

# Cyber Bullying: What Teachers, Social Workers, and Administrators Should Know

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## Abstract

*Bullies continue to torment children and youth in schools, parks, and even the supposed safety of private homes. Today's tech-savvy generation, however, has a new location for bullying: cyberspace. Vicious rumors (often with photos) are spread via e-mail, posted on Web sites, recorded in online journals, and sent as text messages. This article describes how cyber bullying affects aggressors, targets, and bystanders. Strategies to address cyber bullying are presented in the context of conventional bullying, within an ecological framework. Recommendations for school personnel and for parents are included. State, federal, and online resources are provided. The article concludes with a brief application of leadership models to address this new form of an age-old dilemma.*

## Introduction

Bullying by school-age children is evolving from face-to-face taunting into remote electronic taunting. Cyber bullying via e-mail, text messages, and Web sites is affecting children across the world in the time it takes to hit "send" (Paulson, 2003). In one community, nine-year-olds were caught distributing derogatory messages and rumors about their peers online. In another case, sixth-graders set up an online poll to facilitate student voting for the top five "hated kids" (Lisante, 2005). In yet another instance of callous student communication, cell-phone pictures of an overweight boy changing clothes in a school locker room were sent to his peers.

Bullying has been found to begin as early as preschool, and appears to peak in sixth through eighth grades (Feldman, 2004). Thirty percent of sixth- through tenth-graders in public and private schools throughout the

United States reported being bullies (13%), victims (11%), or both bullies and victims (6%) (Nansel, Overpeck, Pilla, Ruan, Simons-Morton, & Scheidt, 2001).

Research has demonstrated that cyber bullying is devastating for both aggressors and victims, but teachers and parents are only just beginning to understand its dangers. British researchers found that although nearly 75% of teachers worried that students might become victims of cell-phone text-message bullying, only 56% of the students' parents showed concern that their children might be susceptible to this form of cyber bullying (Marshall, 2005). The Center for Safe and Responsible Internet Use (2005) reported that cyber bullying affects students around the world. Australian and American children stay home from school because they feel threatened, and Scandinavian children are fearful of using their school locker rooms. Cyber bullying is particularly dangerous for students who are susceptible to depression and anxiety, and tragically caused the murder of a student in Japan (Marshall, 2005).

Although cyber bullying has been described as a new means of bullying, it has not replaced other, more familiar forms of bullying. Traditional taunting, insulting, teasing, threatening, humiliating, and harassing reportedly are endured by approximately 30% to 70% of kindergarten through eighth-grade children (Nansel et al., 2001; Greenya, 2005; Geffner, Loring, & Young, 2001).

Bullied children are lonely, absent from school, anxious around peers, depressed, and easily distracted, and often have physical symptoms (especially stomach aches) and difficulty concentrating in school (Lajoie, McLellan, & Seddon, 2001; Nansel et al., 2001).

In some situations, children who are bullied become aggressors, with tragic consequences that include school and family shootings and suicides (Lajoie, McLellan, & Seddon, 2001). A 14-year-old honor student was convicted as an adult and sentenced to life in prison without parole after having shot and killed two classmates and a teacher in 1996 at his school in Moses Lake, Washington. He said that other students called him "faggot" and bullied him. Three years later, Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris killed 12 students, a teacher, and themselves at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado. According to parent testimony gathered by investigators, bullying had been "rampant" at Columbine (Greenya, 2005).

Tragedy struck yet again April 16, 2007 on the Virginia Tech campus in Blacksburg, Virginia. Thirty-two students and teachers died along with the 23 year-old shooter, Seung-Hui Cho, a Virginia Tech student. Cho appeared to fit a profile of school shooters developed by Robin Kowalski, a psychologist at Clemson University (Westcott, 2007). In addition to pre-occupations with death and underlying psychological problems, Kowalski points out that many school shooters experience severe teasing and bullying. In a video Cho created shortly before the shootings, he stated, "You have vandalized my heart, raped my soul, and tortured my conscience. You thought it was one more pathetic life you were extinguishing."

