

ARTICOLI SU BULLISMO  
E CYBERBULLISMO  
DAL LEARNING EVENT  
'CYBERBULLYING: WHEN  
THE VIRTUAL THREAT BECOMES  
REAL'

PROF.SSA GASPERINI  
GABRIELLA



Twinning



Erasmus+

REGIONE  
LAZIO  
PROIEZIONE  
FUTURA





## Learning Event 2017: Cyberbullying: when the virtual threat becomes real

📅 Registrato il 14.07.2017

INFORMAZIONI

PARTECIPANTI

# LIKE 0

### Organizzato da



**Rute Baptista**  
Central Support Service  
Brussels, Belgio

### A proposito di questo evento

**EXPERT:** Sonia Seixas

**DATE:** 16 - 30.10.2017

**LANGUAGE:** English

**TARGET GROUP:** All teachers in primary, middle and secondary schools.

**SHORT DESCRIPTION:** In this learning event, we intend to reflect on the difference between bullying and cyberbullying, as well as the main factors that facilitate the occurrence or the transition from one to another. We will also address the preventive and interventional approaches in relation to cyberbullying. The main goal is to make teachers aware of this issue and reflect on ways of acting.

### DETTAGLI DELL'EVENTO

Tipo	Learning Event
Lingua	English
Data	16.10.2017 - 30.10.2017
Periodo di iscrizione	09.10.2017 - 17.10.2017
URL	<a href="https://learninglab.etwinning.net/42877">https://learninglab.etwinning.net/42877</a>





Campbell, Marilyn A. (2009) *Why cybersafety tips don't work for cyberbullying*.  
On Line Opinion : Australia's eJournal of Social and Political Debate.

© Copyright 2009 [please consult the author]



We need adults who are sensitive to children and who model good relationships, and do not use their power over others.



## **Why cybersafety tips don't work for cyberbullying**

Marilyn Campbell Associate Professor QUT

Research into cyberbullying in Australia has been slow. This is partly because rigorous research takes time, both to conduct, to analyse and to publish. In addition, Australian governments and other decision makers did not realise that cyberbullying was happening until there was greater media attention to the problem in the last few years. This meant that there was no serious research money allocated to cyberbullying research in Australia until about two years ago.

In addition, initial research has mainly looked at how many students have been cyberbullied and what were the consequences. As far as I know there is only one large research project which is looking at what programs actually work to prevent and/or intervene in cyberbullying in Australia and that will take time to ascertain. However, our society wants quick fixes and they want a quick fix for cyberbullying.

I think that is why "what to do" about cyberbullying is now the agenda of cybersafety experts and not bullying experts. This is unfortunate because while cybersafety experts are very knowledgeable about giving advice about safety aspects such as how to protect one's self from paedophiles and not accessing pornography, their expertise does not usually extend to Internet addiction and bullying, which is usually more the domain of psychologists.

I suppose that because there is a dearth of information, people are amazingly eager to give advice or to promote programs which lack any formal evaluation or research. This often leads to "agony aunt" advice which in the long term might cause more harm than good. For instance:

On the Cybersmart website (set up by the Australian Communications for Media and Technology) the first tip on cyberbullying for children is:

**"Ignore it. If they don't get a response they may get bored and go away."**

This is simplistic advice. Yes, if someone is mean to you, one does not retaliate by being mean to them. However, if you are bullied, because of the imbalance of power in your relationship with that person (either they are older or stronger or have positional power) then you cannot defend yourself because by definition you are disempowered. You are afraid of the bully or bullies.

This advice also seems to assume that it is one mean message and not the repetition that is involved in bullying. Bullying is fear producing because it is relentless; and cyberbullying even more so. Do you ignore the text messages on your mobile at 11pm and again at 12pm and then 1am and 2am?

The only criteria that could even recognise that this advice was meant to be about bullying is that it was mean. If the three tenets of bullying have not been met - imbalance of power, intent to hurt and repetition - then it is not bullying. Bullying is a social relationship problem that is deeply embedded in our culture. Bullying hurts.



Why are people telling children to ignore being hurt? Is it because that was the advice given to these people when they were children? "If someone is bullying you, don't let them see you are afraid, ignore them, don't fight them." "Ignore the big boy who is demanding your tuckshop money" - at your peril! Ignore being hurt by the cyberbully? The underlying message here for a victim is, don't do anything, don't tell anyone. I know the tip is meaning to say don't fight back. But if you are really bullied and are scared of the person because of the imbalance of power, hardly anyone fights back.

The next tip is **"Block the person. This will stop you seeing messages from a particular person."**

This is the same as saying, if the bullies are in the toilet block, don't go to the toilet. Yes, it might give you some temporary abatement from the bullying but usually if someone is intent on hurting you they will find other ways, either to overcome the block or to "get" you by other mediums.

**"Keep the evidence"**. In a litigious society we want evidence - proof. What this does is tell the person who is being cyberbullied, we don't believe you, so prove it. I know people think they are "proving" the bully is bullying but what does it also do to the victim? If someone says something nasty to you, you remember how you feel but you usually can't remember the exact words. When however, you are keeping all the texts, emails, online conversations what do you do? You re-read them. That's the power of the written word. Is this really what we want?

The last tips are virtually the same: **"Tell someone and report it."**

However, we know from research that most victims of bullying do not tell someone about it, or if they do it is their friends. Why don't they? Because they are embarrassed and humiliated by the bullying but mostly because they fear retaliation from the bully when adults are involved.

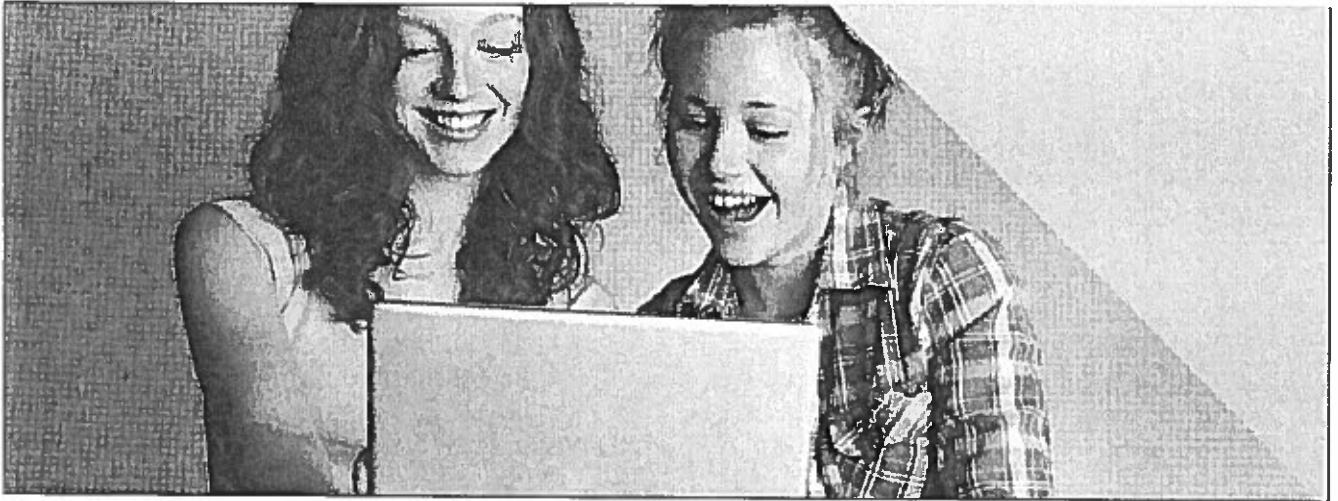
As adults we are often not sensitive enough when children do tell us about bullying. Most adults react by taking the situation into their own hands, taking power away from the already disempowered victim. To be fair, the adults think they are helping. But if an angry parent goes to the bully's parents and complains, often things do not improve. If a teacher quizzes the victim, investigates the situation, decides the bully needs punishing, suspends them for two days from school and nothing else, there is likely to be retaliation against the victim, even if it is in more subtle ways.

The added complication with cyberbullying is that the children fear that the technology will be taken from them: that mum or dad will not let them have their mobile phone or they will not be able to use MSN. They think that adults will punish them for having been the victim.

Reporting by the child victim is unlikely because in Australia we have a culture of "don't dob". Unfortunately, we don't teach children from an early age the difference between "dobbing" where you tell an adult another child is doing something wrong to get them into trouble, and "reporting" where you tell an adult when there is harm to yourself or others.

Cyberbullying is a complex problem which will not be solved by easy tips, however much we might want that. We need programs which have been thoroughly evaluated and which work.





Kids have been bullying each other for generations. The latest generation, however, has been able to utilize technology to expand their reach and the extent of their harm. This phenomenon is being called *cyberbullying*, defined as: "*willful and repeated harm inflicted through the use of computers, cell phones, and other electronic devices.*" Basically, we are referring to incidents where adolescents use technology to harass, threaten, humiliate, or otherwise hassle their peers. For example, youth can send hurtful text messages to others or spread rumors using smartphones or tablets. Teens have also created web pages, videos, and profiles on social media platforms making fun of others. With mobile devices, adolescents have taken pictures in a bedroom, a bathroom, or another location where privacy is expected, and posted or distributed them online. Others have recorded unauthorized videos of other kids and uploaded them for the world to see, rate, tag, and discuss. Still others are embracing anonymous apps or chat functionality on gaming networks to tear down or humiliate others.

### **What are some negative effects that cyberbullying can have on a person?**

There are many detrimental outcomes associated with cyberbullying that reach into the real world. First, many targets report feeling depressed, sad, angry, and frustrated. As one teenager stated: "It makes me hurt both physically and mentally. It

scares me and takes away all my confidence. It makes me feel sick and worthless." Those who are victimized by cyberbullying also reveal that they are often afraid or embarrassed to go to school. In addition, research has revealed a link between cyberbullying and low self-esteem, family problems, academic difficulties, school violence, and various delinquent behaviors. Finally, cyberbullied youth also report having suicidal thoughts, and there have been a number of examples in the United States and abroad where youth who were victimized ended up taking their own lives.

### **Where does cyberbullying commonly occur?**

Cyberbullying occurs across a variety of venues and mediums in cyberspace, and it shouldn't come as a surprise that it occurs most often where teenagers congregate. Initially, many kids hung out in chat rooms, and as a result that is where most harassment took place. In recent years, most youth are have been drawn to social media (such as Instagram, Snapchat, and Twitter) and video-sharing sites (such as YouTube). This trend has led to increased reports of cyberbullying occurring in those environments. Voice chat, textual chat, and texting via phones or tablets also can provide an environment in which hate and harm is expressed. We are also seeing it happen with portable gaming devices, in 3-D virtual worlds and social gaming sites, and in newer interactive apps like Yik Yak, Secret, and Whisper.



## Cyberbullying by the numbers

Estimates of the number of youth who experience cyberbullying vary widely (ranging from 10-40% or more), depending on the age of the group studied and how cyberbullying is formally defined. In our research, we inform students that cyberbullying is when someone "repeatedly makes fun of another person online or repeatedly picks on another person through email or text message or when someone posts something online about another person that they don't like." Using this definition, about 25 percent of the over 10,000 randomly-selected 11-18 year-olds we have surveyed over the last seven years have said that they have been cyberbullied at some point in their lifetimes. About 17 percent admitted to cyberbullying others during their lifetime. In our most recent study of middle-school youth from January of 2014, 12 percent said they had been cyberbullied while 4 percent said they had cyberbullied others within the previous 30 days.

