Creative Solutions for Preventing Cyberbullying: Everyone Deserves to Feel Safe in School

Dr. Lenora Jean Justice
Morehead State University, Morehead, Kentucky
408 Ginger Hall, Morehead, Kentucky 40351

Index Descriptors: Cyberbullying, Bullying, Safe School, Positive School Environment

Abstract

Parents, administrators, and teachers, increasingly call for digital teaching tools in the classroom; however, Internet access allows for gossip, harassment, and intimidation, which can potentially lead to cyberbullying. If educators are called upon to expand the use of technology in learning, how can they prevent the dark side of technology, cyberbullying, from disrupting this process? This paper covers creative ways to prevent cyberbullying while encouraging tolerance and acceptance of potentially marginalized students.

What is Cyberbullying?

Simply put, cyberbullying is a form of bullying that is done through technology. Although it can be compared to bullying, a major difference is that cyberbullying can take place in the safety of a student’s home with his or her parents in the next room. Also, a cyberbully’s identity is often hidden by the technology; therefore, he or she feels less inhibited and will often say things that normally would not be said to a person’s face (Diamanduros & Downs, 2011; Paulet & Pinchot, 2014). Additionally, since cyberbullying usually takes place on the Internet, the potential audience can range in the thousands (Morgan, 2013). Subsequently, a student who is cyberbullied may understandably feel as if the whole school knows.

The consequences of cyberbullying are staggering. Victims can begin to experience eating disorders, chronic illness, depression, significantly lower self-esteem, externalized violence, academic problems, family problems, mental health problems, and suicidal thoughts or actions (Feinberg & Robey, 2009; Morgan, 2013; Patchin & Hinduja, 2012; Simmons & Bynum, 2014; Wolfer et al., 2014). Although the most pronounced effects are observed in the victims, anyone touched by the cyberbullying, including the bully and any witnesses, even virtual witnesses, can suffer some of the same negative consequences (Garaigordobil & Martinez-Valderry, 2015). Even though most cyberbullying happens outside of school, the common denominator is school since this is where cyberbullies often find their victims (Feinberg & Robey, 2009; Patchin & Hinduja, 2012). Unfortunately, because school is the common denominator, there is a lot of finger-pointing about who should stop and/or prevent cyberbullying. Research suggests that it takes everyone, educators (i.e., teachers, administrators, media specialists, staff), parents, and students, to stop cyberbullying (Beale & Hall, 2007; Diamanduros & Downs, 2011; Garaigordobil & Martinez-Valderry, 2015; Panter, 2009; Patchin & Hinduja, 2012; Stanbrook, 2014).

Who are the Victims of Cyberbullying?

Current research has found that there are some characteristics of students that make them more susceptible to cyberbullying (Beale & Hall, 2007; Feinberg & Robey, 2009; Simmons & Bynum, 2014). For example, students who are physically different (i.e., overweight, underweight, race, gender variant, disabled), intellectually different (i.e., gifted, learning disabled), emotionally different (i.e., overly sensitive, depressed, anxious, fearful), unpopular, and/or more isolated are more likely to be victims. In other words, these students are looking for acceptance and positive attention, which makes them more vulnerable to manipulation and, usually, less attentive to online privacy and safety. Also, students who become targets for cyberbullying are the exact group of students who are not well equipped to handle this type of harassment. For example, Feinberg and Robey (2009) suggest that vulnerable young people who have few coping skills, poor relationships, mental health problems, and/or family problems will not be able to overcome cyberbullying without intervention.
Preventing Cyberbullying: Advice for Educators

Cyberbullying is such a complex problem that educators should not try to tackle it alone. Parents, administrators, teachers, students and, when necessary, law enforcement are needed to solve the challenges of cyberbullying. For this reason, please see Appendix A, Cyberbullying Advice for Administrators, Appendix B, Cyberbullying Advice for Parents, and Appendix C, Cyberbullying Advice for Students for more information about preventing/stopping cyberbullying. Educators should be aware that many cyberbullying victims will not report incidents because they are worried that they will lose their Internet privileges in an effort to separate the victim from the cyberbullying or they are ashamed of the embarrassing material used in the cyberbullying process. Consequently, many victims prefer anonymous help through the Internet, so web-based interventions and anonymous reporting may be solutions to the non-reporting problems (Jacobs Vollink, Dehue, & Lechner, 2014). If a student does report cyberbullying, then teachers should respond promptly. Even in a minor case, the victim needs to feel safe again as soon as possible and the cyberbully needs to be stopped so that the incident does not escalate (Morgan, 2013). Above all else, if a victim or a witness comes to you about a cyberbullying incident, do something. It took a lot of courage to report it and given the potential negative outcomes of cyberbullying to all parties involved, you are responsible for doing your part at stopping cyberbullying.

