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Foiling the plan of a cyberbully

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Researchers recommend listening to the advice of adolescents who are closest to the problem.

Morgan Biggs, an eighth grade student at St. Anne's School of Annapolis in Maryland, has an opinion about cyberbullying. "Bullying comes in many different forms, from cyberbullying to physical bullying. It's all wrong and it has to stop."

That's the opening line of her first-place essay on bullying in a recent writing competition. Most academic researchers of cyberbullying would agree with her.

Recent, highly-publicized cases of online bullying, or cyberbullying, are getting considerable attention from parents, teachers, school administrators and academic experts, along with state and federal agencies, who are seeking effective prevention.

Yet, some experts pose a seemingly unconventional question: is "cyberbullying" a true culprit? And if so, what should be done? More to the point, where is the line between criminal and bad behavior? The answers depend on who's asked, and the replies may surprise.

Students and researchers disagree on whether 'cyberbullying' is a cause for concern

Definitions of cyberbullying are highly debated among social scientists, but most agree cyber aggression and cyberbullying refer to harassment and bullying carried out via electronic media--chiefly mobile phones and the internet.

But unlike researchers, the most often affected group--youth--don't necessarily think of cyberbullying in scientific or analytical terms, nor do they think it's much of a problem.

"When I asked students about the kinds of things they were primarily concerned about, the word 'cyberbullying' almost never came up," says Nathan Fisk, a National Science Foundation (NSF) funded science and technology researcher at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, N.Y.

He says youth are more concerned about common disagreements between friends being put online and "spilling over" into the electronic world. Because the disagreements are "visible by all these students inside of a social network, the students start to take sides and they feel that everyone has to get involved."

It's a formula for turning a minor argument between students into a huge argument between groups of students. Fisk, who studies the dynamics of youth internet use, contends his research shows that almost all online arguments stem from offline disagreements, and the participants do not necessarily see these disagreements as cyberbullying.

This mismatch in definitional terms can lead to misunderstandings between parents, school administrators and the young people they are trying to protect. It can also cause decision-makers to simplify the term "cyberbullying" in a way that turns bad behavior into criminal behavior as they wrestle with the complex social interactions between young people.

"One must ensure the complexities and subtleties of cyberbullying are not lost, and that simplistic solutions do not come in response to a simple definition," says psychologist Marilyn Campbell.

Campbell, an associate professor in the School of Learning and Professional Studies, Faculty of Education at Queensland University of Technology in Brisbane, Australia, says "school policies may be practically and legally ineffectual if the language used is too vague and does not address the foreseeable risk."

"If youth do not think in terms of cyberbullying," says Fisk, "how can we expect the policies and curricula centered on these notions to be meaningful and effective?"

Mismatch in terms leads to problems and solutions

In addition, researchers acknowledge the mismatch between student and adult views on cyberbullying could mean even more trouble, namely youth may not report incidents of cyberbullying when they occur. The disparity in opinions weakens youths' confidence that teachers and parents understand their daily social lives, which they largely live online. These doubts make students reluctant to report their digital activities.

Students "see [adults] as dinosaurs related to technology," says Sheri Bauman an NSF-funded cyberbully researcher at the University of

Arizona. They assume that a teacher or a parent's first reaction to an online incident will be to take their mobile technology or internet access away thereby cutting off their friends and social networks, potentially making them social outcasts.

Recent surveys report that at least 80 percent of adolescents own some type of technology, primarily computers and cell phones that they use to engage in email, social networking, digital chats, online gaming and so on. Bauman says the technology is not an auxiliary to the lives of youths, "It is their lives."

Therefore, making them feel more comfortable reporting cyberbullying by changing the perception that their technology will be taken is an important first step to quicker intervention, she says.

Bauman's book Cyberbullying: What Counselors Need to Know identifies non-punitive strategies for responding to cyberbullying. In it, she argues the most important advice for parents and teachers is to get knowledgeable about technology and its safety strategies.

She writes about a national survey in which 33 percent of parents interviewed, who had youth ages 10-17 living with them, used filtering software on home Internet access. She says installing filtering software is an easy, non-punitive, initial step towards protecting youth at home and at school.

"When I'm queen, I would mandate that schools provide education in technology, not just how to use a tool, but also to use it wisely, respectfully, carefully, and how to protect yourself from cyberbullying," says Bauman.

Other advice from Bauman includes keeping abreast of the most recent social media sites, monitoring social network activities, monitoring who

friends are and taking advantage of control options, which are now available on most cell phones.

