased prevalence of cyberbullying offending and victimization among students. In general, it is crucial to establish and maintain a school climate of respect and integrity where violations result in informal or formal sanction.
- **Educate yourself and your community.** Schools can utilize specially created cyberbullying curricula, or general information sessions such as assemblies and in-class discussions to raise awareness among youth. Invite specialists to talk to staff and students. Send information to parents. Sponsor a community education event. Invite parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and any other relevant adult.

Cell phones and the Internet have helped us connect and learn from each other in ways that most of us never imagined. We have only begun to explore the benefits that these, and future technologies, will bring to our lives. As with many things, it is not the technology, but the misuse of it, that creates problems. As responsible parents and educators, we have an obligation to understand the potential uses of new technologies and guide young people in their responsible implementation of them. **GCT**

way up to win their family hundreds of thousands of dollars" (Wyatt, 2009, para. 1). Parents also will have access to Ivy League professors and medical doctors in order to gauge their child's performance (Wyatt, 2009). (Author note: Perhaps the producers have had their own misgivings about the show as, at the time of this writing, it has been put on hold after taping several episodes.) These types of programs and other public forums, much like their predecessors, focus solely on gifted children's keen intellect and present a one-dimensional and stereotypical portrait, resulting in a no greater qualitative understanding of gifted children's capabilities and their correlation to their social and emotional needs. **GCT**

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