



BACKGROUND

What is cyberbullying and how does it differ from traditional bullying?

Cyberbullying has been defined as “willful and repeated harm inflicted through the use of computers, cell phones, and other electronic devices” (Hinduja & Patchin, 2015; Patchin, 2014). The intent of cyberbullying incidents is to threaten, harass, embarrass, or socially exclude another using online technology (Williams & Guerra, 2007). As with traditional bullying, there is usually a power imbalance between the cyberbully and the cybervictim (Patchin & Hinduja, 2015).

Although there are similarities between online and off line bullying, there are significant differences in the context in which the bullying occurs. Anonymity, greater social dissemination, lack of supervision present on electronic media, and greater accessibility to the target are characteristics that set cyberbullying apart from off line bullying (Patchin & Hinduja, 2006; Tokunaga, 2010). These differences have implications in the development of appropriate cyberbullying interventions.

Cyberbullying can take place through various electronic media (Knighton et al., 2012), including: phone calls; e-mails; texting (which may include picture and/or video messages); instant messaging (e.g., Windows Live Messenger); social networking platforms (e.g., Facebook); microblogging sites (e.g., Twitter); rating sites (e.g., Hot or Not); online gaming sites and massive multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPG); video broadcasting websites (e.g., YouTube); chat rooms; website forums / bulletin boards / “bash boards”; and dedicated websites.

Cyberbullying can include the following behaviours which may occur at various levels of severity:

- Teasing / belittling / name-calling
- Exclusion: Deliberately leaving certain individuals out of online social exchanges (e.g., instant messaging or email conversations)
- Rumour-spreading
- “Flaming” or “bashing”: Verbally attacking an individual with belligerent or denigrating language (e.g., insults, bigotry, or other hostile expressions);
- Online harassment: Repeatedly sending offensive messages to an individual;
- Cyberstalking: Online harassment that includes intimidation and/or threats of harm;
- “Cyber-smearing”: Creating, posting and/or distributing sensitive, private and/or embarrassing information or images (including doctored images);
- Impersonating someone or creating a false identity to deceive another individual (“catfishing”);
- Rating aspects of an individual (e.g., appearance, character) on a rating site; and
- Creating derogatory websites that mock, torment, and harass the intended victim.

The most common type of cyberbullying behaviour reported by Canadian students is name calling (Mishna et al., 2010; Steeves, 2014; Wade & Beran, 2011). Other, much less common, forms of mean or cruel behaviour includes harassing someone during an online game, spreading rumours, posting embarrassing photos or videos of someone, making fun of someone's race/religion/ethnicity, making fun of someone's sexual orientation, and sexually harassing someone (Mishna et al., 2010; Steeves, 2014; Wade & Beran, 2011).

A 2014 youth survey indicated that the majority (65%) of cyberbullying incidents were chronic, lasting longer than a year (PREVNet, 2014). In this same survey, 70% of youth reported that when they see abusive content online, they report it. However, when asked why they might not report, they gave the following reasons: There is no point, reporting would not help (43%); I do not want the person to find out (36%); I am afraid of the negative consequences (29%); It takes too much time (27%); Someone else will report this content (15%); and I do not know how to report (13%).

Prevalence of Cyberbullying

In their recent and comprehensive synthesis of existing cyberbullying literature (73 articles published in peer-reviewed academic journals), Patchin and Hinduja (2013) found that victimization rates ranged from 2.3% to 72%, with the average being 21%. Among the studies that included offending behaviours, 1.2% to 44% of teens reported cyberbullying others, an average of 15%. Overall, approximately one out of every five teenagers has been the target of cyberbullying, and one out of every six has been a cyberbully at some point in their lifetimes.

A recent survey found that 23% of Canadian students from grades 4-11 have said or done something mean or cruel to someone online, while 37% reported that someone has said or done mean or cruel things to them online that made them feel badly (Steeves, 2014).

The substantial variation in prevalence rates can be attributed to a number of factors, including the lack of an accepted definition of cyberbullying, the range of conceptual and operational definitions, methodological differences and the lack of reliable and valid measures of cyberbullying.

Why worry about cyberbullying?