This article explores the current phenomenon of cyber bullying in the context of traditional forms of bullying behavior. Characteristics of online aggressors and targets are summarized. Theoretical frameworks for addressing the underlying causes of bullying are suggested. Examples of effective strategies are provided, along with local and national resources that address both cyber bullying and traditional forms of bullying. As children and youth embrace the Internet, educators and parents must expand their guidance to recognize and confront early signs of cyber bullying before children's well being and learning are adversely affected.

## Characteristics of Cyber Bullying Aggressors and Targets

Online bullying presents particularly strong challenges to schools, families, and communities. The Youth Internet Safety Survey project (commissioned by the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children and reported by Ybarra and Mitchell, 2004) conducted phone interviews with 1,500 regular Internet users between the ages of 10 and 17. One parent or guardian also participated, providing an important ring of information from an ecological perspective (described in the following section). Of the 19% of children who reported bullying behaviors, most (12%) reported being online aggressors, 4% reported being targets only, and 3% stated that they were both aggressors and targets.

Infrequent parental monitoring was reported by 54% of the group of self-identified bullies, and 46% indicated poor emotional bonds with their parents. In contrast, only 15% of victims reported being involved in problem behaviors, but 13% stated that they had a low commitment to school. Twenty-nine percent of victims reported infrequent parental monitoring, while 27% of online targets reported poor emotional bonds with their parents.

With the exception of the Youth Internet Safety Survey, empirical research on cyber bullying aggressors, targets, and onlookers is rare. Therefore, this review also includes information derived from the popular press, which is often anecdotal in nature.

### The Rise of Cyber Bullying

Why has cyber bullying become prevalent? Lisante (2005) suggests two main reasons: (1) the comfort level children and youth have in using the Internet, and (2) the anonymity of the Internet. Students enjoy e-mailing, text messaging, using instant messages, joining chat rooms, and setting up Web sites. Children and youth also realize that usually there is little monitoring of what they do or communicate in cyberspace.

Parry Aftab, an Internet privacy and security lawyer and executive director of WiredSafety.org, observed that cyber bullying is more prevalent in affluent suburbs, where students have more access to the Internet and are therefore more technologically advanced. According to Aftab, affluence also complicates the relationships between cyber bully aggressors and targets, because their parents are knowledgeable about and quick to employ legal remedies. Aftab explained that when issues arise, “parents of a bully can be sued for defamation, privacy invasion, and emotional distress” (Schoolyard E-Bullies, 2005).

Another characteristic of online bullies appears to be an attraction to power. Shy students, who might not have the social skills necessary to engage in conventional face-to-face bullying, can become aggressive by utilizing the Internet. Once in charge, cyber bullies hang on to their victims. Glenn Stutzky, a school safety violence specialist serving on the faculty of Michigan State University’s School of Social Work, emphasized the relentless nature of cyber bullying: “Cyber bullies have their victims on an electronic tether. The kids on the receiving end can’t get out of range” (Wendland, 2003).

Conventional bullies seek to satisfy their higher-than-usual need to dominate and feel in control. They show little or no remorse about hurting other children (Nansel et al., 2001, Swearer & Doll, 2001; Espelage & Swearer, 2004). According to school administrators Leon Beckerman and John Nocero (2003), cyber bullies demonstrate these same characteristics. They become bolder and say things online that normally might not have been expressed. When these cyber bullies become embroiled in online chats, and as the conversations become more heated, they become bolder in their bullying. Meanwhile, on the other end of the screen, the victims feel a loss of power and control. The anonymous conflicts that begin at home are frequently played out during school time and result in loss of instructional time.

Cyber bullies are also more likely to engage in problem behaviors. Ybarra and Mitchell (2004) found that 35% of the bullies surveyed reported engaging in drinking and smoking. Interestingly, bullies often make friends more easily than their peers, and may appear to be popular. However, of youth who were both victims and bullies, 28% reported social isolation, as well as difficulty with academics and a low commitment to school.

In 2005, *Time* magazine reported that cyber bullying appeared to have turned the traditional gender tables: Girls, rather than boys, rule on the Internet (Chu, 2005). Researchers at Clemson University found that almost one-third of eighth-grade girls stated that they had been bullied online in the preceding two months, whereas only 10% of boys claimed to have been bullied online. As for the aggressors, 17% of girls stated that they had bullied others online, while 10% of boys stated that they had bullied others online. In a study of students in grades six through eight, girls were found to be twice as likely as boys to be either cyber bullies or victims (Kowalski et al., 2005). These reports appear to validate a finding of conventional bullying: namely, that girls tend toward verbal aggression, referred to as the “mean girl” phenomenon, whereas boys tend toward physical aggression (Espelage & Swearer, 2004).