## Cyberbullying vs. traditional bullying

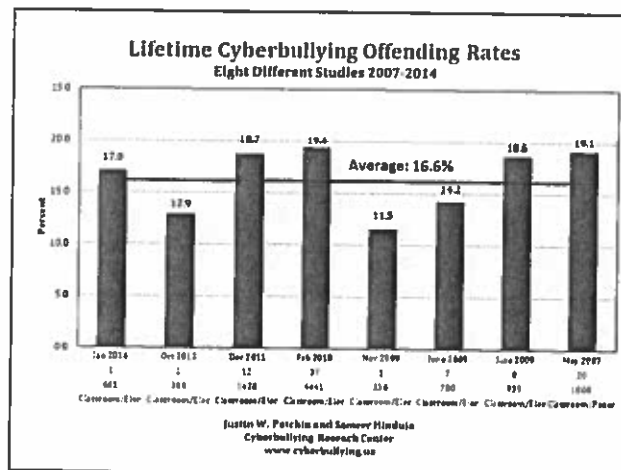
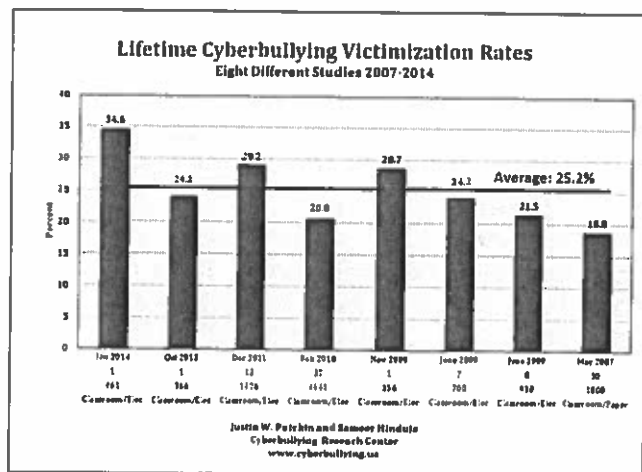
While often similar in terms of form and technique, cyberbullying and bullying have many differences that can make the latter even more devastating. With the former, victims may not know who the bully is, or why they are being targeted. The cyberbully can cloak his or her identity behind a computer or phone using anonymous email addresses or pseudonymous screen names. Second, the hurtful actions of a cyberbully are viral; that is, a large number of people (at school, in the neighborhood,

in the city, in the world!) can be involved the victimization, or at least find out about the incident with a few keystrokes or touchscreen impressions. It seems, then, that the pool of potential victims, offenders, and witnesses/bystanders is limitless.

Third, it is often easier to be cruel using technology because cyberbullying can be done from a physically distant location, and the bully doesn't have to see the immediate response by the target. In fact, some teens simply might not recognize the serious harm they are causing because they are sheltered from the victim's response. Finally, while parents and teachers are doing a better job supervising youth at school and at home, many adults don't have the technological know-how (or time!) to keep track of what teens are up to online. As a result, a victim's experiences may be missed and a bully's actions may be left unchecked. Even if bullies are identified, many adults find themselves unprepared to adequately respond.

## Why is cyberbullying becoming a major issue?

Cyberbullying is a growing problem because increasing numbers of kids are using and have completely embraced online interactivity. A remarkable 95% of teens in the US are online, and three-fourths (74%) access the Internet on their mobile device. They do so for school work, to keep in touch with their friends, to play games, to learn about celebrities, to share their digital creations, or for many other reasons. Because the online communication





tools have become such a tremendous part of their lives, it is not surprising that some youth have decided to use the technology to be malicious or menacing towards others. The fact that teens are connected to technology 24/7 means they are susceptible to victimization (and able to act on mean intentions toward others) around the clock. As alluded to, is also easier to be hateful using typed words rather than spoken words face-to-face. And because some adults have been slow to respond to cyberbullying, many cyberbullies feel that there are little to no consequences for their actions. Many even feel that there is little chance of detection and identification, let alone sanction.

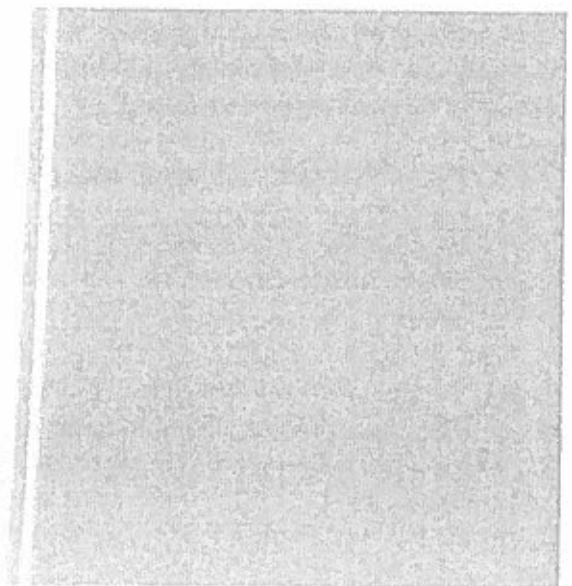
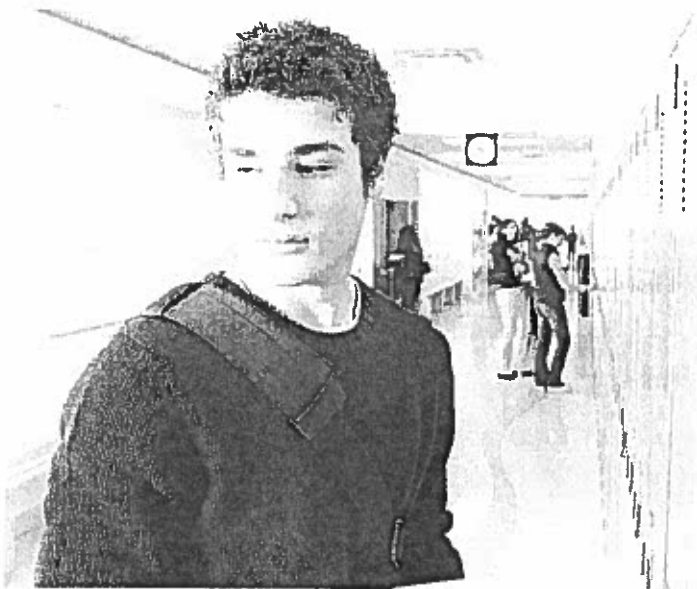
Cyberbullying crosses all geographical boundaries. The Internet has really opened up the whole world to users who access it on a broad array of devices, and for the most part this has been a good thing (a really good thing!). Nevertheless, because of the issues previously discussed, some kids feel free to post or send whatever they want while online without considering how that content can inflict pain – and sometimes cause severe psychological and emotional wounds.

### **Obstacles in the fight to stop cyberbullying**

There are two primary challenges today that make it difficult to prevent cyberbullying. First, even

though this problem has been around for well over a decade, some people still don't see the harm associated with it. Some attempt to dismiss or disregard cyberbullying because there are "more serious forms of aggression to worry about." While it is true that there are many issues facing adolescents, parents, teachers, and law enforcement today, we first need to accept that cyberbullying is one such problem that will only get more serious if ignored.

The other challenge relates to who is willing to step up and take responsibility for responding to inappropriate use of technology. Parents often say that they don't have the technical skills to keep up with their kids' online behavior, and that schools should be covering it in detail during class time and through other programming. Educators are often doing their part through policies, curricula, training, and assemblies, but sometimes don't know when and how to intervene in online behaviors that occur away from school but still involve their students. Finally, law enforcement is hesitant to get involved unless there is clear evidence of a crime or a significant threat to someone's physical safety. As a result, cyberbullying incidents either slip through the cracks, are dealt with too formally, are dealt with too informally, or are otherwise mismanaged. At that point, the problem behaviors often continue and escalate because they aren't adequately or appropriately addressed. Based on these challenges, we collectively need to create an environment





"The last time I was cyberbullied was when my friend, or at least used to be, sent horrible things about me to all of my friends on this app called Kik. This person is from my school. This made me feel angry and wanted to get revenge but I knew it was a bad thing. I did not tell anyone."

where kids feel comfortable talking with adults about this problem and feel confident that meaningful steps will be taken to resolve the situation. We also need to get everyone involved - kids, parents, educators, counselors, youth leaders, law enforcement, social media companies, and the community at large. It will take a concerted and comprehensive effort from all stakeholders to make a meaningful difference in reducing cyberbullying.

### **The role of parents**

The best tack parents can take when their child is cyberbullied is to make sure they feel (and are) safe and secure, and to convey unconditional support. Parents must demonstrate to their children through words and actions that they both desire the same end result: that the cyberbullying stop and that life does not become even more difficult. This can be accomplished by working together to arrive at a mutually-agreeable course of action, as sometimes it is appropriate (and important) to solicit the child's perspective as to what might be done to improve the situation. It is so critical not to be dismissive of their perspective, but to validate their voice and perspective. Victims of cyberbullying (and the bystanders who observe it) must know for sure that the adults who they tell will intervene rationally and logically, and not make the situation worse.

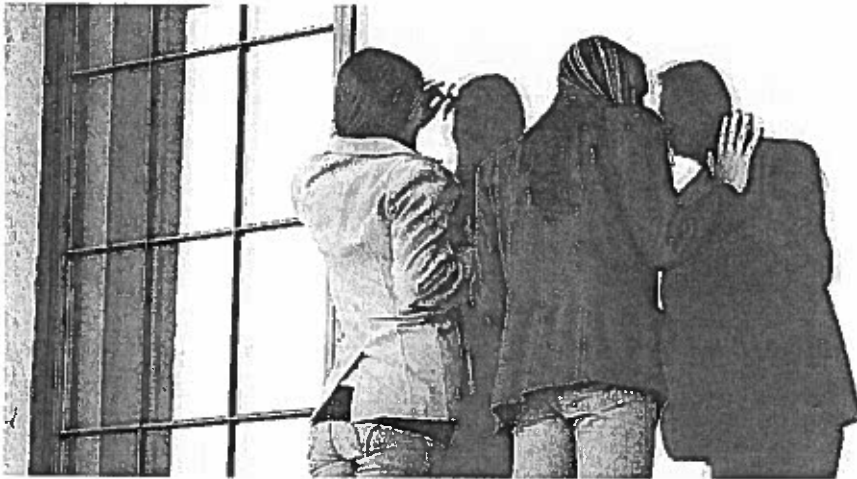
If it is deemed necessary, parents should explain the importance of scheduling a meeting with school administrators (or a teacher they trust) to discuss the matter. Parents may also be able to contact the father or mother of the offender, and/or work with the Internet Service Provider, Cell Phone Service Provider, or Content Provider to investigate the is-

sue or remove the offending material (many times, the victim simply wants the content or account deleted so they can move on with their life). The police should also be approached when physical threats are involved or a crime has possibly been committed (extortion, stalking, blackmail, sexual exploitation of minors, etc.).