According to the survey *Protecting Canadian Families Online*, conducted by Leger on behalf of Primus, parents are more concerned about cyberbullying (48%) than they are about teen pregnancy (44%), drug use (40%) or alcohol use (38%) (Primus, 2015).

Some researchers (e.g., Kiriakidis & Kavoura, 2010) have suggested that due to the unique features of the electronic environment (i.e., anonymity, lack of emotional cues, rapidity, increased accessibility, and a large audience), the consequences of electronic victimization might be more serious than those for traditional victimization.

Victims of cyberbullying have reported a multitude of emotional, social, and academic problems, including: poor physical health outcomes, self-denigration, school failure, absenteeism, depression, anxiety, discrimination, school violence, eating disorders, chronic stress, low self-esteem, isolation, poor relationships, aggression, and even self-harm or suicide (Foody et al., 2015; Ryan & Curwen, 2013). Tokunaga (2010) identified the following consequences of electronic victimization: decreased academic performance, increased truancy, perceptions of school being unsafe, poor concentration, and increased incidence of weapons-carrying. Ybarra and Mitchell (2007) found that those who engage in electronic bullying tend to have higher rates of rule-breaking and delinquent behaviours. Online harassment, especially harassment occurring monthly or more frequently, appears to be related to increased reports of behaviour problems and weapon carrying at school (Ybarra, Diener-West, & Leaf, 2007). Maladaptive

behaviors that appear to be related to both cyberbullying and cybervictimization include: recent school problems, assaultive behaviors, or substance use (Hinduja & Patchin, 2008).

Links between cyberbullying, bullying and delinquency

In comparing cyberbullies to those who had no involvement in electronic harassment, “online aggressors” are significantly more likely to exhibit low school commitment, and to engage in alcohol and cigarette use, and other types of problematic/delinquent behaviour, such as damaging property, police contacts, stealing and physical assaults (Ybarra et al., 2007). Participation in school violence and usage of illicit substances predict both victimization and perpetration of cyberbullying (Pelfrey & Weber, 2013). Moreover, children who bully are more likely to engage in violent behaviour later on in life, commit adult offences, and have convictions by the time they are in their 20s (e.g., Sourander et al., 2007; Ttofi et al., 2011).

What to do about cyberbullying?

There are very few interventions specifically targeting cyberbullying behaviours, and even fewer rigorous evaluations of these interventions (Cioppa, O’Neil, & Craig, 2015; Nocentini, Zambuto, & Menesini, 2015). Adolescents often refuse to seek help from an adult in fear that their technology will be taken away (Tokunaga, 2010). Research results suggest that more work needs to be done around making reporting safer and more convenient, as well as ensuring that appropriate actions are taken after a report is received. Engaging both adults and youth in this process is essential. Innovative, youth friendly solutions are needed. For example, infographics¹, online games, apps², or software³ may be an effective way of educating youth about cyberbullying and changing patterns of interaction. However, none of these innovative initiatives have been rigorously tested for effectiveness.

Defending behaviour (i.e., attempting to stop bullying and provide comfort and support to victimized peers) has been found to significantly reduce bullying in schools and have a protective effect on victimized peers (Sainio et al., 2010). Defenders are most likely to be female or empathetic males (Gini et al., 2007). The effects of defending behaviour on bullying and on the adjustment of victimized students has informed a number of bullying prevention and intervention programs (e.g., KiVa: Kärnä et al., 2011; Befriending Interventions: Menesini et al., 2003), and Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATH): Domitrovich, Cortes, & Greenberg, 2007). However, recent research suggests that defenders may experience problems due to defending (Sandre & Craig, 2015). In a recent fMRI study, Sandre and Craig (2015) found that, compared to controls, defenders display greater neural responsivity in the posterior insular cortex, an area of the brain associated with emotional arousal and social pain when witnessing the victimization of peers. More research is needed regarding the risks and benefits of defending behaviours towards cyberbullying.

Previous research on protective factors for bullying perpetration and victimization in general may apply to cyberbullying. For example, a positive school climate and feeling connected to school have both been found to be protective factors against bullying (Resnick et al., 1997; Williams & Guerra, 2007). Therefore, the same may be the case for cyberbullying.

