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Brief report

Students' Perspectives on Cyber Bullying

Patricia W. Agatston, Ph.D.[a],*, Robin Kowalski, Ph.D.[b], and Susan Limber, Ph.D.[c]

[a]*Cobb County School District, Prevention/Intervention Center, Marietta, Georgia*
[b]*Department of Psychology, Clemson University, Clemson, South Carolina*
[c]*Institute on Family and Neighbor Life, Clemson University, Clemson, South Carolina*

Abstract

The aim of this study was to gain a better understanding of the impact of cyber bullying on students and the possible need for prevention messages targeting students, educators, and parents. A total of 148 middle and high school students were interviewed during focus groups held at two middle and two high schools in a public school district. The focus groups were approximately 45 minutes in length. Students were divided by gender and asked a series of scripted questions by a same-gender student assistance counselor. We found that students' comments during the focus groups suggest that students—particularly females—view cyber bullying as a problem, but one rarely discussed at school, and that students do not see the school district personnel as helpful resources when dealing with cyber bullying. Students are currently experiencing the majority of cyber bullying instances outside of the school day; however there is some impact at school. Students were able to suggest some basic strategies for dealing with cyber bullying, but were less likely to be aware of strategies to request the removal of objectionable websites, as well as how to respond as a helpful bystander when witnessing cruel online behavior. We conclude that school districts should address cyber bullying through a combination of policies and information that are shared with students and parents. Schools should include cyber bullying as part of their bullying prevention strategies and include classroom lessons that address reporting and bystander behavior. © 2007 Society for Adolescent Medicine. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Cyber bullying; Internet; Prevention; Students

Young people are very sophisticated users of technology and often lead the way in adapting new technologies to everyday use. Their technological savvy, combined with the ability to be online without much adult supervision, can lead to behaviors that are high risk. Such high risk behaviors include exposure to pornography, drugs, violence, and cyber bullying (i.e., using the Internet to harass and bully others). In a study involving 3767 students in grades 6–8, Kowalski and Limber found that although 78% of the students surveyed had no experience with cyber bullying, 11% were victims of cyber bullying, 7% were bully/victims, and 4% were bullies [1].

In addition to rates of cyber bullying reported by youth, it is helpful to gain an understanding of how concerned youth are about cyber bullying and whether or not the

prevention of cyber bullying is being addressed in the school and community setting. This article will discuss findings from focus groups conducted in the Cobb County School District of Marietta, Georgia. Despite frequent off-campus origination, some cyber bullying incidents come to the attention of school district personnel because they are disruptive to the school day. The rationale for the focus groups was to gain a better understanding of the impact of cyber bullying on students and the possible need for prevention messages targeting students, educators, and parents. In addition students' responses would provide input for policy development governing students' use of the Internet and other mobile devices on campus.

Methods

Approximately 150 students participated in focus groups at two middle schools and two high schools. Although income demographic level information was not collected for

*Address correspondence to: Patricia W. Agatston, Ph.D., Cobb County School District, Prevention/Intervention Center, 514 Glover Street, Marietta, GA 30080.

E-mail address: pagatston@bellsouth.net

individual students, middle and high schools were selected in part based on diverse socioeconomic (SES) data. One high school had a rate of 13% of students eligible for free or reduced-cost lunches, and the other had a rate of 42%. The two middle schools had free/reduced-cost lunch rates of 25% and 48% respectively. Student participants' ages ranged from 12–17 years. The students were divided by gender during the focus groups. Cyber bullying was defined for the students as "using the Internet or other digital technologies such as cellular phones and personal digital assistants to be intentionally mean or to harass others."

Results

Students in the groups indicated that they were very familiar with technology. The majority of them own cellular phones and have Internet access at home. A majority of the female students indicated that cyber bullying was a problem at their schools, although male students were somewhat less likely to agree that this was a problem. Students indicated that the majority of the incidents occurred outside of the school day, with the exception of cyber bullying via text messaging. Students indicated that they were unlikely to report cyber bullying to the adults at school, as it frequently occurs via cellular phone use, and it is against the school policy to have cellular phones on during school hours. When students were asked if they placed text messages or used their cellular phone during the school day, the majority of the students interviewed indicated that they did despite the policy. Students also indicated that they did not think the adults at school could help them if they were experiencing cyber bullying. Students were more likely to report cyber bullying to parents than adults at school, particularly if the bullying was threatening in nature. However students also indicated that they were reluctant to report cyber bullying to parents because they feared the loss of online privileges.

When asked whether they could circumvent the school filters to access MySpace or other social networking sites, e-mail, or instant messaging programs, students were able to describe ways to effectively circumvent the school district filters. This knowledge was more apparent at the high school level, but some middle school students were aware of ways to circumvent filters. The students indicated that because no one else was on MySpace or instant messaging at the same time, there was not much incentive to go to these sites during the school day.

Students were able to suggest strategies for dealing with cyber bullying, such as to block the sender or ignore the message rather than respond in a manner that would encourage retaliation. Students were less likely to be aware of strategies to request the removal of objectionable websites, as well as how to respond as helpful bystanders when witnessing cruel online behavior.

Discussion

The focus group and interviews conducted suggest that students—particularly female students—view cyber bullying as a problem but one rarely discussed at school, and the students do not see the school district personnel as helpful resources for dealing with cyber bullying. Students are currently experiencing the majority of cyber bullying instances outside of the school day, with the possible exception of text messaging via cellular phone. It is possible that with greater ease of access to MySpace and to the Internet in general with increasingly sophisticated cellular phones, we may see an increase in cyber bullying during the school day through the use of such phones. It is recommended that school districts that allow cellular phones on campus prepare for this potential by ensuring that cellular phone policies are enforced with consistent consequences for students who use their phones during the school day. It is also recommended that school districts have parents and students read and sign the school districts' policies regarding acceptable use of technology, and accompany these policies with literature for parents on cyber bullying. Finally, schools are encouraged to adopt bullying prevention programs that include classroom lessons on cyber bullying to ensure that students understand that targeting classmates through negative messages or images online or through cellular phones is a form of bullying [2]. Classroom lessons should include steps that bystanders can take to report and respond to cyber bullying, whether it occurs on campus or in the community.

Acknowledgment

References

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