Cyberbullying: Prevention and Intervention Strategies

Cyberbullying is a serious form of bullying that can negatively affect children and adolescents. Recent estimates suggest that about 1 in 4 students (29.3%) in the United States have been victims of cyberbullying at some point in their life (Patchin, 2022). Cyberbullying victimization can lead to harmful mental health outcomes ranging from stress to suicidal ideation. Adults can help by taking preventive action against cyberbullying and intervening when it occurs.

WHAT IS CYBERBULLYING?

Researchers typically define *cyberbullying* as willful and repetitive harm through the use of technology. In other words, behaviors considered cyberbullying are done *purposely*, and they are *repeated over time*. Cyberbullying can take place through text messages, social media, and other online means (e.g., online forums, video game communities). Cyberbullying may come in many different forms, including:

- Flaming (i.e., sending messages that are hostile or vulgar to provoke someone)
- Online harassment (i.e., repeatedly sending offensive messages)
- Cyberstalking (i.e., using technology to intimidate, threaten harm, or cause someone to fear for their safety)
- Denigration (i.e., posting untrue statements or gossip about someone)
- Masquerading/impersonating (i.e., pretending to be someone else or creating fake social media accounts)
- Trickery/outing (i.e., tricking someone into sharing sensitive information and then sharing it publicly)
- Exclusion (i.e., deliberatively leaving someone out of an online group)

Cyberbullying differs from traditional forms of bullying in that it can be anonymous, comments can go viral (i.e., spread to large groups of people), and it can occur 24 hours a day/7 days per week. However, there is often substantial overlap in that students who are involved in one form of bullying (as either the victim or perpetrator) are much more likely to be involved in another form.

RISK FACTORS FOR CYBERBULLYING INVOLVEMENT

It can be difficult to label risk factors as specific to becoming either a perpetrator or victim of cyberbullying. Bullying involvement is influenced by a range of individual and environmental factors that, depending on the individual, may lead to student involvement as a perpetrator, victim, or both (sometimes called *bully-victims*). Some common risk factors include:

- Teens over 15 are more likely to be involved in cyberbullying than younger teens and tweens.
- Individuals who are involved in face-to-face bullying are more likely to be involved in cyberbullying.
- More frequent use of technology increases the probability of cyberbullying involvement.
- Students with marginalized identities (e.g., LGBTQ+ students, students with disabilities, racially minoritized students) are at increased risk for cyberbullying involvement.

It is important to note that every situation is unique, and students with the above risk factors may not be involved in cyberbullying at all.

CONSEQUENCES OF CYBERBULLYING

Cyberbullying has short- and long-term negative impacts on those involved. Children and adolescents who experience cyberbullying report increased mental health issues and physical health problems. Additionally, they face a higher likelihood of substance use, depression, anxiety, loneliness, and suicidal ideation, as well as decreased self-esteem and poor academic performance. Children and adolescents who experience both traditional bullying and cyberbullying report more negative academic, social, and emotional outcomes compared to students who experience only one form of bullying.

PREVENTION AND INTERVENTION STRATEGIES

For Parents and Caregivers. Parents and caregivers should pay attention to their child's use of technology, keeping an eye out for signs of cyberbullying involvement. Some behaviors that may warrant attention include changes in emotion after online use, attempts to hide online activities from adults, or a tendency to be insensitive or callous toward peers.

There are several preventive measures parents can take against cyberbullying:

- Talk with children early and often about online safety and how to be respectful and responsible in online settings.
- Set clear expectations related to technology use.
- Model safe and responsible online behavior.
- Monitor technology and social media use.

A particular challenge related to cyberbullying is its low report rate—children often hide cyberbullying from their parents for fear of having their devices taken away, among other reasons. Parents should aim to be proactive in supervising their children's technology use.

Parents and other adults who discover a child is involved in cyberbullying should:

- Provide nonjudgmental support.
- Document incidents of cyberbullying (e.g., save screenshots of harmful posts and text messages).
- Report cyberbullying incidents to the child's school.
- Contact law enforcement in cases of illegal activity or physical threats.

For Educators and Practitioners. Educators can engage in school-wide and individual-level cyberbullying intervention and prevention in the following ways (Fredrick et al., 2023):

- Implement school-based cyberbullying prevention programs, especially programs with interactive components (e.g., class discussions, role playing, or other social learning activities) and programs led by curriculum content experts (e.g., trained psychologists).
- Use social–emotional learning (SEL) programming to promote healthy school climates and decrease bullying.
- Understand that zero-tolerance policies are *not* effective responses to bullying; no one response is helpful across all situations.
- Consider context and power dynamics between students when addressing cases of cyberbullying.
- Use *restorative* practices rather than *punitive* practices to remediate any bullying situation.
- Teach students digital citizenship skills (i.e., skills for engaging in safe and responsible online behavior).
- Monitor activity on school-issued technology and identify warning signs of cyberbullying involvement.

Family–School Collaboration. Given how cyberbullying tends to persist across settings, collaboration plays a key role in prevention and intervention; communication between families and educators is crucial.

- Schools can provide digital literacy education for families. Many organizations (e.g., Common Sense Media, Cyberbullying Research Center) have guides for parents with information about popular apps and online behavior.
- Parents should aim to keep an open line of communication with their children's teachers regarding bullying issues.

SUMMARY

Research shows that digital media use among teens and tweens is on the rise; between 2019 and 2021, media use in this age group rose by 17% (Rideout et al., 2022). Increased exposure to technology and digital media creates more opportunities for cyberbullying to occur. The good news—caregivers, educators, and practitioners can take steps to counter cyberbullying. When adults are proactive and informed, they can help keep students safe online.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Alberti Center for Bullying Abuse Prevention, https://ed.buffalo.edu/alberti
- Cyberbullying Research Center https://cyberbullying.org/
- Common Sense Media, https://www.commonsensemedia.org/
- Common Sense Education (digital citizenship curriculum), https://www.commonsense.org/education/
- Common Sense Education: SEL in Digital Life Resource Center, https://www.commonsense.org/education/SEL
- StopBullying.gov, www.stopbullying.gov
- Pacer's National Bullying Prevention Center, https://www.pacer.org/bullying/
- Pew Research Center: Internet and Technology, https://www.pewresearch.org/topic/internet-technology/
- Children and Screens, https://www.childrenandscreens.com/

REFERENCES

Fredrick, S. S., Sun, L., & Nickerson, A. B. (2023, March/April). Cyberbullying and social media use: Overview and implications for practitioners. *Communiqué*, *51*(6)1, 8–11.

Patchin, J. (2022, June 22). *Summary of our cyberbullying research (2007-2021).* Cyberbullying Research Center. https://cyberbullying.org/summary-of-our-cyberbullying-research

Rideout, V., Peebles, A., Mann, S., & Robb, M. B. (2022). *The common sense census: Media use by tweens and teens, 2021*. Common Sense Media. https://www.commonsensemedia.org/sites/default/files/research/report/8-18-census-integrated-report-final-web_0.pdf

Contributors: Stephanie Fredrick, Lucia Sun, Amanda Nickerson, and Katherine Margiotta