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The Impact of Cyber Bullying: A New Type of Relational Aggression

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Cyber Bullying: Definition and Characteristics

Cyber bullying is defined as a means of indirect aggression in which peers use electronics to taunt, insult, threaten, harass, and/or intimidate a peer (Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2007). It is classified as relational or indirect aggression because it is a deliberate attempt to inflict direct or indirect harm on peers through manipulation and damaging peer relationships (Berger, 2007). It encompasses non-physical attacks such as: teasing, telling lies, making fun of another, making rude or mean comments, spreading of rumors, or making threatening or aggressive comments towards another person. This new type of relational aggression of repeat humiliating gossip (Berger, 2007) is done using the Internet (web pages, instant messaging), text messages, picture messages, and any other form of technology in a negative way to indirectly or directly attack another person. Some examples are defaming web sites and online “slam books” (Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2007).

Cyber bullying is unique to other more traditional forms of bullying because of the perpetrator’s anonymity and ability to harass their victim 24 hours a day. Anonymity inherited in many electronic communications modes not only fosters playful disinhibition but reduces social accountability, making it easier for users to engage in hostile, aggressive acts (Li, 2007). This new technology [also] allows victims to be attacked at anytime, and in any place (David-Ferdon & Hertz, 2007). The invincibility and anonymity of cyber bullies makes it difficult to manage within the school system and opens the door for more youth to take part in this type of behavior.

Statistics on Cyber Bullying

In a national study of 15,686 students Grades 6-10, 29.9% reported moderate to frequent involvement in bullying (Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2007). According to Wolak and colleagues, from 2000 to 2005 there was a 50% increase in the percentage of youth who were victims of online harassment (David-Ferdon & Hertz, 2007). The number of victims and bullies are steadily rising and is positively correlated with the increase of technology usage by adolescents and technological improvements. Over 80% of adolescents own at

least one form of new media technology (e.g., cell phone, personal data assistant, computer for Internet access), and they are using this technology with increasing frequency to text and instant message, e-mail, blog, and access social networking Web sites (David-Ferdon & Hertz, 2007).

New technological advances have also contributed to the cyber bullying. The availability of picture cell phones (also known as camera phones) have even resulted in compromising photos of students in school locker rooms or restrooms spread via email around the school or posted on web sites (Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2007). These cell phones are allowing adolescents to take pictures of their peers at anytime and anyplace and e-mail, text, or post them on public web sites. This happens to youth all over the country and in other countries on a daily basis.

One such story is of an overweight Japanese adolescent boy whose picture was taken using a cell phone in the locker room while he was changing clothes. These pictures were distributed to his peers at school (Li, 2007). Another example is a student taking a picture of his classmate in the shower and distributing it around the school (Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2007). These experiences are damaging to both parties: the bully and the victim and will have a lasting impact without positive and effective interventions.

Prevalence of Cyber Bullying

Although, cyber bullying occurs at both home and on school grounds, many times the consequences are prevalent during school hours. There is a growing understanding that these external events negatively affect the functioning of students at home and the school environment (David-Ferdon & Hertz, 2007). Research has demonstrated that there are specific effects of cyber bullying for both the victims and bullies, as well as individually. Victims and perpetrators of cyber bullying have difficulty in school with their academic performance, social competency, and life at home (David-Ferdon & Hertz, 2007). Bullies and victims do not perform as well in school because of lower self-esteem, personal insecurities, and a heightened sense of paranoia that prevents them from concentration in the classroom.

The victim of cyber bullying has also been related to the development of general psychological distress and poor psychosocial adjustment (Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2007). In a study involving victims of cyber-bullying, 31% of students victimized reported being very or extremely upset, 19% were very or extremely afraid, and 18% were very or extremely embarrassed by online harassment (Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2007). It has also been found that repeated acts of cyber bullying has been shown to threaten healthy development of self-esteem in youths and contribute to school failure and dropout (Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2007) and increase psychological symptoms such as depression and anxiety (Raskauskas & Lynch, 2007). Extreme cases of cyber bullying have led to adolescent suicide (Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2007).