Overall, parents must educate their kids about appropriate online behaviors just as they convey appropriate offline behaviors. They should also monitor their child's activities while online – especially early in their exploration of cyberspace. This can be done informally (through active participation in your child's Internet experience, which we recommend most of all) and formally (through software). Spying on kids and unnecessarily invading their privacy should only be done as a last resort when there is a significant cause for concern. Honest and open monitoring is a part of a healthy parent-child relationship. Spying conveys distrust and may encourage children to go further underground.

In time, parents will need to give their children more freedom, privacy, and responsibility. They will not be able to monitor their child's activities 24/7, nor should they need to do so. As a result, it is crucial that parents cultivate and maintain an open, candid line of communication with your children, so that they are ready and willing to come to you whenever they experience something unpleasant or distressing when interacting via text, or Facebook, or a gaming network. Reinforce positive morals and values that are taught in the home about how others should be treated with respect and dignity. Point out models to emulate in society, and use viral mistakes made by other youth and adults as teachable moments.





Parents may also utilize an age-appropriate "Technology Use Contract" to foster a crystal-clear understanding about what is and is not appropriate with respect to the use of various devices and online communication tools. To remind the child of this pledged commitment, we recommend that this contract be posted in a highly visible place at home. When there are violations, immediate logical consequences must be given that are proportionate to the misbehavior. Kids need to learn that inappropriate online actions will not be tolerated. Get them to understand that technology use and access is a privilege, and not a right—and with those privileges comes certain responsibilities that *must* be respected.

If a parent discovers that their child is cyberbullying others, they should first communicate how that behavior inflicts harm and causes pain in the real world as well as in cyberspace. We must remember that kids are not sociopaths—they are just kids who sometimes lack empathy and make mistakes. That said, there are ramifications for every choice they made. Depending on the level of seriousness of the incident, and whether it seems that the child has

"I like the way they [my school] handled it because they treated me with respect and did not laugh at the situation. They took it seriously."

realized the hurtful nature of his or her behavior, consequences should be firmly applied (and escalated if the behavior continues). Moving forward, it is essential that parents pay even greater attention to the technology use of their child to make sure that they have internalized the lesson and are continually acting in responsible ways. Not only should they not be doing the wrong thing, they should be doing the right thing online!

### **What should schools do to prevent cyberbullying?**

The most important preventive step that schools can take is to educate the school community about responsible Internet use. Students need to know that all forms of bullying are wrong and that those who engage in harassing or threatening behaviors will be subject to discipline. It is therefore essential to discuss issues related to appropriate online communications in various areas of the general curriculum. To be sure, these messages should be reinforced in classes that regularly utilize technology. Signage also should be posted around campus to remind students of the rules of acceptable use. In general, it is crucial to establish and maintain an environment of respect and integrity where violations result in informal or formal sanction.

Furthermore, school district personnel should review their harassment and bullying policies to ensure that it allows for the discipline of students who engage in cyberbullying. If their policy covers it, cyberbullying incidents that occur at school - or



that originate off campus but ultimately result in a substantial disruption of the learning environment - are well within a school's legal authority to intervene. The school then needs to make it clear to students, parents, and all staff that these behaviors are unacceptable and will be subject to discipline. In some cases, simply discussing the incident with the offender's parents will result in the behavior stopping.

### What should schools do to respond to cyberbullying?

Students should already know that cyberbullying is unacceptable and that the behavior will result in discipline. Utilize school liaison officers or other members of law enforcement to thoroughly investigate incidents, as needed, if the behaviors cross a certain threshold of severity. Once the offending party has been identified, develop a response that

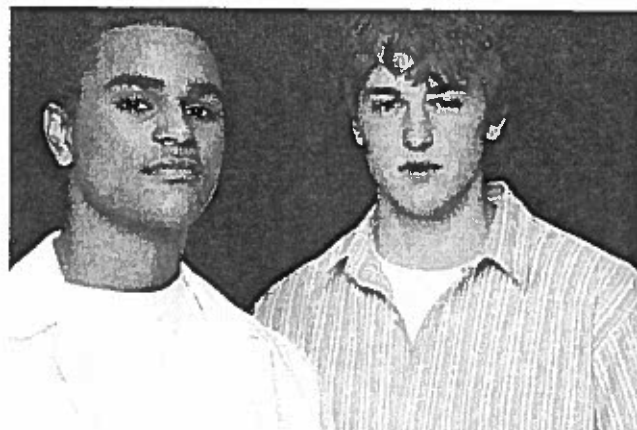
#### A youth may be being cyberbullied if he or she:

- unexpectedly stops using their device(s)
- appears nervous or jumpy when using device(s)
- appears uneasy about being at school or outside
- appears to be angry, depressed, or frustrated after texting, chatting, using social media, or gaming
- becomes abnormally withdrawn
- avoids discussions about their activities online

#### A youth may be cyberbullying others if he or she:

- quickly switches screens or hides their device
- uses their device(s) at all hours of the night
- gets unusually upset if they can't use device(s)
- avoids discussions about what they are doing online
- seems to be using multiple online accounts, or an account that is not their own

In general, if a child acts in ways that are inconsistent with their usual behavior when using these communication devices, it's time to find out why.



is commensurate with the harm done and the disruption that occurred.

School administrators should also work with parents to convey to the student that cyberbullying behaviors are taken seriously and are not trivialized. Moreover, schools should come up with creative response strategies, particularly for relatively minor forms of harassment that do not result in significant harm. For example, students may be required to create anti-cyberbullying posters to be displayed throughout the school, or a public service announcement (PSA) video conveying an anti-bullying and/or a pro-kindness message. Older students might be required to give a brief presentation to younger students about the importance of using technology in ethically-sound ways. The point here, again, is to condemn the behavior (without condemning the offender!) while sending a message to the rest of the school community that bullying in any form is wrong and will not be tolerated.

Even though the vast majority of these incidents can be handled informally (calling parents, counseling the bully and target separately, expressing condemnation of the behavior), there may be occasions where formal response from the school is warranted. This is particularly the case in incidents involving serious threats toward another student, if the target no longer feels comfortable coming to school, or if cyberbullying behaviors continue after informal attempts to stop it have failed. In these cases, detention, suspension, changes of placement, or even expulsion may be necessary. If these extreme measures are required, it is important that educators are able to clearly articulate the link to school and present evidence that supports their action.



## Cyberbullying and school climate

The benefits of a positive school climate have been identified through much research over the last thirty years. It contributes to more consistent attendance, higher student achievement, and other desirable student outcomes. Though limited, the research done on school climate and traditional bullying also underscores its importance in preventing peer conflict. One of our recent studies found that students who experienced cyberbullying (both those who were victims and those who admitted to cyberbullying others) perceived a poorer climate at their school than those who had not experienced cyberbullying. Youth were asked whether they "enjoy going to school," "feel safe at school," "feel that teachers at their school really try to help them succeed," and "feel that teachers at their school care about them." Those who admitted to cyberbullying others or who were the target of cyberbullying were less likely to agree with those statements.

Overall, it is critical for educators to develop and promote a safe and respectful school climate—one marked by shared and palpable feelings of connectedness, belongingness, peer respect, morale, safety, and even school spirit. A positive on-campus environment will go a long way in reducing the frequency of many problematic behaviors at school, including bullying and harassment. In this setting, teachers must demonstrate emotional support, a warm and caring atmosphere, a strong focus on academics and learning, and a fostering of healthy self-esteem. As mentioned, it is crucial that the school seeks to create and promote an atmosphere where certain conduct not tolerated—by students and staff alike. In schools with healthy climates, students know what is appropriate and what is not.

**Educators who establish a nurturing and caring classroom and school climate will make great strides in preventing a whole host of problematic behaviors, both at school and online.**

## What can youth do?

First and foremost, youth should develop a relationship with an adult they trust (a parent, teacher, or someone else) so they can talk about any experiences they have online (or off) that make them upset or uncomfortable. If possible, teens should ignore minor teasing or name calling, and not respond to the bully as that might simply make the problem continue. They should also use the account and privacy settings within each device, app, or network to control who can contact and interact with them, and who can read their online content. This can significantly reduce their victimization risk.

It's also useful to keep all evidence of cyberbullying to show an adult who can help with the situation. If targets of cyberbullying are able to keep a log or a journal of the dates and times and instances of the online harassment, that can also help prove what was going on and who started it—which greatly helps during an investigation. This information can also be forwarded to the respective site or company that serves as the venue or medium for the cyberbullying. Youth should take the time to report any harassment, threats, impersonation, or other problems they see or experience, and remember that their identity will be protected to the maximum extent of the law when doing so (for more information, see [www.cyberbullying.us/report](http://www.cyberbullying.us/report)).

In addition, youth should go online with their parents – show them what sites and apps they use, and share with them why they are great. Chat with them about what safety precautions they use while texting or tweeting, and give their parents (and other adults they trust) a chance to come through for them if a problem arises. Finally, they should pause before they post—and make really wise decisions with what they share or send online, considering the possibility that anyone and everyone may see it (including their parents, and others with opportunities to give them).

## Don't stand by

Bystanders also have a very critical role to play. Those who witness cyberbullying generally do not want to get involved because of the hassle and



problems they fear it might bring upon them, yet they often recognize that what they are seeing is not right and should stop. However, by doing nothing, bystanders are doing something—they are passively encouraging the behavior. By actively standing up—in that moment or right afterward, we believe that bystanders can make a huge difference in improving the situation for targets, who often feel helpless and hopeless and need someone to come to the rescue. Bystanders should note what they see and when. They should also intervene when they feel comfortable doing so, and afterwards tell an adult they trust who can really step in and improve the situation. Finally, they should never encourage or indirectly contribute to the behavior – by forwarding hurtful messages, laughing at inappropriate jokes or content, condoning the act just to “fit in,” or otherwise silently allowing it to continue.

### When should law enforcement get involved?

Law enforcement officers also have a role in preventing and responding to cyberbullying. To begin, they need to be aware of ever-evolving state and local laws concerning online behaviors, and equip themselves with the skills and knowledge to inter-

vene as necessary. In a recent survey of school resource officers, we found that almost one-quarter did not know if their state had a cyberbullying law. This is surprising since their most visible responsibility involves responding to actions which are in violation of law (e.g., harassment, threats, stalking). Even if the behavior doesn’t immediately appear to rise to the level of a crime, officers should use their discretion to handle the situation in a way that is appropriate for the circumstances. For example, a simple discussion of the legal issues involved in cyberbullying may be enough to deter some youth from future misbehavior. Officers might also talk to parents about their child’s conduct and express to them the seriousness of online harassment.

Relatedly, officers can play an essential role in preventing cyberbullying from occurring or getting out of hand in the first place. They can speak to students in classrooms about cyberbullying and online safety issues more broadly in an attempt to discourage them from engaging in risky or unacceptable actions and interactions. They might also speak to parents about local and state laws, so that they are informed and can properly respond if their child is involved in an incident.

### Suggested citation

Hinduja, S. & Patchin, J. W. (2014). *Cyberbullying Identification, Prevention, and Response*. Cyberbullying Research Center ([www.cyberbullying.us](http://www.cyberbullying.us)).