A March 2005 report in *USA Today* named four types of cyber bullies (Swartz, 2005). “Vengeful angels” come to someone’s defense but then spread rumors about them. “Mean girls” simply gang up on others for fun. The “power hungry” bullies seek power over weaker peers. Finally, the “inadvertent” bullies do not realize that they have hurt someone’s feelings with their “fun” text messages and e-mails.

## An Ecological Framework for Understanding Cyber Bullying

Research has shown that cyber bullying usually begins on home computers and on private cell phones (Kowalski et al.,

2005). Students bring their resulting fear, embarrassment, anger, and aggression to school. Thus, students, families, schools, and the surrounding communities are affected. All of these entities must be considered and included when working to address the problems of bullies, victims, and bystanders.

Bronfenbrenner's theory of ecological systems (1977, 1979) provides a means for conceptualizing the impact of cyber bullying on students, families, schools, and communities. The aggressor or target might be viewed as being within his or her own circle, in the center of other concentric circles representing families, schools, and the surrounding community. The model demonstrates how the individual (e.g., aggressor or target) shapes, and is shaped by, social entities such as school or the community at large. Each concentric ring (student, family, school, and community, among others) must be called upon to identify and implement effective anti-bullying interventions—or suffer the consequences.

Research on conventional bullying has addressed some of the issues outlined in Bronfenbrenner's theoretical framework, including family dynamics, school climate, and neighborhood factors. In addition, reviews of bullying research (Swearer & Doll, 2001; Espelage & Swearer, 2004) have applied an ecological structure and have concluded that schools must recognize six key factors:

1. Bullying is a constellation of behavioral interactions.
2. Internalized disorders contribute to bullying and are too often overlooked.
3. Families must be active partners in anti-bullying programs.
4. Anti-bullying programs must interrupt and neutralize the current peer support for bullying behavior.

5. Anti-bullying interventions must alter adult (teacher, bus driver, administrator) responses.
6. Changes must occur within the upper reaches of school administration if they are to have lasting effects.

These six findings provide a starting point for identifying effective anti-bullying strategies.

## Effective Strategies to Address Cyber Bullying

Schools have seen decreases in bullying through the implementation of effective anti-bullying programs (Greenya, 2005). Several key components have been noted across effective programs. Schools with effective anti-bullying programs have **conducted periodic surveys** to assess the degree of face-to-face and cyber bullying. Students identified where and when bullying occurred. These "hot spots" were then carefully monitored by teachers and parents (not peers). With **adult monitoring**, school restrooms, playgrounds, cafeterias, computer labs, and school busses changed from feared to safe places. Migliore (2003) recommended that all school personnel, particularly bus drivers and cafeteria workers, participate in in-service programs to learn and understand effective intervention procedures. Computer lab monitors must also be informed of steps to take when cyber bullying surfaces. Home computers should be placed in common areas (e.g., family or living room, kitchen) rather than in students' bedrooms (Snider, 2004; Cyberbullying, 2006).

Because cyber bullying often begins on family computers and students' personal cell phones, parents must be vigilant with their monitoring efforts. Parental vigilance is paramount, because inappropriate text messages, e-mails, and postings on Web sites and in chat rooms usually do not occur on school property. Parents and teachers must talk with students about the dangers of cyber bullying, and take action immediately if it occurs (Snyder, 2004).

Current computer usage agreements must be updated to include statements regarding cyber bullying. For example, on March 26, 2003, the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) adopted a policy entitled "Student Acceptable Use of the CPS Network" (Board Report 03-0326-PO03, Section 604.2, printed in the *Chicago Public Schools Policy Manual*). Cyber harassment is not mentioned. Statements of unacceptable uses, such as "use of the CPS Network for soliciting or distributing information with the intent to incite violence, cause personal harm or bodily injury, or to harass or 'stalk' another individual" could be more effective if they specified cyber bullying. Instead, students and families are typically told that this means online bullying *after* an incident occurs.

