

Cyberbullying less frequent than traditional bullying, according to international studies

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Traditional in-person bullying is far more common than cyberbullying among today's youth and should be the primary focus of prevention programs, according to research findings presented at the American Psychological Association's 120th Annual Convention.

"Claims by the media and researchers that [cyberbullying](#) has increased dramatically and is now the big school bullying problem are largely exaggerated," said psychologist Dan Olweus, PhD, of the University of Bergen, Norway. "There is very little scientific support to show that cyberbullying has increased over the past five to six years, and this form of bullying is actually a less frequent phenomenon."

APA presented Olweus at the convention with its 2012 Award for Distinguished Contributions to Research in [Public Policy](#) for his 40 years of research and intervention in the area of bullying among youth.

To demonstrate that cyberbullying is less frequent than "traditional" bullying, Olweus cited several large-scale studies he conducted, including one involving approximately 450,000 U.S. [students](#) in grades three to 12. In the latter, regular surveys were conducted in connection with the introduction of Olweus's bullying prevention program in 1,349 schools from 2007 to 2010. Another study followed 9,000 students in grades four through 10 in 41 schools in Oslo, Norway, from 2006 to 2010.

In the U.S. sample, an average of 18 percent of students said they had

been verbally bullied, while about 5 percent said they had been cyberbullied. About 10 percent said they had bullied others verbally and 3 percent said they had cyberbullied others. Similarly, in the Norwegian sample, 11 percent said they had been verbally bullied, 4 percent reported being the victim of cyberbullying, 4 percent said they had verbally bullied others and 1 percent said they had cyberbullied others.

Other analyses showed that 80 percent to 90 percent of cyberbullied students were also exposed to traditional forms of bullying -- that is, they were bullied verbally, physically or in more indirect, relational ways, such as being the subject of false, mean rumors. Similarly, most cyberbullies also bullied in more traditional ways.

All students filled out the Olweus Bullying Questionnaire, which asks extensive questions about an individual's experience with bullying, both as a victim and a perpetrator. The survey includes questions about the students' experience with cyberbullying, which is defined as taking place via a mobile phone or the Internet.

"These results suggest that the new electronic media have actually created few 'new' victims and bullies," Olweus said. "To be cyberbullied or to cyberbully other students seems to a large extent to be part of a general pattern of bullying where use of electronic media is only one possible form, and, in addition, a form with low prevalence."

This is not to say that cyberbullying cannot be a problem in schools and outside of school, Olweus noted. Cyberbullied children, like targets of more traditional bullying, often suffer from depression, poor self-esteem, anxiety and even suicidal thoughts, he said.

"However, it is difficult to know to what extent these problems actually are a consequence of cyberbullying itself. As we've found, this is because the great majority of cyberbullied children and youth are also

bullied in traditional ways, and it is well documented that victims of traditional bullying suffer from the bad treatment they receive," he said. "Nonetheless, there are some forms of cyberbullying -- such as having painful or embarrassing pictures or videos posted -- which almost certainly have negative effects. It is therefore important also to take cyberbullying seriously both in research and prevention."

Olweus recommends that schools and communities invest time and technical efforts in anonymously disclosing identified cases of cyberbullying – and then communicating clearly and openly the results to the students. This strategy can substantially increase the perceived risk of disclosure and is likely to reduce further the already low prevalence of cyberbullying, he said.

"Given that traditional bullying is much more prevalent than cyberbullying, it is natural to recommend schools to direct most of their efforts to counteracting traditional bullying. I don't want to trivialize or downplay cyberbullying but I definitely think it is necessary and beneficial to place cyberbullying in proper context and to have a more realistic picture of its prevalence and nature," he said.

More information: Presentation: "School Bullying: Development and Current Status," Dan Olweus, PhD, Session 3279, Saturday, Aug. 4, 2 p.m., Room W304H, Orange County Convention Center

Provided by American Psychological Association

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