**Sameer Hinduja, Ph.D.** is a professor at Florida Atlantic University

**Justin W. Patchin, Ph.D.** is a professor at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire.

Together, they speak on the causes and consequences of cyberbullying across the United States and abroad and offer comprehensive workshops for parents, teachers, counselors, mental health professionals, law enforcement, youth and others concerned with addressing and preventing online aggression. They have written six books and numerous articles on teen technology use and misuse.

The **Cyberbullying Research Center** ([www.cyberbullying.us](http://www.cyberbullying.us)) provides research findings, stories, cases, fact sheets, tips and strategies, current headlines, quizzes, a frequently-updated blog, and a number of other helpful resources. It also has downloadable materials for educators, counselors, parents, law enforcement officers, and other youth-serving professionals to use and distribute as needed.

© 2014 Cyberbullying Research Center • Sameer Hinduja and Justin W. Patchin.  
Permission for duplication provided for non-profit educational purposes.



## **Cyber-Bullying: Developing Policy to Direct Responses that are Equitable and Effective in Addressing this Special Form of Bullying<sup>1</sup>**

Karen Brown, Margaret Jackson & Wanda Cassidy  
Simon Fraser University

### **ABSTRACT**

The article reviews existing research on cyber-bullying, framed through a policy lens. It is clear that public policy issues for cyber-bullying involve tensions between the values of freedom of speech, the best interests of the child, and parental and school protective authority over the child. Given the complexity of the problem, as well as conflicting values, the development of effective policy requires a collaborative effort involving all stakeholders – policymakers, school officials, parents and youth. It is important to emphasize literature that delineates the differences between conventional bullying and cyber-bullying because the two are very different and must be treated and analyzed separately. Thus, the following sections set out the definitions and mechanisms of cyber-bullying for policymakers contemplating new and/or modified policies, review the characteristics of the problem and the psychology of Internet abuse, explain the physical and mental consequences of it, and outline the results of recent surveys on cyber-bullying. Finally, the article concludes with recommendations on implementing acceptable use policies at the School Board and individual school levels, as well as family contracts for home use.

---

<sup>1</sup> This research was supported by funds from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC). Portions of this research were presented at the Canadian Association for the Practical Study of Law in Education ("CAPSLE") conference in Montreal, Quebec, April 30-May 2, 2006.



## **I Can't See You – You Can't See Me**

How the Use of Information and Communication Technologies Can Impact Responsible Behavior

Nancy Willard, M.S., J.D.  
Center for Safe and Responsible Internet Use  
474 W 29<sup>th</sup> Avenue, Eugene OR 97405  
URL: <http://csriu.org>  
E-mail: [nwillard@csriu.org](mailto:nwillard@csriu.org)

© 2004 Nancy Willard

To address issues of responsible use of the Internet, it is important to recognize how young people learn to engage in responsible behavior in the real world and then consider how information and communication technologies may affect their decision-making regarding the appropriateness of certain choices. Based on this knowledge, strategies to promote more responsible choice can be developed.

### **External Forces that Promote Responsible Behavior**

As young people grow in the real world, four external forces play a significant role in help them learn to engage in responsible behavior. These forces are:

1. Moral values and social expectations, which establish the standards by which behavior is to be measured

Parents are the primary source for the transmission of moral values and social expectations to young people. Child caring facilities, such as day care and schools, are another major source of such values and expectations, especially through the establishment and enforcement of rules or policies related to the standards young people are expected to abide by in relations with others within the child caring environment. For many families, religious beliefs provide a valuable source of values and expectations for behavior. Unfortunately, an additional major source of such values and expectations in the lives of our young people is advertising agencies and the media—television, movies, music, magazines, and video games. As children become teens, peer norms become an important part of the picture.

Given the potential for differences in moral values and social expectations from these different sources, there is an amazing global-wide agreement on many values and expectations emanating from parents, child caring facilities, and religious traditions. Moral values, especially, are grounded in a rather universal recognition of behavior that is necessary to support the health and well-being of people and our planet. It should be noted that every religious tradition has some version of a "golden rule" that seeks to encourage responsible behavior towards others.



Unfortunately, many of the advertising and media messages, especially those targeted to young people, promote values that do not encourage behavior that supports the health and well-being of others. The substance of many advertising messages is that personal value is directly related to physical appearance and acquisitions. Advertising messages often foster rebellion against authority or expectations. Advertisers in particular promote youth rebellion as a way to stimulate brand loyalty. An ad for a sugary cereal ends with kids jumping up with fists in the air shouting, "We eat what we like." This kind of a message easily translates to a general attitude of "I'll do what I want," and "I'll take what I want."

There are ample concerns that entertainment media is fostering disrespectful attitudes and violence directed toward others, especially 'different others.' The very popular violent video game *Grand Theft Auto*, which allows users to gain points by killing hobos and Haitians, is an example of such promotion of disrespect and violence. Entertainment media in various forms of "reality shows" is also promoting the value of public disclosure of personal concerns. Ample evidence from extensive research reveals that these kinds of media strongly influence values, attitudes, and behavior of young people.

As young people grow, the values and expectations transmitted by others, and influenced by the following three factors, become internalized. A child's understanding of moral values and social expectations is tied to their cognitive development, especially their ability to take the perspective of others. (Nucci, 1989) A major task of adolescence is the development of personal identity. (Erickson, 1963) This personal identity incorporates an internalized moral code—an internalized set of values and expectations that will guide decisions relating to ethical and responsible behavior.

The manner in which values or expectations may influence behavior also is influenced by an individual's characterization of the issue as involving a moral value, social expectation, or personal choice. (Turiel, 1983)

Moral values are categorical, universalizable, and structured by underlying conceptions of justice, rights, and welfare. Social expectations are arbitrary and agreed-upon uniformities in social behavior that are determined by the social system and which are alterable and context dependent—that is the expectations for behavior can vary depending on the environment. Personal choice issues are those issues, which impact only on the self. Some issues are multifaceted issues that implicate moral values, as well as social expectations or personal choices.

The manner in which an individual characterizes an issue will affect how the person makes decisions about personal behavior with respect to that issue. For example, one person may consider the issue of abortion in the context of a moral value, whereas another person may view the issue from the perspective of personal choice. A key factor that has been identified as important in an individual's characterization of an issue as involving a moral value, social expectation, or personal choice is the individual's determination of whether or not a certain action will result in harm to another.



Educational policies and interventions can also enhance the transmission of values and expectations for behavior. Most schools have developed approaches to address school safety. Fostering positive relationships between students and between staff and students are an essential component of any school safety plan.

2. An empathic recognition that an action has caused harm, which leads to remorse.

When a young person engages in action that harms another and recognizes that his or her action has caused harm, this generally will result in empathic recognition—feeling bad inside because you have harmed another. Empathic recognition is recognized as a significant vehicle by which external or society-based values become internalized. (Hoffman, 1984, 1991)

Empathy has both an affective (feeling) component, as well as a cognitive (thinking) component. Affectively, people appear to differ in the degree to which they are sensitive to the emotional states of others. Differences appear to relate, in part, to biologically based personality traits. People appear to vary in the degree to which they are sensitive to others and to situations unfolding around them. Differences also appear to relate to life experiences. A child whose own feelings are not recognized or properly responded to will frequently have greater difficulty being emotionally sensitive to the feelings of another person.

Empathy is also connected with cognitive development. As young people grow, they gain greater abilities to recognize and understand the perspectives of others—to put themselves in another person's shoes. The ability to take the perspective of others impacts how one responds to the perceived distress of others. The early teen years are a time where there is a major cognitive development shift that leads to a significantly greater ability to take the perspectives of others.

When a younger child perceives that another child is hurt, this generally stimulates a direct empathic response—feeling hurt inside because they see that someone else is feeling hurt. Younger children are not as likely to have an empathic response if they are not directly in the presence of the child who is hurt. Simply being told that another child has been harmed or is feeling hurt will generally not stimulate significant internal empathic feelings in a younger child. The emerging ability to take the perspectives of another person increases the probability that a growing child or young teen will have an empathic response—feeling hurt inside—upon learning that an unseen other person has been harmed or is feeling hurt. This process is sometimes called predictive empathy.

Empathy-induced remorse is a bad feeling about oneself when one is aware of that his or her actions have harmed another. Empathy-induced remorse may lead to efforts to remedy the situation. Alternatively, the person who becomes aware that his or her actions have harmed another may seek to prevent feelings of remorse by rationalizing his or her actions. Rationalizations will be discussed below.



Educational interventions can enhance the potential that a young person will have an empathic response to another person who has been harmed or is feeling hurt. Violence and bullying programs used in schools today contain components that seek to enhance empathy, perspective taking, and recognition of the feelings of others. Increasing the potential that a young person will have an empathic response to the hurt of another and feel remorse if his or her actions caused this hurt is a critically important foundation for the prevention of violence and bullying.

3. Social disapproval, which leads to feelings of shame or 'loss of face.'

When a young person engages in irresponsible or harmful behavior and recognizes that others are aware of and disapprove this behavior, this recognition can lead to feelings of shame and 'loss of face.' Parents and peer are key providers of social approval or disapproval.

Because their survival depends on it, young people are clearly strongly influenced by the approval or disapproval of their behavior by their parents, or other adult serving in that capacity. Extensive research has demonstrated that active parental involvement including active supervision and appropriate responsiveness to behavior that is not in accord with values and expectations, is the key to a raising responsible young people.

Parental involvement also plays an important role with respect to peer influence. Active parents play a strong role in a young person's selection of friends and in moderating the impact of peer pressure. When parents are permissive or uninvolved, peer groups can assume what should be the role of parents approving or disapproving behavior.

4. Negative consequence imposed by person in authority, which can lead to remorse or shame, but can also lead to anger directed at the person in authority.

When a young person engages in irresponsible or harmful behavior that is detected by a person with authority over the young person, this will generally lead to a negative consequence. Parents and school officials are the most common authority figures to impose negative consequences on young people.

The nature of the negative consequence that is imposed in response to irresponsible or harmful behavior is of critical importance. A disciplinary response that forces the child or teen to recognize the harm that was caused, thus enhancing an internal empathic response and feelings of remorse, and focuses on how his or her actions were not in accord with established values and expectations, thus enhancing feelings of shame, can be very powerful in influencing future behavioral choices. Additionally, a very effective disciplinary response is one that requires the child or teen to take a positive action to cure any harm that was caused.

An ineffective negative consequence is that of punishment—a consequence that merely demonstrates the power of the person in authority to impose his or her will on the child



or teen and is unrelated to the action that was irresponsible or caused harm. A punitive response will frequently shift the young person's focus away from the harm that his or her action has caused to anger at the person in authority. While feelings of remorse or shame can influence future behavior, feelings of anger at the authority figure generally will not influence future behavior other than behavior that seeks to avoid future detection.

Unfortunately, a common negative consequence applied in schools can be applied in a manner that makes it an ineffective punitive response—suspension for a period of days. Suspension, in and of itself, does nothing to force a young person to confront the harm his or her actions caused to another. Suspension fails to provide a vehicle for the young person to take an action that will cure the harm. In cases of egregious behavior, suspension may be an appropriate response, but it will only be effective if combined with other consequences that force recognition of harm and allow for a cure of that harm.