Illinois District 214, which includes Prospect High School in Schaumburg, requires students to sign a 17-point agreement. Cyber bullying, although not so labeled, is clearly addressed in the second statement:

While online, I will not use language [that] may be harassing, intimidating, threatening or offensive to other users. I will treat others with respect. The written and verbal messages I send while on the Internet will not contain profanity, obscene comments, sexually explicit material, or expressions of bigotry, racism, or hatred (Illinois District 214, 2006).

Simply signing a statement will not prevent cyber bullying. However, contracts may heighten awareness, particularly if parents also sign an agreement to monitor student computer and cell-phone use to the extent possible.

**Teacher involvement**, through immediate, caring, and consistent responses, is a strong component of effective anti-bullying programs. Nationwide, an alarming disconnect exists between teacher and student perception of teacher response to bullying (Greenya, 2005). "Only 25% of students report that teachers intervene in bullying situations, while 71% of teachers

believe they always intervene" (Lajoie, McLellan, & Seddon, 2001). Not only must teachers respond immediately to instances of bullying, they must also support students who report witnessing bullying behavior. Students who muster the courage to speak out about bullying should be praised (Migliore, 2003). Educators are obligated to take action immediately if bullying occurs through a school district's Internet system (Willard, 2005).

Schools with effective anti-bullying programs also focus on building a **climate of acceptance**. As one 15-year-old girl said, "I don't know how you do this, but we need to make acceptance cool" (Lumsden, 2000). In schools where acceptance is honored, students and their parents sign anti-teasing pledges and practice effective conflict resolution strategies (Migliore, 2003).

A climate of acceptance leads to students feeling connected. Students who feel that they truly belong to and in their school community perform better on tests and are better able to resist the pressures of cyber and conventional bullying (Osher & Fleischman, 2005). A sense of belonging is fostered through cooperative learning projects with clear role assignments, and through provision of a variety of ways for all students to gain recognition. In addition to academic success, students need to be recognized for effort, appropriate leadership, and helpfulness (Migliore, 2003).

Effective anti-bullying programs **reach out to families**. First, a total school anti-bullying program is implemented. Detailed, specific, clear procedures to address bullying are developed cooperatively with school personnel. Schools then partner closely with parents to ensure implementation of all policy components (often schools find this aspect to be the most challenging). In a survey of more than 300 Arizona schools, personnel reported concerns about their inability to address domestic abuse, negative family reinforcements, and subsequent bullying (Aora, 2001).

A study of the relationships among conventional bullying behavior, self-concept, and parental discord suggests that strong disagreements between parents can significantly lower children's self-concepts (Christie-Mizell, 2003). Children living in households where parents fight often have lower self-concepts—and “self-concept is among the most powerful predictors of bullying among elementary and middle school children” (p.246). The study concluded that parental education can ameliorate the strong negative effects of parental fighting on children's self-concept. Parents need to be informed of how fighting affects children's self-concept and the short distance between low self-concept and bullying behavior.

Positive parenting can preempt cyber bullying. Ybarra and Mitchell (2004) emphasized the importance of parent-child relationships in their discussion of findings from the Youth Internet Safety Survey. “Indeed, general monitoring and positive caregiver-child relationships may be more important factors in Internet safety[,] as global parental monitoring is significantly related to a decrease in the likelihood of being an online aggressor” (p. 1315).

The Internet itself is a resource for families. Numerous Web sites list strategies for parents to implement for safe Internet use and to effectively address cyber bullying (Several of these Web sites are included in the resource list at the end of this article).

**Character education and social skills programs** are an integral part of effective anti-bullying programs (Lajoie, McLellan, & Seddon, 2001; Dygdon, 1998; Sanchez, Robertson, Lewis, Rosenbluth, Bohman, & Casey, 2001). However, experts warn that a comprehensive ecological approach is needed to ensure that changes “last for more than a week” (Beaudoin & Taylor, 2004). Building social skills and addressing character issues are essential, but only a part of effective intervention. Many students affected by bullying lack appropriate social skills. Bullies, victims, and bystanders alike struggle with making friends, being appropriately

assertive, and even learning to take turns. In addition to teaching these lessons directly, teachers need to recognize and employ the many opportunities throughout the day to applaud acts of kindness. Nancy Willard, executive director of the Center for Safe and Responsible Internet Use, stresses the role that both parents and educators play in promoting basic moral values (Willard, 2004). Although most students know and value the Golden Rule, many need to be taught how and why they should treat one another with respect. Students who follow rules simply to avoid punishment (and do not truly value kindness and respect) are more likely to harass others on the Internet simply because they can.

