Dynamics of Adolescent Cyberbullying and the Need for Social Support

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COLUMN ARTICLE

Adolescent cyberbullying is a persistent, pervasive public health concern. The Cyberbullying Research Center reports an average lifetime cyberbullying victimization rate of nearly 28% with rates staying at or above 33% since 2014 and a cyberbullying offending rate of 16% [1]. The extant literature provides evidence to support the association between adolescent cyberbullying and significant negative health outcomes. More recently, studies have indicated the need for strong social support, not necessarily intervention, during the cyberbullying experience, whether from adults or peers [2, 7].

Cyberbullying is a unique and dynamic phenomenon. Though not universally defined, cyberbullying is most often considered to be “an aggressive, intentional act carried out by a group or an individual, using electronic forms of contact” [3]. As with traditional, face-to-face bullying, cyberbullying is generally believed to include an intent to harm, repetition, and a real or perceived power imbalance [4, 5]. Simply defining cyberbullying as an electronic medium for traditional bullying, however, disregards the distinctiveness of the phenomenon [4].

The element of repetition in the experience of cyberbullying can be unique. Though cyberbullying can occur with multiple postings, messages, etc., over time, a single minute spent uploading a derogatory photo or comment can lead to widespread humiliation that can be relived every time someone accesses it on the Internet [4]. Consequently, victims may feel as though cyberbullying is inescapable and that attempts to stop it are futile since it’s “out there for the world to see” [6-8]; thus, victims may not be as apt to ask for help if they believe it is hopeless to try. The power imbalance that is typical of traditional bullying is challenged by the cyberbullying phenomenon. In the past, the bully was stronger, larger, or more popular than the victim they preyed upon [4]. The power imbalance with electronic bullying may be more perceived than real or may be related to technical know-how, anonymity, or access to technology instead of physical size [9]. Cyberbullying perpetration is “hands-off” by definition and often anonymous, meaning no one is immune to victimization and essentially anyone can be the perpetrator [10]. This characteristic of cyberbullying may lead the victim to a more fearful experience than traditional bullying as they may believe they are defenseless against a faceless attacker [8]. Recent research has brought into question the intention behind cyberbullying and argue that the perpetrator may not specifically target a person they perceive as less powerful or even intend for the message to be seen beyond the original posting [5]. Once posted on the Internet, however, information takes on a mind of its own and may spread like a virus (go viral) or seemingly disappear altogether. Some perpetrators (and victims) may argue...
that since the perpetrator did not intend to hurt anyone, the posting(s) should not be considered cyberbullying and no one should face any adverse consequences for the damage caused.

Regardless of the definition used to describe cyberbullying, research shows a significant association between online bullying behaviors and negative health outcomes, for victims, bullies and bully-victims. Psychological health is of prime concern for any type of bullying victim and cyberbullying is no exception. Cyberbullying is often associated with anxiety and fear, depression, anger, self-harm and suicidality [11-14]. Physical health outcomes associated with cyberbullying are often related to stress and include headaches, panic attacks, “stomachache” and insomnia, among others [15,16]. Unfortunately, many of these “symptoms” are broad and may be associated with other illnesses, instead of viewed as consequences of cyberbullying victimization. Cyberbullying victims may also drop out of clubs and sports teams, isolate themselves from family and friends, or turn to substance and alcohol abuse as attempts to cope [6,11,13,17,18-20].

Adolescents are generally not likely to report cyberbullying victimization, especially to adults [6,21-23]. Many adolescents view adults as unlikely to understand cyberbullying or cite that adults are dismissive to reports of cyberbullying as a real problem [2,8]. Some adolescents report that teachers and school personnel are also dismissive of cyberbullying and refuse to intervene, resulting in fewer reports to adults at school [2] and continuation of cyberbullying behaviors. Adults who dismiss cyberbullying or refuse to get involved may lack an understanding of the dynamics of cyberbullying or knowledge of how to intervene, instead of a lack of desire to help. Adolescents however, especially in the throes of cyberbullying victimization, may perceive it as rejection or devaluation of their own worth citation #2. Social connectedness and fitting in are important for identity-seeking adolescents, particularly those who are attempting to cope with cyberbullying [24]. Many find that they connect better online than in the real world, placing their friendships in the virtual realm. However, relying on online social support, often from strangers, brings unique challenges and risks. It is important for users of technology, especially young people who spend a large part of their day online, to understand the risks and benefits of technology and receive education relating to appropriate online behavior and digital citizenship for a lifetime.

For early recognition of cyberbullying and appropriate intervention, it is important for adults and professionals to have a foundational understanding of what constitutes cyberbullying, common terminology used across technology, where and how cyberbullying occurs, familiarization with social media applications and platforms, how cyberbullying impacts everyone involved and strategies for intervention [13,25]. Negative responses from adults (or peers) may result in further isolation or may lead to the use of questionable and harmful coping strategies, such as alcohol or substance abuse or self-harm many times resulting in even more severe health outcomes or hindering successful transition into adulthood [2,7].

Well-informed adults and professionals are vital in efforts to educate others in reducing cyberbullying and dispelling myths and misunderstandings, especially among young people [26]. Knowledge of the dynamics of cyberbullying can also lead to the formation of policies inside and outside of schools, resulting in safer online experiences for everyone [27]. Researchers have provided extensive evidence of the short-term and long-term impacts of cyberbullying victimization and perpetration, but there is much research still needed to fully understand the dynamics of this ever-changing phenomenon. Ultimately, the goal for those concerned about the health and wellbeing of adolescents, is to stop cyberbullying behavior permanently by considering the long-term impact and the importance of promoting pro-social online behaviors and digital citizenship [13]. Professionals must continue to forge ahead in developing educational programs and identifying effective interventional strategies to combat this serious youth health problem.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


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