### **Rationalizations**

When we perceive that we acted in a way that is not in accord with established social expectations or our own internal moral code, we will generally feel guilty—unless we can rationalize our actions in some manner. It appears that we are all willing, under certain circumstances, act in ways that are not in accord with established social expectations or our internal moral code. We each appear to have an internalized limit about how far we are willing to waiver from the ideal set forth in our personal moral code. This limit protects against unlimited inappropriate activity (Nisan, 1991)

There are a number of factors that appear to influence behavior that waivers from our personal moral code. (Nisan, 1991; Bandura, 1991) We are more likely to waiver when our assessment is that:

- “I won't get caught.” There is an extremely limited chance or no chance of detection and punishment.
- “It didn't really hurt.” The inappropriate action will not cause any perceptible harm.
- “Look at what I got.” The harm may be perceptible, but is small in comparison with the personal benefit we will gain.
- “It is not a real person.” The harm is to a large entity, such as a corporation, and no specific or known person will suffer any loss.
- “Everyone does it.” Many people engage in such behavior, even though some may consider the behavior may be considered illegal or unethical.



## Cyberbullying: The Challenge to Define

Colette Langos, B.A., L.L.B., GDLP, MComL

### Abstract

Cyberbullying is a reality of the digital age. To address this phenomenon, it becomes imperative to understand exactly what cyberbullying is. Thus, establishing a workable and theoretically sound definition is essential. This article contributes to the existing literature in relation to the definition of cyberbullying. The specific elements of repetition, power imbalance, intention, and aggression, regarded as essential criteria of traditional face-to-face bullying, are considered in the cyber context. It is posited that the core bullying elements retain their importance and applicability in relation to cyberbullying. The element of repetition is in need of redefining, given the public nature of material in the online environment. In this article, a clear distinction between direct and indirect cyberbullying is made and a model definition of cyberbullying is offered. Overall, the analysis provided lends insight into how the essential bullying elements have evolved and should apply in our parallel cyber universe.

### Introduction

WHAT HAS BECOME overwhelmingly apparent over the last decade is just how extensively new information and communication technologies (ICTs) have become intertwined with our everyday lives. The benefits of new technology are undeniable, but along with the advantages comes the potential for technology to be misused. Cyberbullying is one of the negative by-products of the digital age.

Cyberbullying has proven difficult to define. To date, a universal definition has not been agreed upon. A literal approach to interpreting the meaning may be to consider the words "cyber" and "bullying" quite separately, attaching ordinary, natural meaning to the words and then merging the two meanings to create a singular meaning.

Following this approach, "cyber" may be quite simply described as "generated by technology." Defining "bullying" presents a more challenging task.<sup>1,2</sup> Semantic differences may explain the varying conceptualizations of bullying,<sup>1</sup> considering linguistic differences that exist across disciplines and cultures. In general, national and international consensus exists<sup>3</sup> that bullying is a subset of aggression defined as being a "specific type of aggressive behaviour that is intended to cause harm, through repeated actions carried out over time, targeted at an individual who is not in a position to defend him/herself."<sup>4</sup> It can be physical or nonphysical in form.<sup>5</sup>

The elements of repetition (a course of conduct as opposed to a single incident); power imbalance (where the offender demonstrates power over the target); intention (conduct must be intended as opposed to accidental); and

aggression (conduct involves maliciousness on the part of the aggressor) are broadly considered as being the necessary elements differentiating bullying from mere aggression. A distinction can be made between direct and indirect traditional bullying. Direct bullying may include physical bullying (e.g., hitting and kicking), damaging the personal property of a victim, or verbally bullying the victims (e.g., name calling). Indirect bullying in the traditional sense may include behaviors such as spreading false rumors about the victim behind their back.

The four core bullying elements are encapsulated within several descriptive cyberbullying definitions.<sup>6,7</sup> The element unique to a cyberbullying definition relates to use of ICTs through which repeated, aggressive online acts are facilitated. Cyberbullying can occur through a variety of technological media, such as computers, mobile phones (smart phones), or any other ICTs. Cyberbullying is bullying transposed on a technological platform.

### Traditional Bullying Elements in the Cyber Context

There is some academic debate as to the importance of the four foundation elements of traditional bullying in the cyber context. This being the case, the ordinary meanings of repetition, power imbalance, intention, and aggression will need revising/redefining to tailor their meanings to the cyber environment if society is to develop a satisfactory response to the phenomenon.

To assist in understanding how the elements may apply in the cyber context, it is necessary to differentiate between direct and indirect cyberbullying.



Direct cyberbullying occurs where the cyberbully "directs the electronic communications directly at the victim. It encompasses a cyberbully's use of instant messaging, text or multimedia messaging, or email intended to have a direct, immediate effect on the victim."<sup>8</sup> Direct cyberbullying is limited to the context where the cyberbully directs communications to the victim only, as opposed to communications that are posted to more public areas of cyberspace. Direct cyberbullying occurs in the private domain.

Indirect cyberbullying occurs where the cyberbully "does not direct the electronic communication that constitutes the bullying at his/her victim directly. Instead, the bully posts them on MySpace, Facebook, a specially created Website or blog, or some other reasonably public area of cyberspace."<sup>8</sup> Public forums such as social media sites, blogs, Web pages, and video-sharing Web sites are obvious examples of platforms that fall within the public cyberspace arena. The concept of the public domain in cyberspace extends to situations where the victim has knowledge of multiple recipients being privy to a personal communication transmitted via ICTs. The nature of this technology is such that the sender has no control over to whom the original communication is forwarded. Because multiple parties are directly privy to the original electronic communication, the communication has the potential to spread to an infinite audience. Thus, once any other recipient has access to the information, it should be considered material falling within the public arena.

### Repetition

Repetition is firmly established as being a key criterion in cyberbullying.<sup>9,10</sup> Without the presence of this element, conduct may arguably be described as mere face-to-face joking or jovial teasing in the traditional sense, or cyberjoking or playful cyberteaching in the virtual world. Teasing is specifically referred to as playful or jovial in nature. Olweus comments that some forms of "repeated teasing of a degrading and offensive character continued in spite of clear signs of distress or opposition on the part of the target qualifies as bullying."<sup>11</sup> Repetition is an important criterion to allow for differentiation between a joke or jovial teasing and an intentional attack.<sup>12</sup> The presence of repetition demonstrates systematic conduct.

The nature of cyberspace alters the way in which repetition should be understood in some instances. One act in cyberspace, such as one posting of a photo or video, one posting on a blog, on a Web site, one e-mail sent, one twitter tweeted, or one SMS sent, has the unique ability to remain in cyberspace indefinitely, as photos, videos, e-mails, tweets, and phone messages can be archived or forwarded by anyone who gains access. A single act could be considered repetitive each time the blog, Web site, video, e-mail, photo, or text message is accessed/viewed.<sup>13</sup> In the cyber context, it is necessary to consider the element of repetition differentiating between direct and indirect cyberbullying.

Direct cyberbullying occurs in the private arena. It involves electronic communications directed from the perpetrator to the victim only. Direct cyberbullying could include, but is in no way limited to, calls from the perpetrator's mobile phone to the victim's mobile phone, SMS messaging between the perpetrator's mobile phone and the victim's mobile phone, or e-mails sent to a victim's personal e-mail account from the perpetrator's personal e-mail account. In the direct cyber-

bullying context, for conduct to qualify as cyberbullying, the victim would need to be subjected to a course of conduct to establish the element of repetition. The negative conduct needs to occur on more than one occasion so as to distinguish it from a one-off act of aggression. In this manner, the element of repetition in the direct cyberbullying context is defined in the same way as it is defined in the traditional face-to-face bullying context.

Indirect cyberbullying occurs in the public cyber arena. It refers to material that has been posted to areas in cyberspace that are publically accessible. In circumstances where a perpetrator posts an electronic communication into a public forum, such as a public blog, a social media forum, or a video-sharing Web site, it is no longer necessary for the victim to prove a course of conduct to satisfy the element of repetition. Repetition occurs by virtue of the arena in which the behavior occurs. Material can remain in the public cyber arena indefinitely. It can be viewed publically countless times. It can be distributed, and it can be saved and re-posted at a later time. In the instance where an electronic communication has been sent directly to the victim but has, to the victim's knowledge, been copied/forwarded to other people, the act of distribution propels the material out of the private domain and into the public arena. This negates the victim's onus to establish a course of conduct to establish the element of repetition.

For the purpose of the definition of cyberbullying, repetition in the private context (electronic communication between the perpetrator and the victim only) occurs as a result of multiple contacts; in the public arena (electronic communication that has been distributed to persons other than the victim only), it can be established simply by its appearance in that forum.

### Power Differential

Power imbalance (power differential) is another element considered by many researchers as an essential criterion to the cyberbullying definition. In the traditional bullying context, a power imbalance relates to the "demonstration or interpretation of power by the offender over the target."<sup>7</sup> The meaning is not altered in the cyber context. Although a power imbalance may be achieved in various new ways in cyberspace, this does not alter the fact that, in order for conduct to qualify as cyberbullying, the conduct must place the victim in a position where he/she cannot easily defend him/herself.

In the physical world, a person's characteristics such as popularity, height, intelligence, physical strength, age, sex, and socioeconomic status can give a perpetrator perceived or actual power over a victim.<sup>7</sup> It is not uncommon to hear of instances where a larger student bullies a smaller student. The power imbalance between the two students is likely to result from the smaller student feeling defenseless against the physically much larger student. Additionally, factors such as low social integration, low self-esteem, a problematic parent-child relationship, or school-related behavioral problems have been established as determinates of school victimization.<sup>14</sup> In the physical world, it is not uncommon to hear of situations where a bully targets a victim who displays signs of low social integration. This aspect makes the target a perceived easy target for the bully. There is a power imbalance



between the perpetrator and the target that defines the relationship: where the perpetrator is perceived as the stronger party and the victim (the social outcast) as the weaker party who cannot easily defend him/herself against the bully. Known determinates of school victimization, along with a person's physical characteristics, can act as ammunition a perpetrator uses to exploit power over a victim. Studies conducted on school children in Sweden, Germany, and Belgium demonstrate that targets of traditional bullying are more likely to become targets of cyberbullying.<sup>13-15</sup> This would suggest that determinates of traditional bullying that enable a perpetrator to demonstrate actual or perceived power over a victim may also be determinates of cyberbullying. (The fact that a victim is perceived as a social outcast in the physical world may continue to be a reason for the continued bullying of the victim in the parallel cyber world.) However, it is also possible that a perpetrator in cyberspace does not know his/her victim in a physical social context. Electronic media provide a novel platform for individuals to connect with strangers. In such cases, physical characteristics or other determinates of school victimization are unlikely to be the trigger for the cyberbullying.

In addition, cyberspace presents a bully with new opportunities in which to flaunt their power over a perceived weaker victim. It has been suggested that varying degrees of technological skill may create a power differential between a perpetrator and a victim in the digital world.<sup>15</sup> In this sense, a victim could feel powerless in defending him or herself against a perpetrator's online actions as a result of the perpetrator's perceived or actual greater technological expertise. Once online material enters the public online environment, as material can be disseminated, archived, reposted, or altered by people other than the victim or the perpetrator. This fact plays to a perpetrator's perceived and actual power over the victim in the cyber context given the complexities associated with controlling material in cyberspace.