On the other hand, being a bully has also been associated with poor psychosocial adjustment, as well as delinquency in late adolescence and early adulthood (Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2007). Adolescent bullies when they mature are not as socially and emotionally developed compared to their peers. They are accustomed to demeaning others for their own gratification and need help from professionals to coach them into changing negative

interactions into more positive ones. These same youth are at risk of drinking alcohol and getting into fights, compared to adolescent victims or observers of cyber bullying (Berger, 2007).

Implications for School Counselors

Professional school counselors need to be cognizant of the issue of cyber bullying and its dynamics within the school system. As professionals, school counselors are to embody the motto of the Michigan Comprehensive Guidance and Counseling Program (MCGCP) of improving the academic, personal/social, and career development of each student. Research has shown that cyber bullying can affect the three above mentioned competency areas of students, whether they are a victim, observer, or a bully.

School counselors should acknowledge that cyber bullying is a problem in their schools and educate teachers and school administrators about the problem. Some research has shown that teachers are unaware of the seriousness of peer victimization at their school and its consequential effects and tend to underestimate the number of students being bullied (Bradshaw, Sawyer, & O'Brennan, 2007). School counselors should be an "agent of change" by proactively opening a dialogue about this problem. This education can be in the form of in-service training, disseminating information regarding cyber bullying to the school staff, and [or] educating school personnel about the potentially deleterious effects of peer victimization (Bradshaw, Sawyer, & O'Brennan, 2007). The school counselor should work as a team with his/her colleagues and be a "resource guide" in a non- confrontational and non- authoritative way.

Once teachers and administrators are aware of what cyber bullying is, and its consequences, the school counselor can determine the level of engagement and interest from teachers and school staff before implementing a bullying prevention program to ensure program effectiveness (Bradshaw, Sawyer, & O'Brennan, 2007).

It is necessary for all professionals in the school to be on one accord and have a united front against the unwanted behavior. The integration of bully prevention programs at schools can show solidarity on the part of administration and staff and that cyber bullying is against school policy. Also, it shows that perpetrators of cyber bullying will be held accountable for their actions. These programs can be incorporated into the program component of guidance curriculum, responsive services, and coordination of systems support in the MCGCP model. Whole school bullying prevention approaches are often recommended, as they are intended to increase collaboration among school psychologists, teachers, and students (Bradshaw, Sawyer, & O'Brennan, 2007). One such bully prevention program is the Olweus Bullying Prevention program.

A school counselor can also assist by advocating for anti-harassment policies in their school districts, as others have done across the country. Districts in Florida, South Carolina, Utah, and Oregon are creating new policies to address this new form of relational aggression (David-Ferdon & Hertz, 2007). New York City currently enforces an existing law banning communication devices in school buildings, whereas the state of Washington passed legislation requiring the inclusion of cyber bullying in school district harassment prevention policies (David-Ferdon & Hertz, 2007).

Although cyber bullying has many consequences at schools, school counselors should educate, collaborate with and reach out to parents and families for additional support. School counselors can send home information regarding what cyber bullying is and potential signs that their child may be involved as a bully or a victim. School counselors can also hold informal meeting to have open discussions with parents. In addition, school counselors can educate parents about effective strategies for talking to their children about bullying and communicating concerns to administrators, teachers and other parents (Bradshaw, Sawyer, & O'Brennan, 2007).

For those students and their families who have been personally affected by cyber bullying, the school counselor can set up group sessions. These group sessions can meet on a regular basis and would address specific needs of the participants. For example, there can be separate groups for victims, bullies, and parents of both victims and bullies. The group sessions can help parents and students voice concerns and learn positive coping skills at home and within the school environment.

Lastly, school counselors should stay current on the issue of cyber bullying by maintaining a current membership and participation with organizations such as the American Counseling Association (ACA), the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) and the Association of Michigan School Counselors (AMSC). These organizations have a plethora of information for members on various topics, including cyber bullying and talking points on how to deal with this pervasive issue with parents, students, teachers and administrators. The organizations will also allow school counselors to consult with other professionals through conferences and meetings to learn from one another.

These above implications of a guidance curriculum on cyber bullying, group sessions, and individual and group consultation are activities endorsed by the MCGCP. These strategies may not alleviate cyber bullying but would help teachers, administrators, students, and parents to better understand what it is and its damaging effects. School counselors are normally the first support staff members who see students during crisis or emergency situations. For this reason, these techniques may help them work more effectively when cyber bullying is the cause of chaos in his/her school.

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