Perhaps the best strategy for an educator is the old adage: “the best offense is a great defense”. Or, in other words, preventative strategies are the best protection that an educator can offer students. For example, educators can raise awareness about cyberbullying by helping students understand that ‘friendling,’ privacy settings, and sharing and re-posting online makes them targets for cyberbullies (Bryce & Klang, 2009; Furnell, 2010). Additionally, because mainstream news and late night talk shows will often offer news items of social media goofs, these instances make great talking points as contextual examples for students of what they should and should not do. Additionally, educators should have rules and/or policies in place for Internet use, which should reflect those established by the school and/or administrator(s), and should monitor students’ activities online while reducing the amount of spare time online (Demaray & Brown, 2009; Patchin & Hinduja, 2012). Moreover, Patchin and Hinduja (2012) claim that one way to prevent cyberbullying is to promote a positive school environment. To promote a positive school environment, teachers should demonstrate emotional support, a warm and caring atmosphere, a strong focus on learning and academia, and foster student self-esteem. Additionally, neither students nor faculty should tolerate abusive conduct; accordingly, students and faculty should follow a respect policy or honor code.

Perhaps one of the most creative ways to prevent cyberbullying is to stop the marginalization of potential victims. Since students who are ‘different’ have a tendency to become victims of cyberbullying, an educator can make those characteristics more acceptable in class. For example, if racism seems to be an issue, perhaps reading a story about a minority scientist, war hero, or other positive role model would help in creating more tolerance and understanding. Or, if an educator hears some conversation questioning the gender identity of another student, perhaps discussing current events, like Caitlyn Jenner, or reading a novel with a transgender main character may make the student feel more welcome and the other students less antagonistic. Norton & Herek (2013) suggest that positive interactions can help reduce negative attitudes toward stigmatized groups of people, then, perhaps, these positive interactions may stop or even prevent cyberbullying.

Literature Cited


Appendix A – Cyberbullying Advice for Administrators

School administrators are responsible for ensuring that all students, faculty, and staff are provided an opportunity to teach and learn in an environment free from fear and intimidation. The following list of tips for administrators is directly related to preventing cyberbullying (Justice & Hooker, in press):

1) Review policy – make sure the school’s acceptable use policy, the school board’s antibullying policy, and any other relevant school policy include cyberbullying with agreed upon punishments. Be sure to understand all the legal obligations and restrictions in dealing with and disciplining cyberbullies.

2) Establish a Cyberbully Task Force – this panel should be made up of teachers, parents, students, and law enforcement officers in an effort to establish policies, punishments, and acceptable usage or honor/ethics policies.

3) Education – provide training and awareness for students, faculty, staff, and parents by integrating activities in student curriculum, offering trainings specific to teachers, counselors, and various staff members, and sending informational letters parents and, potentially, offer information seminars once a month.

4) Coordinate with other schools – by being consistent throughout grade levels and among schools, students will be more likely to not participate in cyberbullying.

5) Create an anonymous reporting system – since students are afraid of punishment, embarrassment, and/or retaliation, they will rarely report cyberbullying incidents. By creating an anonymous reporting system, victims and witnesses can report cyberbullying without worry.

6) Investigate all reports of cyberbullying – victims and witnesses are not very likely to inform anyone about cyberbullying; therefore, it is important to carefully consider every incident of reported cyberbullying. Assure confidentiality for the victim and witness while promptly punishing those involved in bullying.

7) Provide support – since all participants (i.e., victims, bullies, and witnesses) face negative outcomes of cyberbullying, all participants should receive some sort of interventative support such as targeted skill development, counseling, monitoring, and referral to professional assistance.

8) Safeguard faculty and staff – everyone needs protection from cyberbullying, including faculty and staff. Respond to cyberbullies who victimize school employees just as you would respond to cyberbullies who victimize students.

9) Teach technology savviness – cyberbullies often succeed because of the disconnect between teacher and parent knowledge and opinions about technology and student knowledge and opinions about
technology. If everyone is on the same page, cyberbullies are unable to easily hide their activities and so bully less.

10) Create a positive school environment – schools should be a place where students feel encouraged, safe, and supported. A positive school environment does not tolerate abusive conduct like cyberbullying. Students in this positive environment will be more likely to be respectful and not participate in any form of bullying.

Appendix B – Cyberbullying Advice for Parents

Parents are usually very invested in their children. They want to protect them, but at the same time realize that they need their own space and privacy to grow up. It can be quite difficult at times to balance these two opposing conditions. The following list of tips for parents is directly related to preventing cyberbullying (Justice & Hooker, in press):

1) Talk regularly – by communicating often with your children, you become more approachable to them when they have problems, but you also may be able to pick up on problems with which they are facing. Additionally, on occasion talk specifically about Internet etiquette and use teachable moments that crop up in the news on your own social media feeds.