More advice for teachers

Meanwhile, Fisk suggests parents and educators address the more common, everyday problems identified by students that can lead to more severe forms of bullying. "Understanding social context is critical in defusing and managing conflicts between students," he says. "It is important to address conflict at the local individual level."

To do that, one approach Fisk recommends is to listen to the advice of adolescents who are closest to the problem. In her first-place essay, student Biggs proposes what she calls a "Bully Beatdown" campaign to raise awareness of bullying issues. Her campaign would allow students to share personal stories and experiences with bullying and train them on anti-bullying tactics.

She also suggests schools create an anonymous email for students who don't want to report an incident of bullying or cyberbullying in-person for fear of becoming bullying victims.

The suggestion mirrors one offered by some experts. "Victims often do not report incidents of cyberbullying because they fear retaliation and worry that they will be ostracized if it is known that they reported it," says Bauman, who also suggests anonymous reporting. While there are no data on the effectiveness of anonymous reporting systems, giving youth an avenue to report via an anonymous website, or telephone number, could help mitigate future online bullying, she says.

Fisk responds to the suggestion with skepticism. "I don't think that having an anonymous tip line is a terrible idea, but it is at least somewhat problematic on a number of levels," he says. He argues that bullying

offers a seductively simplistic frame for adults, who lack true understanding of the complexity of youth social interactions and that it is important to realize that some youth will exploit this knowledge to their advantage.

"A bullying, or worse a cyberbullying, tip line would only make it easier for those responsible for the supervision of youth to see things in terms of 'bullies' and 'victims,'" says Fisk.

Moreover, Fisk suggests that an anonymous tip line doesn't necessarily get to the issue of saving face, which he says is what usually stops youth from reporting harassment. "It is not much of a logical leap to assume that if one side of a dispute between youth did not report the incident that the others most likely did."

The need for data on anonymous tip lines leaves open the question about their effectiveness.

Students should be engaged in policy decisions

In the meantime, Bauman also advises that schools initiate a dialogue with youth that allows them to participate in crafting school rules and policies regarding cyberbullying. She says it is important to find out from students what types of problems they encounter online and to use their experiences as a mechanism for creating curricula on internet safety.

"I think that it is critical that schools have very clear policies on cyberbullying. [Schools should] engage kids, because they will know what will make the difference," Bauman says.

Once a clear policy has been set, Bauman contends, it is important to post policy reminders, use technology to clarify what types of online

social interactions are appropriate and determine the consequences for deviation from those boundaries. She urges [school administrators](link) to engage youth to help create these reminders and gather input about what types of communication they think will have the most positive effect on online behavior.

Based on their research, cyberbullying experts trust suggestions like these will provide some protection for students until they graduate high school. "There is some hope that by the time people get to adulthood, they may be more equipped to deal with bullying behaviors," says Peter Vishton, a program director in NSF's Directorate for Social, Behavioral and Economic Sciences, which funds cyberbullying research for the federal agency.

Even so, he warns instances of cyberbullying could further spread into adulthood and get a lot worse as cyberbullying does not stop at the school house doors. He urges continued vigilance and prevention.

Advice for adults

Demographics of social media users are changing as more and more adults sign on to social media sites like Facebook, making them more susceptible to electronic bullying. Justin Patchin and Sameer Hinduja, co-directors of the Cyberbullying Research Center website, have a few suggestions for adult victims.

They say it is important to keep all evidence of the bullying: messages, posts, comments, etc. and use them to determine exactly who is making the comments if the person is unknown. They also recommend adults contact the service or content provider through which the bullying is occurring to obtain assistance.

"Many websites expressly prohibit harassment and if you report it through their established mechanisms, the content and/or bully should be removed from the site in a timely manner," they write on their online blog.

Internet safety--the responsibility of all

The current state of cyberbullying is in flux because the research is still in its infant stages--researchers and decision-makers have been addressing the topic for fewer than 10 years. International, federal, state, local and non-governmental organizations have engaged numerous researchers and key federal agencies to define cyberbullying in a way that allows them to produce effective policies and legislation. Even though there are disagreements about its definition and the extent to which cyberbullying as a behavior should be criminalized, most stakeholders agree Internet safety is the responsibility of all parties and must be taken seriously to protect people online.

  More information: This is part three of a three part National Science Foundation series: Bullying in the Age of Social Media.

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