¹ e.g., <http://mashable.com/2012/07/08/cyberbullying-infographic/>

² e.g., Stopit mobile app: <http://stopitcyberbully.com/http://stopitcyberbully.com/news/3714-several-schools-adopt-stopit-mobile-app-reduce-cyberbullying/>

Know Bullying app: <http://www.stopbullying.gov/videos/2014/09/knowbullying-app-by-samhsa.html>

³ e.g., ReThink: <http://rethinkwords.org/#download>

Fanti and colleagues (2012) found that parental/family support helped to protect youth from engaging in cyberbullying behaviours, and from being victimized online. This association was especially important for children from single-parent families who, compared to children from intact families, were more likely to be targets of cyberbullying by their peers. Social support from peers is also an important protective factor (Sainio et al, 2010).

Advice for Parents: L-O-V-E

Research indicates that youth who perceive more support from their family, encounter fewer incidents of cyberbullying and cybervictimization (Fanti et al, 2012). The precise nature of this relationship is unclear; however, the research highlights the important role that parents play in preventing and reducing cybervictimization. A parent's love and support can go a long way to building resiliency and self-confidence in a child so that the child feels safe enough to report any cyberbullying and take actions to stop it. Keeping in mind the importance of parents acting out of love for their child, the following advice is offered:

- **Listen to your child.** Allow him/her to talk about what is going on without being judged, criticized or made to feel uncomfortable. By remaining calm and simply listening without over-reacting, the lines of communication between you and your child are more likely to remain open. Reassure your child that you will not take away their phone or Internet, but if they encounter anything online that makes them feel uncomfortable, or if they receive any messages or view content that is harassing or upsetting that it is important to talk to you about it.
- **Offer support and advocacy.** Discuss potential actions with your child and make sure that he/she is comfortable with the action, before you proceed. One reason children stop talking to their parents about their problems is their fear that their parents will over-react and do something that will embarrass them. Inform yourself of the legal consequences of cyberbullying⁴. Work with your child to keep a record of emails, chat room history, web postings or phone messages that you can potentially take to your Internet Service Provider or the police. If the cyberbullying involves someone at your child's school, you and your child might choose to report the incidents of cyber bullying to your child's teacher and/or principal.
- **Validate your child's feelings.** Explain that it is normal to feel sad, angry, fearful, frustrated, and lonely. Talking about their feelings will help. Value your child's opinions on what might help and what might make things worse.
- **Explore resources together.** For example, PREVNet⁵ and MediaSmarts⁶ have a number of helpful resources on cyberbullying. Looking at these resources together can help you and your child to have a more informed discussion on the topic and come up with a suitable plan.

The main thing for a parent to keep in mind is that their love and support are essential to preventing and reducing cybervictimization.

Public Safety Canada's role

You can learn more about the harmful effects of cyberbullying and how you can help stop it by checking out Public Safety Canada's anti-cyberbullying national awareness campaign at

⁴ See: <http://mediasmarts.ca/background/cyberbullying-law-fact-sheet>

⁵ <http://www.prevnet.ca/bullying/cyber-bullying>

⁶ <http://mediasmarts.ca/digital-media-literacy/digital-issues/cyberbullying>

Canada.ca/StopHatingOnline. The website contains information, advice and tools needed to identify, prevent and reduce cyberbullying. You can also watch the *Stop Hating Online* YouTube interactive experience [#WordsHurt](#), and the television ads [“Consequences”](#), and [“Pass It On”](#).

Public Safety Canada is responsible for implementing the [National Crime Prevention Strategy \(NCPS\)](#). Our work provides national leadership on effective and cost-effective ways to prevent and reduce crime by intervening on the risk factors before crime happens. Our approach is to promote the implementation of effective crime prevention practices. We will work closely with partners and stakeholders to address the gaps in knowledge about what works for cyberbullying prevention and reduction. NCPS will work towards identifying best practices through literature reviews, knowledge products, and potential evaluations of innovative cyberbullying prevention or intervention initiatives. This work will build the knowledge base regarding evidence-based cyberbullying prevention and intervention practices.

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Research Division, Public Safety Canada
340 Laurier Avenue West
Ottawa, Ontario
K1A 0P8
PS.CSCCBResearch-RechercheSSCRC.SP@canada.ca

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