2) Monitor them – if they know that you may be reading what they are writing, they will be more accountable for what they post. Perhaps move the computer out to an open area where the screen can be read by anyone at any time.

3) Consider blocking software – some firewalls can make certain websites inaccessible and some software can record every keystroke. Again, children may reconsider posting if there is a potential their parent could read it.

4) Work with your school system – participate with any activities and seminars your child’s school provides. Read their cyberbullying policies and notices. Also, if asked, participate in the cyberbullying task force or any cyberbullying panels to help set the policies and etiquette for technology use.

5) Create family rules – establish acceptable use policies, limit time online, and reduce use of social networks, chat rooms, and instant messaging. This may reduce the potential for victimization since this helps children to reduce their amount of sharing online, which could help protect their privacy.

6) Become tech savvy – understand why your child uses technology and the lingo involved. Parents often see technology as a tool, but children see it as a social lifeline. It is their direct connection to their friends, so they use it different ways. Also, some of their language is designed to mask the true message from parents.

7) Be careful when your child uses chat rooms and instant messaging – make sure your child uses a generic nickname to remain anonymous, have your child avoid private chats since it could be a predator or aggressor, make sure your child’s understand that all conversation should remain polite (i.e. suggest that they can’t say anything that they wouldn’t say to someone’s face), make sure your child doesn’t click on any links or open any files sent since a virus could easily be passed this way, make sure your child knows not to log in to these sites on a public computer since it may have a virus, and have your child understand that under no circumstances should he or she exchange pictures, videos, or phone numbers or set up a face-to-face meeting with someone from a chat room, even if they appear to be someone the child already knows.

8) Be aware that your child may be the cyberbully – even unintentionally, anyone can be a cyberbully. Pay attention to what your child is posting online.

9) If you think your child is being cyberbullied:
   a. Don’t overreact, keep an open line of communication with your child through the whole process.
   b. Print all messages, do not delete or erase any contact
   c. Make appointments and talk with administrators, teachers, and counselors
   d. Consider contacting the police/local law enforcement, especially if the cyberbully has used any threats
   e. Have your child block or unfriend the cyberbully to stop more messages from being posted
   f. Have your child change their screen or profile name
   g. File a complaint with the website used to cyberbully
   h. Consider professional help, especially with emotional distress caused by cyberbullying
Appendix C – Cyberbullying Advice for Students

Students are just trying to make it through each day. They want to be safe and protected, but at the also they want their own space and privacy to grow up. It can be quite difficult at times to balance these two opposing conditions. The following list of tips for students is directly related to preventing cyberbullying (Justice & Hooker, in press):

1) Talk regularly – by communicating often with the adults in your life, they become more approachable to you when you have problems. Additionally, on occasion talk specifically about Internet etiquette and use teachable moments that crop up in the news on your own social media feeds. For instance, if you think something questionable was posted, ask a parent or a teacher their opinion.

2) Understand and accept the rules – your school and your family may have established acceptable use policies and/or Internet etiquette policies. Accept and follow them since these rules were put in place to protect you.

3) Do not try to friend everyone – if you are friending strangers, you are opening yourself up to the potential of being bullied. Understand that friends should be people you do see outside of a social network and those people who you do care about.

4) Protect your privacy – be careful handing out information that can be pieced together to identify you. Be aware that terms of service agreements may have policies of sharing your information for commercial purposes. Also understand that you have no legal repercussions if your data is mined or hacked from websites.

5) Do not share passwords – if you share a password, that person could share it with someone else without your knowledge. Anyone who has your password can change your information or post misinformation to cause you or your relationships harm. Additionally, someone with your password could log in as you and post terrible things to your friends. Posing as you, everyone would think you posted.

6) Watch what you share – you should realize that anything you post can be re-posted and re-shared until complete strangers are seeing your post. Therefore, be careful about the content you are posting. If you think it might embarrass you if certain people were to see it, then don’t post it. If you think it might be found very offensive by some people, then don’t post it. Both of these situations could trigger a cyberbullying incident.

7) Stop it if you see it – if you witness cyberbullying, then do something about it. You will face some of the same negative outcomes as the victim, so for yourself as well as the victim, report it, and get help.

8) If you are being cyberbullied:
   a. Tell an adult (i.e., parent, teacher, counselor, law enforcement officer)
   b. Don’t engage the cyberbully, just don’t respond
   c. Print all messages, do not delete or erase any contact
   d. Block or unfriend the cyberbully to stop more messages from being posted
   e. Change their screen or profile name
   f. File a complaint with the website used to cyberbully