A perpetrator may feel emboldened to engage in cyberbullying as a result of the perceived anonymity cyberspace presents. Cyberbullies are able to create pseudonyms and provisional e-mail addresses and to block their telephone number to conceal their identity. A victim is likely to feel increased feelings of powerlessness by not knowing the person behind the cyber aggression.<sup>15</sup> In this manner, the victim could be interpreted as the weaker party.

The seemingly limitless nature of technology means a cyberbully (as opposed to a schoolyard bully or a workplace bully) can penetrate the home environment. There are no spatial or time limitations. This factor awards a perpetrator the upper hand and ensures the victim feels powerless in comparison.<sup>16</sup>

Additionally, a victim may feel less able (and therefore more powerless) to defend him or herself against a potentially infinite cyber audience. In the physical world, the number of witnesses to bullying is likely to be far fewer.

The cyber environment creates a variety of new opportunities that can give rise to an exploitation of power in a perpetrator/victim relationship. The element of power imbalance remains and therefore an essential criterion that applies equally in both the private and public contexts. In either setting, physical or virtual, a victim's lack of perceived or actual power comparative to the perpetrator's possession of power is crucial to the definition.

## Aggression and Intention

### *The bullying context*

In the bullying context, the elements of intention and aggression are intrinsically linked. Defined as a subset of aggression,<sup>17</sup> bullying inherently contains the same elements that frame the definition of aggression. What propels bullying out of the broad pool of merely aggressive behaviors into a new realm (or subset of aggression) are the necessary elements of repetition and power imbalance.

Arguments for and against the inclusion of intention in a definition of bullying relate to the arguments advanced in the context of aggression.<sup>18-21</sup> Those who argue against inclusion maintain the weaker argument. Without its inclusion, joking, jovial teasing, and inadvertent/accidental behaviors are captured in an overly broad meaning of bullying. In the same way, inadvertent online behaviors and common behaviors such as playful cyberteasing and cyberjoking, which do not require the elements of repetition, power imbalance, or intention to cause harm to the target, would be labeled aggressive cyber acts. An exclusion of the element of intention suggests that acts carried out in an attempt to cause a victim harm will not be deemed aggressive if harm does not materialize.<sup>19</sup> To differentiate behaviors, acts (online or otherwise) should only be deemed aggressive where the action was directed toward the goal of producing a negative consequence for a victim which that victim is motivated to avoid.

### Intention in the Cyberbullying Context

#### *Direct cyberbullying*

It is necessary to consider the element of intention in relation to direct and indirect cyberbullying. Direct cyberbullying requires the perpetrator to engage in a course of conduct to fulfill the criterion of repetition. The repetitive conduct, in turn, may illustrate an intention to harm, as the conduct is not an inadvertent or isolated incident. Behavior demonstrated as a course of conduct is likely to implicate the perpetrator as having the desire and the knowledge that the victim would be harmed by the conduct. In this manner, repetition and intention may be considered related elements. The context of the conduct and form of words, images or sound used need to be taken into account.

#### *Indirect cyberbullying*

Let us presume that a perpetrator has posted material via ICTs into a public area of cyberspace. Brenner and Rehberg appropriately posit that two issues unique to indirect cyberbullying arise in that instance. The first issue relates to the extent to which the cyberbully intentionally directed the online communication at the victim; the second issue relates to the extent to which the cyberbully intended the communication to have a negative impact (harm) the victim.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, where material is posted in a public forum, it may be possible to determine the extent to which the cyberbully intentionally directed the online communication at the victim. For example, addressing the victim in the public forum by name may be considered reasonably strong evidence that the cyberbully intentionally directed the communication at the victim. There may be instances, however, where it is much more difficult to make this determination. Where material is



posted to a public forum, but either restricted to a particular audience by virtue of privacy settings, or posted to an area of cyberspace where it would not readily come to the victim's attention, establishing intention becomes problematic. The perpetrator has posted the material to an area where it is unlikely to become known to the victim.

Where the victim is deemed to be the intended target of the aggression, particularly hostile/malicious material is more likely to be deemed material that is intended to have a negative impact on the victim. Where the material posted is not of the type that is clearly intended to harm the victim, it will be more arduous to fulfill the criterion of intention. The context of the cyberbullying and the form of words, images or sound used will be relevant.

### How Intention Could Be Established

It is clear that the subjective nature of intention can make this element difficult to establish in some instances. To assist in making a determination, it may be appropriate to take into account the age of a perpetrator.<sup>6</sup> A younger child is likely to have a reduced capacity to appreciate the consequences of his/her actions than an adult because of a child's less-developed stage of maturity.<sup>8</sup> Research findings suggest that the relationship between victim and perpetrator plays an important role in the way conduct is interpreted.<sup>15</sup> Others suggest it is a victim's perception of the incident rather than the intention of the other that should be considered.<sup>12,20</sup> It is the view of the author that intention is best determined based on how a reasonable person would perceive the perpetrator's conduct.

The reasonable person approach is an objective test that measures the conduct of the perpetrator against conduct of a hypothetical reasonable person placed in a similar position as the victim. This approach is widely adopted in both criminal law and law of torts. In Australia, it is not uncommon for offences to be defined by the reasonable person test in relation to harassment or workplace bullying.<sup>22</sup> Applying the reasonable person standard to the cyberbullying context would set some boundaries to an establishing intention. It would serve as a practical tool for diminishing the level of subjectivity from a finding of intention. By introducing the reasonable person standard as an objective measurement of conduct, intention becomes a practicable element of the definition.

### A Suggested Descriptive Definition

In light of the above, an appropriate descriptive definition is suggested:

Cyberbullying involves the use of ICTs to carry out a series of acts as in the case of direct cyberbullying, or an act as in the case of indirect cyberbullying, intended to harm another (the victim) who cannot easily defend him or herself.

*Direct cyberbullying* involves a perpetrator repeatedly directing unwanted electronic communications to a victim who cannot easily defend him or herself with the intent to harm the victim.

*Indirect cyberbullying* involves directing a single or repeated unwanted electronic communications to a victim who cannot easily defend him or herself with the intent to harm the victim.

An *intention to harm* is established where a reasonable person, adopting the position of the victim and having regard to all the circumstances, would regard the series of acts or an act as acts or an act intended to harm to the victim.

*Electronic communication* includes (but is not limited to) any transfer of signs signals, writing, images, sounds, data transferred whole or in part by wire, radio, a photo electronic or photo optical system, including electronic mail, Internet communications, instant messages, and facsimile communications.

*Harm* refers to emotional harm.

The elements of power imbalance, aggression, and intention (which are intrinsically linked) and the use of ICTs are all included in the above description. The altered meaning of repetition in the indirect cyberbullying context is captured by differentiating between direct and indirect cyberbullying.

### Conclusion

To address the phenomenon of cyberbullying, it is imperative to know what it is. A workable definition is crucial. This article has presented a model definition that encompasses both direct and indirect cyberbullying. The definition highlights the importance and applicability of traditional elements of bullying in relation to cyberbullying. Traditional face-to-face bullying requires a course of conduct to be established before the criterion of repetition is satisfied, and this aspect is retained in the model definition. The meaning of repetition in the cyber context is, however, altered in relation to indirect cyberbullying because of the public nature of the material once it enters the public online domain. Power imbalance is an equally essential criterion to cyberbullying and is preserved in the cyber context. The elements of intention and aggression are intrinsically linked and are fundamental aspects of this proposed cyberbullying definition.

### Disclosure Statement

No competing financial interests exist.

### References

1. Espelage D, Swearer S. Research on school bullying and victimization: what have we learned and where do we go from here? *School Psychology Review* 2003; 3:365-383.
2. Monks C, Smith P. Definitions of bullying: age differences in understanding of the term, and the role of experience. *British Journal of Development Psychology* 2006; 24:801-821.
3. Cross D, Shaw T, Hearn L, et al. (2009) *Australian covert bullying prevalence study*. Edith Cowan University, Perth: Child Health Promotion Research Centre.
4. Olweus D. Familial and temperamental determinants of aggressive behavior in adolescent boys: a causal analysis. *Developmental Psychology* 1980; 16:644-660.
5. Rigby K. Effects of peer victimisation in schools and perceived social support on adolescent well-being. *Journal of Adolescence* 2000; 23:57-68.
6. Smith PK, Mahdavi J, Carvalho M, et al. Cyberbullying: its nature and impact in secondary school pupils. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 2008; 49:376-385.
7. Hinduja S, Patchin JW. (2009) *Bullying beyond the schoolyard: preventing and responding to cyberbullying*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
8. Brenner SW, Rehberg M. "Kiddie Crime"? The utility of criminal law. *First amendment law review* 2009; 8:1-85.
9. Patchin JW, Hinduja S. Bullies move beyond the schoolyard: a preliminary look at cyberbullying. *Youth Violence & Juvenile Justice* 2006; 4:148-169.



10. Li Q. New bottle but old wine: a research of cyberbullying in schools. *Computers in Human Behavior* 2007; 23:1777–1791.
11. Olweus D. Bully/victim problems in school: knowledge base and an effective intervention program. *Irish Journal of Psychology* 1997; 18:170–190.
12. Nocentini A, Calmaestra J, Schultze-Krumbholz A, et al. Cyberbullying: labels, behaviors and definition in three european countries. *Australian Journal of Guidance and Counselling* 2010; 20:129–142.
13. Slonje R, Smith PK. Cyberbullying: another main type of bullying? *Scandinavian Journal of Psychology* 2008; 49:147–154.
14. Katzer C, Fetchenhauer D, Belschak F. Cyberbullying: who are the victims? A comparison of victimization in Internet chatrooms and victimization in school. *Journal of Media Psychology* 2009; 21:25–36.
15. Vandabosch H, Cleemput K. Defining cyberbullying: a qualitative research into perceptions of youngsters. *Cyberpsychology & Behavior* 2008; 11:499–503.
16. Dooley J, Pyzalski J, Cross D. Cyberbullying versus face-to-face bullying: a theoretical and conceptual review. *Journal of Psychology* 2009; 217:182–188.
17. Smith PK, Cowie H, Olafsson RF, et al. Definitions of bullying: a comparison of terms used, and age and gender differences, in a fourteen-country international comparison. *Child Development* 2002; 73:1119–1133.
18. Geen RG. (2001) *Human aggression*. Buckingham, England; Philadelphia, PA: Open University Press.
19. Baron RA. (1977) *Human aggression*. New York: Plenum Press.
20. Tattum D. A whole-school response: from crisis management to prevention. *Irish Journal of Psychology* 1997; 18: 221–232.
21. Guerin S, Hennessy E. Pupils' definitions of bullying. *European Journal of Psychology of Education* 2002; 17:249–261.
22. *Equal Opportunity Act 1984* (SA), s 87(9) (Austl.); *Sex Discrimination Act 1984* (Cth), s 28A(1) (Austl.); *Criminal Code Act 1995* (Cth), s 474.17 (1)(b) (Austl.); *Occupational Health Safety and Welfare Act 1986* (SA), s 55 A(1) (Austl.).

Address correspondence to:

Colette Langos  
 Centre for Regulation and Market Analysis  
 and School of Law  
 University of South Australia  
 GPO Box 2471  
 Adelaide  
 South Australia 5001  
 Australia

E-mail: colette.langos@unisa.edu.au



Copyright of CyberPsychology, Behavior & Social Networking is the property of Mary Ann Liebert, Inc. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.