In addition to these general components, schools must teach children **specific steps to implement when confronted by bullies**. Langan (2004) offers a clear, step-by-step anti-bullying guide for older elementary and middle school students. Through powerful, first-person vignettes, he conveys the almost unbearable fear and embarrassment of victims, as well as the frustration and confusion of bullies.

#### *Recommendations for School Personnel Regarding Cyber Bullying*

Internet safety experts offer recommendations to address cyber bullying in school settings. In addition to having clear computer-use policies that specifically address cyber bullying, schools need to instruct students about the dangers of cyber bullying. Instructional resources in the form of online “webisodes” first teach students how to respond to cyber bullying through animated segments portraying bullies, victims, and bystanders. Students then discuss effective strategies in depth (Cyberbullying, 2006).

The United States Health Resources and Services Administration recommends that educators use the following steps, based on recommendations provided by Willard (2005), to address cyber bullying:

- Notify parents of both known and suspected cyber bullying.
- Notify police if cyber bullying in your school involves a threat.
- Watch victims of cyber bullying for possible retaliation (aggressor actions).
- Have ongoing talks with all students about the potentially devastating outcomes of cyber bullying.
- Respond immediately to students who appear to need counseling.

See [www.stopbullyingnow.hsra.gov](http://www.stopbullyingnow.hsra.gov) for a complete list of recommendations for both parents and educators.

Inviting officers from local police departments to talk with students and families about the effects of cyber bullying is also recommended (Lisante, 2005). As a result of past cyber harassment, legislation has been passed in the state of Washington making cyber bullying a criminal offense.

#### *Recommendations for Parents Regarding Cyber Bullying*

Family involvement is critical. Children need continual reminders from parents that hurtful online messages have the same impact as face-to-face insults and rumors (Willard, 2004). America Online (AOL), Yahoo, and Microsoft offer protective software with features that track which Web sites children visit, including chat rooms. AOL also offers a service that provides parents with access to messages their children send and receive (Beckerman & Nocero, 2003). Parents can study and then install filtering software to reduce inappropriate computer use through the following Web sites: [www.surfcontrol.com](http://www.surfcontrol.com), [www.netnanny.com](http://www.netnanny.com), and [www.cybersitter.com](http://www.cybersitter.com).

As with other infractions, clear consequences must be established and applied for violation of Internet rules, particularly cyber bullying. However, a home policy of zero tolerance (prohibiting children

from using their cell phones or computers at all) can backfire. Children and youth can easily gain access to the Internet without their home equipment. Most importantly, they may refuse to communicate with their parents if they are angry or confused about punishments.

Jeff Chu (2005), in his *Time* article, offered the following guidelines for parents.

1. Learn—Know how to use the Internet yourself.
2. Be aware—Know if your child has a Xanga (online diary or journal) [or blog, MySpace, or other personal site], visits chat rooms, or uses instant messaging.
3. Talk—Keep the lines of communication open with your children so they feel comfortable telling you about any threatening or upsetting online situations.
4. Teach—Be sure your child knows how to be courteous online. Rudeness is not acceptable, online or offline.
5. Trust—Inform your children that you will be checking their e-mail, if you feel that this is important. Do not “snoop” without their permission.

As Willard (2004) emphasized in her policy essay, teaching appropriate and responsible Internet use is part of good parenting. Parents who use a democratic approach are informed, fair, and consistent, and communicate openly with their children. They apply these same qualities to expectations regarding Internet use.

## Conclusion

Although educators often attribute bullying to individual students' behaviors, successful intervention programs emphasize the interrelated impact of family, school culture, and communities. An ecological approach that includes appropriate family guidance, a proactive school culture, and community involvement is needed to

implement the components necessary to combat bullying.