# Cyberbullying Versus Face-to-Face Bullying

## A Theoretical and Conceptual Review

Julian J. Dooley,<sup>1</sup> Jacek Pyżalski,<sup>2,3</sup> and Donna Cross<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Child Health Promotion Research Centre, Edith Cowan University, Mt. Lawley, WA, Australia

<sup>2</sup>The Pedagogy Academy, Lodz, Poland

<sup>3</sup>Nofer Institute of Occupational Medicine, Lodz, Poland

**Abstract.** Cyberbullying has been described as a type of electronic bullying and has recently been subjected to intense media scrutiny largely due to a number of high profile and tragic cases of teen suicide. Despite the media attention relatively little is known about the nature of cyberbullying. This is, at least in part, due to a lack of theoretical and conceptual clarity and an examination of the similarities and differences between cyberbullying and face-to-face bullying. This paper reviews the limited theoretical and empirical literature addressing both cyberbullying and face-to-face bullying, using some specific examples from a qualitative study for illustration. We compare and contrast individual factors common to cyber and face-to-face bullying. We then examine social information processing factors associated with face-to-face bullying and present a discussion of the similarities and differences that may characterize cyberbullying.

**Keywords:** cyberbullying, face-to-face bullying, theory

To date cyberbullying has received significant media attention driven by some recent cases resulting in criminal or civil lawsuits filed against the perpetrator as well as, in some incidences, the school. Despite this attention, many questions about cyberbullying are yet to be answered. For example, is cyberbullying analogous to face-to-face bullying? Are cyberbullying and face-to-face bullying conceptually and theoretically similar? We review the cyberbullying literature, examining the conceptual and theoretical similarities and differences between cyberbullying and face-to-face bullying.

While this paper treats those who engage in cyberbullying or face-to-face bullying behaviors as two distinct groups, we acknowledge the evidence indicating the overlap between them (e.g., Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2007). However, to examine cyberbullying and face-to-face bullying it is necessary to describe and compare the "discrete" forms as distinct behaviors enacted by different people. This should not be interpreted as meaning that individuals cannot or do not engage in both forms of the behavior. This paper aims to start a dialog to improve our conceptual understanding of cyberbullying and henceforth approaches to measurement and the development of prevention/intervention strategies.

Given that the theoretical discourse regarding cyberbullying is limited, we draw on available empirical literature for illustration. In addition we use some qualitative data, collected by the second author via face-to-face interviews, e-interviews, and focus groups. Participants were Polish university students aged 12–25. The interviews and focus group sessions addressed: general use patterns of communication technologies and their role in daily life, the role of communication

technologies in building and maintaining relationships, the bullying concepts of repetition of behaviors and imbalance of power, as well as experiences as a victim, perpetrator, or witness of cyberbullying. Quotations obtained during these sessions are used to illustrate examples of various aspects of bullying behaviors.

### Definition

Bullying is usually defined as aggression that is intentionally carried out by one or more individuals and repeatedly targeted toward a person who cannot easily defend him- or herself (e.g., Olweus, 1993). Olweus identified two factors crucial to differentiating between aggression and bullying: aggression is a single act whereas bullying comprises repeated acts; and bully-victim relationships are characterized by an imbalance of power while aggression can be between two persons of equal power. Finally, including intentionality in the definition excludes acts bereft of malice.

To date, cyberbullying has been difficult to define and compare because, as Kowalski, Limber, and Agatston (2008) noted, the methods employed are varied. However, cyberbullying has generally been defined as bullying using an electronic medium, adopting the definition of Olweus, or something similar. Smith et al. (2008, p. 376) defined cyberbullying as "an aggressive, intentional act carried out by a group or individual, using electronic forms of contact, repeatedly and over time against a victim who cannot easily defend him or herself." Major components to this definition



are that the act must be *aggressive, intentional, repetitive*, and with a *power imbalance*. Belsey (2004) defined cyberbullying as "the use of information and communication technologies to support deliberate, repeated, and hostile behavior by an individual or group that is intended to harm others." Note the absence of a power imbalance, suggesting that online power is not a necessary component. Alternatively, Wolak, Mitchell, and Finkelhor (2006, 2007) suggest that it is more accurate to consider repeated acts of online aggression as *online harassment*. Further, Wolak et al. (2006) argued that, as negative online interactions can be easily terminated, the victim is in a position of power they would not have if the bullying occurred in the schoolyard from which they cannot easily escape. However, Wolak et al. (2007) note that there are instances of online victimization that cannot be easily terminated, such as the difficulties associated with removing information (e.g., on websites) from the Internet.

To proceed with uniformity the core components of cyberbullying must be identified. Vandebosch and van Cleemput (2008) conducted focus groups with 10–19 year olds in Belgium about their experiences with information and communication technology (ICT) and cyberbullying. These data suggested that cyberbullying behavior must be intentional, repetitive, and characterized by a power imbalance – the same factors considered central to face-to-face bullying, and suggested that the behavior not the medium is important. Similarly, Kowalski et al. (2008) suggested that cyberbullying is the electronic form of face-to-face bullying rather than a distinct phenomenon. However, considering cyberbullying as merely the electronic form of face-to-face bullying may overlook intricacies of these behaviors. As bullying (and cyberbullying) behaviors are, by almost all definitions, intentionally hurtful, the next section will focus on the more contentious issues of repetition and power imbalance.

## Repetition

Olweus (1993) argued that repetition is necessary in the definition of bullying, in order to exclude occasional acts of aggression directed at different people at different times. Nonetheless, it is feasible that multiple acts of aggression by a single person toward numerous individuals may be considered bullying independent of whether the person being aggressed is considered a victim of bullying. The repetitive nature of the aggressive behavior can be used to instill fear, thus causing psychological harm to a victim. As bullying behaviors take many forms (e.g., physical hitting and gossiping) it is argued that it is the repetitive nature of acts intended to harm that is crucial and not necessarily the nature of the behavior itself.

Although the inclusion of repetition in the definition is generally accepted, debate continues about its nature and importance. For example, Tattum (1989) argued that ongoing feelings of stress about an incident may be considered repetitive even though the act occurred only once. Similarly, Guerin and Hennessy (2002) found that over 50% of their sample of children did not consider the frequency of occur-

rence to be important, with over 40% of those believing that an act that occurred once or twice could still be bullying.

Repetition in cyberbullying is especially problematic to operationalize, as there can be differences between the perpetrator and victim in terms of perceptions of how many incidences occur and the potential consequences. While repetition is clear when a perpetrator sends numerous phone text messages or e-mails (e.g., Slonje & Smith, 2008), it is not so clear when a bully creates a single derogatory website, or a message on a website, which many people can access (Leishman, 2005). A single aggressive act such as uploading an embarrassing picture to the Internet can result in continued and widespread ridicule and humiliation for the victim. Whereas the aggressive act is not repeated the damage caused by the act is relived through the ongoing humiliation.

If it is assumed that not all forms of cyberbullying are equal in terms of victim impact (Smith et al., 2008), such that the effect of receiving a threatening text message is not the same as receiving a threatening message in an online chat-room, then it follows that some acts may not need to be repeated (or repeated as often) to inflict harm. Further, Vandebosch and van Cleemput (2008) noted that a single cyber act could be sufficient to be considered bullying, especially if this act followed on from a series of offline acts of bullying. Along these lines, Fauman (2008) suggested that as information posted online can be widely disseminated, the repetitive nature of the act by the person bullying may not be as important as in face-to-face bullying.

The relative permanence of pictures or videos posted online for anyone to view is likely to have a similar effect (or possibly worse) than an offline act. Having an embarrassing picture posted on the Internet has the potential for significant and long-lasting social and emotional harm. This is illustrated in an interview with a 22-year-old girl whose drunk behavior at a party was video recorded and then posted on the Internet. She reported feeling like the act was being repeated as she watched the number of website hits increase. Slonje and Smith (2008) found that cyberbullying using picture/video clips was perceived by students as being more severe than other forms of cyberbullying primarily due to the large potential audience and because they can be identified. Therefore, it appears that the damage experienced in cyberbullying may be largely social and emotional in nature and is exacerbated by the potential scale of the damage inflicted.

## Power Imbalance

An imbalance in power between perpetrator and victim has been described as a fundamental aspect of bullying that permits the distinction between acts of aggression and bullying. Aalsma and Brown (2008) use the example of a sixth grade boy being kicked on the bus every day by a smaller, emotionally impaired second grader suggesting that bullying did not occur because the second grade child was smaller (and less physically powerful) than the sixth grade child. However, implicit in their example is that a sixth grader



should not be afraid of a smaller second grader which, of course, is not necessarily always the case. The assessment of power imbalance is complicated because it is difficult to assess, especially in younger populations (Mishna, 2004, 2006). The issue of power is further complicated as power can be social, psychological, or physical in nature (Monks & Smith, 2006). Olweus (1997) has made reference to the "weak" victim, meaning not merely physically weak but also mentally weak. The acknowledgment that aggression (and bullying) can be enacted to damage a person's social and relational status indicates that power can come in many forms. In fact, Rigby (2007, p. 19) noted that "wherever there is a power imbalance, whatever its source, an individual can be reduced in status."

Conceptualizing and assessing power imbalance in cyber-based interactions is even more complicated than in traditional forms of bullying. With Rigby's comment in mind, power in online relationships can be interpreted as more advanced technological skills. However, it does not require an advanced skill set to take a picture using a mobile phone camera and send it to others. Similarly, posting a picture online or creating a fake social network site profile requires only a basic skill set. Other more complicated forms of cyberbullying (e.g., manipulating and modifying pictures) require more advanced skills but these forms are relatively less common (Smith et al., 2008).

It has been suggested that one of the distinguishing features of cyberbullying is the inability of victims to get away from it (Slonje & Smith, 2008). Unlike with face-to-face bullying, there is potentially no reprise from technology-based interactions as they can be received at any time of the day or night. In this sense, the inability to have any control over acts of bullying may result in feelings of powerlessness in the person being bullied.

To date, few have explicitly measured the nature of power imbalance in online interactions. Vandebosch and van Cleemput (2008) reported that those who engaged in cyberbullying behaviors acknowledged that many of/most of their victims knew them in the real world (although the perpetrators concealed their identity) and that the victims were perceived as being of more, less, or equal strength. Interestingly, students in this study indicated that the weaker victims were also often the victims of face-to-face bullying whereas

those considered more powerful in the real world were bullied due to the anonymity that ICT affords. More importantly, cybervictims reported that not knowing the identity of the bully increased feelings of frustration and powerlessness. Consistent with this, Fauman (2008) suggested that the ability to remain anonymous may minimize the necessity for those who bully to be more powerful than victims.

Given that most victims are cyberbullied by either another student at school or a stranger (Kowalski & Limber, 2007) the anonymity afforded to perpetrators is an important issue. Smith et al. (2008) reported from focus groups that students believed phone text messaging was the most common form of cyberbullying as it enabled those who bully to remain anonymous. Consistent with this, we noted a male participant (17 years old) in a focus group, who encouraged his peers to send threatening phone text messages from many unknown numbers, openly expressed such awareness by commenting that the victim "is in real trouble ... he doesn't know who is sending this - doesn't know what can happen - it's better when he's uncertain what can happen..." Similarly, in a face-to-face interview a 15-year-old girl described receiving a series of anonymous phone text messages criticizing her harshly. She reported that it was not the content of messages but the anonymity of the author that was the most threatening. Anonymity appears to be an important feature of cyberbullying for perpetrators who report that they would not engage in offline bullying (Vandebosch & van Cleemput, 2008). This highlights the potential for growth in cyberbullying, given that many more people could engage in this behavior than would normally engage in face-to-face bullying.