With the arrival of cyber bullying, the call to action against bullying is even more urgent. Strong leadership laced with an ethic of care can provide an additional theoretical framework for addressing high-tech versions of age-old school bullying. In her thoughtful discussion of legal issues regarding cyber bullying, Canadian scholar Shaheen Shariff (2004) suggested that school leaders implement Burns's (1978) model of ethical leadership.

Burns maintained that good leaders should recognize potential conflict, but have the ability to interpret it as potential for health and growth instead of destruction and barbarism. The challenge of educators who confront cyber bullying is to recognize its potential to escalate and its impact on the physical school environment, and to transform the momentum into positive learning opportunities for perpetrators (Shariff, 2004, p. 230).

Instead of implementing a zero-tolerance response to cyber bullying, educators must recognize the needs of those involved with all forms of bullying. Creating and then maintaining a culture of respect, and recognizing students' unique abilities, requires careful observation, heartfelt conversations, in-depth planning, and dogged persistence.

Shariff also points to Nell Noddings's (1992) work on creating an ethic of care as a foundation for effective responses to both cyber and conventional bullying. Dialogue, both verbal and nonverbal, can help students feel connected and cared for. On a day-to-day basis, knowing that those around them care can make coming to school worthwhile for both victims and aggressors. In extreme cases, an underlying psychological commitment to caring for everyone in the school community could address legal aspects of deeply troubled, potentially suicidal students involved in bullying.

Effective anti-bullying strategies are available to parents and educators. Information on cyber bullying, immediate adult responses, school/family commitment, social skills and character education, periodic surveys, and proactive leadership based on an ethic of care are all powerful strategies for addressing the complex issues of bullies, victims, and bystanders. Addressing all forms of bullying is a matter of promoting both individual welfare and civic responsibility.

## Resources

*City of Chicago Bullying Resource*  
*Being a friend, having a friend: Powerful ways to prevent bullying.* This 38-page brochure contains lesson plans, a poster, a sample anti-bullying policy, and additional online and print resources. Produced in collaboration with the Chicago Public Schools, Illinois Violence Prevention Authority, Chicago Department of Human Services and Office of Catholic Schools, it is available from the Chicago Department of Public Health, Office of Violence Prevention; 312-745-0381; e-mail: [ovp@cdph.org](mailto:ovp@cdph.org).

*Bullying Handbook*  
*Bullying in schools: What you need to know* by Paul Langan (2004). Townsend Press offers this 52-page publication at the nonprofit price of \$1.00 each (plus shipping) in an effort to reduce school violence. Toll-free number: 800-772-6410; Web site: [www.townsendpress.com](http://www.townsendpress.com); e-mail: [townsendcs@aol.com](mailto:townsendcs@aol.com).

*Online Information and Resources Regarding Cyber Bullying*  
Center for Safe and Responsible Internet Use: <http://www.csriu.org>  
Internet safety recommendations: [www.getnetwise.org](http://www.getnetwise.org); [www.wiredsafety.org](http://www.wiredsafety.org)  
Suggestions for parents and educators: [www.cyberbullying.org](http://www.cyberbullying.org); [www.bullyonline.org](http://www.bullyonline.org)  
United States Health Resources and Services Administration: <http://www.stopbullyingnow.hsra.gov>



*Bullying Resources in Illinois*  
 Illinois Association of School Administrators:  
 (217) 522-4479  
 Illinois Association of School Social Workers:  
 (847) 658-8223  
 Illinois Attorney General:  
 (217) 782-1090, (312) 814-2503  
 Illinois Center for Violence Prevention:  
 (312) 986-9200  
 Illinois Principals Association:  
 (217) 525-1383  
 Illinois School Boards Association:  
 (217) 528-9688  
 Illinois School Counselors Association:  
 (708) 371-3600

Illinois School Psychologists Association:  
 (630) 307-1148  
 Illinois State Board of Education:  
 (217) 782-2221  
 Illinois Violence Prevention Authority:  
 (312) 814-2796  
 Juvenile Serious Offender Comprehensive  
 Action Program (SHOCAP):  
 (217) 782-0043  
 Prevention First, Inc.:  
 (217) 793-7353  
 Regional Institute for Community Policing,  
 Illinois State Police:  
 (217) 786-0029  
 School Safety Tip Line:  
 (800) 477-0024.

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