Table 1 outlines how the two primary constructs (imbalance of power and repetition) relate to face-to-face and cyberbullying contexts. The relationship between anonymity and power in cyberbullying behavior has yet to be thoroughly addressed and may reveal important differences between cyber- and face-to-face bullying, especially in relation to how information is processed in cyberbullying interactions. Before addressing the information processing patterns that characterize bullying behaviors, we examine if bullying presents in different forms which will further enable the identification of cognitive motivations that characterize these forms.

*Table 1.* The constructs of imbalance of power, and repetition, in relation to face-to-face and cyberbullying

	Face-to-face bullying	Cyberbullying
Imbalance of power	Usually connected to the features of perpetrators and their relative physical and/or psychological power in a real world	May be related to the features of perpetrators, but often to "a power of technology" and the features of the content published on the Internet or features of computer mediated communication (e.g., anonymity)  May be based on a victim's lack of power as opposed to a perpetrator's possession of power
Repetition	Based on behavioral repetition over time conducted by perpetrators	May be based on technology and the specific features of the content published - not initial perpetrator's intentions and behavior



## Forms of Bullying

Early researchers primarily focused on physical and verbal aggression that characterized bullying interactions. In the 1990s researchers recognized that other more subtle forms of aggression were also being used, such as relational aggression, characterized by attempts or threats to damage relationships (e.g., Crick & Grotpeter, 1996). Relational aggression consists of subtle behaviors (e.g., gossiping) which are more frequently observed in women (Coyne, Archer, & Eslea, 2006). Underwood (2003) also described social aggression, which was a broader form of aggression than relational aggression, where many tactics were employed in an attempt to destroy all types of social relationships as well as a person's self-esteem and social status.

These forms of aggression can be either direct or indirect in how they are enacted (e.g., Björkqvist, Österman, & Kaukiainen, 1992). For example, direct forms would include telling someone they cannot join in a game or by being verbally aggressive whereas indirect forms would include gossiping or spreading nasty rumors. The primary difference is that direct aggression is enacted directly toward the victim (so the victim is aware who the aggressor is) while indirect aggression is directed at the victim via a third (or more) party so it is not always possible to identify the aggressor (i.e., the person who started the rumor). Additionally, bullying has also been described in terms of reactive (i.e., emotionally volatile and explosive) versus proactive (i.e., planned and controlled aggression designed to dominate others or to acquire tangible objects such as lunch money). To date, much research has focused on the reactive/proactive aggression dichotomy especially in relation to the cognitive motivations that drive these forms of aggression (e.g., Fontaine, 2007).

Smith et al. (2008) described seven modes of cyberbullying: phone call, mobile phone text messaging, e-mail, picture/video clip, instant messaging, website, and chatroom. Clearly, there are distinct differences between some of these media in terms of the nature of contact between the bully and the victim (e.g., phone call requires the bully to speak to the victim while e-mail requires no "direct" contact) as well as the level of technological skills required (e.g., the skills required to set up a website are more complex than the skills required to send a mobile phone text message). Smith and colleagues (Slonje & Smith, 2008; Smith et al., 2008) demonstrated the differential impact of each of these types of cyberbullying in comparison with face-to-face bullying. In general, the impact of picture/video clip bullying was considered worse than face-to-face bullying, while the impact of phone call and text messaging bullying (Smith et al., 2008) or of text message and e-mail bullying (Slonje & Smith, 2008) was considered better (i.e., less damaging) than face-to-face bullying. Clearly, the different types of cyberbullying are not equal in terms of the skills needed to engage in the behavior as well as the impact they have on victims. It would be interesting to determine if there is an association between a perpetrator's motivation (e.g., revenge vs. fun) and the type of media used to cyberbully.

Although both the mobile phone and Internet lend themselves to verbal threats and insults the anonymity afforded by these forms of cyberbullying makes the classification

more complex. For example, it is possible to directly aggress toward a person in an online chatroom or via text message (i.e., being verbally aggressive) but this could be considered indirect aggression as the identity of the perpetrator is concealed. Therefore, the same act of aggression can have both direct and indirect components to it. In relation to proactive aggression, the use of aggression is considered a means of interpersonal dominance (i.e., getting others to do what you want them to) or of object acquisition (Pepler, Jiang, Craig, & Connolly, 2008). This type of aggression has often been associated with bullying, especially in relation to its instrumental motives (see Fontaine, 2007, for a detailed discussion of the differences between proactive/instrumental and reactive aggression).

Although the literature is sparse it can be concluded that the motives for engaging in these acts of aggression are primarily focused on inflicting harm and fear. Vandebosch and van Cleemput (2008) reported that students indicated that revenge for being bullied in real life was a primary motivation for some. Similarly, Raskauskas and Stoltz (2007, p. 570) found that 25% of those who cyberbullied others engaged in aggressive behaviors to "get back at someone they're mad at." For others, cyberbullying was in reaction to a previous argument or was a means for the person bullying to display their technological skills; and almost 40% of those who cyberbullied others reported engaging in online aggression for fun. Given this, it is highly likely, as suggested by Slonje and Smith (2008), that not having to see the fear in a victim's eyes and being less aware of the consequences reduces the potential for empathy and remorse – factors which would lessen the likelihood of future acts of aggression and bullying. However, these reasons offer only anecdotal evidence and, to date, no studies have thoroughly assessed the motivation that drives cyberbullying and whether it is different than for face-to-face bullying. One method of understanding the motivations for bullying behaviors is to examine the patterns of information processing associated with these behaviors.

## Information Processing and Bullying

A number of theoretical models have been proposed to describe and explain the processing of social information that drives aggressive and bullying behaviors. To date, the most empirically supported model was proposed by Crick and Dodge (1994). The social information processing (SIP) model describes five interrelated cognitive processes believed to underlie social behaviors: (1) internal and external stimuli are encoded; (2) encoded information is interpreted and attributions of intent and causality are made; (3) a social goal is generated; (4) responses are generated that will lead to its attainment; and (5) the response that is attributed the highest overall value is chosen (Fontaine & Dodge, 2006). In terms of aggression research, the stages of attribution (Stage 2) and response decision (Stage 5) are the most frequently addressed.

One of the most consistent findings in the SIP and aggression literature is the association between reactive aggression and the tendency toward attributing hostile intent in ambiguo-



ous social interactions (e.g., Crick & Dodge, 1996; Hartman & Stage, 2000; Orobio de Castro, Veerman, Koops, Bosch, & Monshouwer, 2002). Unlike reactive aggression, proactive aggression has been associated with differences in latter stages of the SIP model. The most consistent finding is the association between proactive aggression and the response decision stage of the SIP model (e.g., Crick & Dodge, 1996; Schwartz et al., 1998). For example, Crick and Dodge (1996) reported that proactively aggressive children were more likely to anticipate positive outcomes for their aggressive behavior. Similarly, Schwartz et al. (1998) reported that high rates of proactive aggression were associated with positive outcome expectancies for aggressive behavior. Thus, examining the patterns in which information is processed during social interactions has provided a means to distinguish between different forms of aggressive behavior and has provided important insights into the cognitive motivations that drive these behaviors (e.g., Camodeca & Goossens, 2005).

To date, no studies have examined SIP in relation to cyberbullying. We are not suggesting that the patterns of information processing associated with cyberbullying behavior will be totally distinct from what has been reported in relation to, for example, proactive aggression. However, given the media typically used to engage in cyberbullying and that those who engage in cyberbullying behaviors do not necessarily engage in face-to-face bullying, we suggest there may be some subtle differences between how information is processed in these interactions. For example, the expectation of positive outcomes after aggressive behavior (a finding primarily related to those who bully either getting people to do what they want or acquiring an object) may be the same for the cyberbully but, importantly, the goal toward which the behavior is directed may differ. If, as was suggested by Vandebosch and van Cleemput (2008), those who cyberbully others are more motivated by revenge than the explicit goal is to hurt rather than to dominate or to acquire.

However, due to the nature of the medium in which cyberbullying is enacted, those who bully are no longer reinforced for their behavior in the traditional manner. For example, if a person engaging in face-to-face bullying behaviors is motivated (and goal oriented) to inflict harm primarily using fear, then they will likely be reinforced for this behavior by the body language and facial expression (as well as the verbal response) of their victim. The reinforcement is immediate and tangible. In contrast, a person engaging in cyberbullying behaviors who is motivated to socially hurt others may have to wait for a period of time before the impact is apparent (at least until the text message, picture, or other material is distributed among the group).

Similarly, the person engaging in cyberbullying behaviors who is motivated to inflict harm using fear has limited external sources of reinforcement and may have to, at least initially, rely on their own reactions to their acts. The reward for engaging in some forms of cyberbullying could be based to a larger extent on the expectations the person engaging in bullying behaviors has for how the target person *will* react versus how the target person is reacting, than is the case with face-to-face bullying. This delay between the act (i.e., creating a fake website) and the outcome (i.e., sharing secrets with the school) would likely result in a heightened sense

of expectation and a built-up level of excitement and anticipation for the time when the target person realizes what has been done. Thus, it is feasible that a difference exists between those engaging in cyberbullying behaviors versus face-to-face bullying behaviors according to the generation of goals and the expectations related to the outcome of an interaction. It may be the case that these differences are only observed in relation to different types of cyberbullying.

## Gender Differences

One of the most interesting aspects of the bullying/cyberbullying debate relates to gender differences in the rates of these behaviors. Traditionally, men engage in more bullying behaviors than women (Forero, McLellan, Rissel, & Baum, 1999; Nansel et al., 2001; Sourander, Helstela, Helenius, & Piha, 2000). However, Blair (2003) reported that women are more likely to communicate using text messaging and e-mail than are men; this, combined with the more covert (and social) nature of cyberbullying, would make it reasonable to expect that the gender differences demonstrated in face-to-face bullying are, at the least, not as strong in cyberbullying. Indeed, some have reported that men and women were equally likely to report harassing others online (Williams & Guerra, 2007; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004). Similarly, Slonje and Smith (2008) reported no gender differences in the self-reported rates of being either engaging in or being the target of cyberbullying behaviors (a trend suggesting boys engaged in more acts of cyberbullying than girls was not statistically significant). In contrast, Li (2006) reported that men were more likely to engage in cyberbullying behaviors than their female counterparts. Although these results do not suggest that women engage in more cyberbullying than men they do indicate that the gender differences reported in relation to face-to-face bullying are not as strong. Further, girls tend to have more close-knit relationships/friendships and therefore more readily exchange intimate details and personal secrets whereas boys socialize in larger groups and share fewer details. That girls use text messaging and e-mail more than boys may result in more opportunities to spread secrets and have their secrets spread online.

## Group Effect

It has been noted that one of the most distressing aspects of traditional face-to-face bullying is the effect of the group, an effect which perpetuates and sustains the abuse of the target of the bullying behaviors (Bukowski & Sippola, 2001; Crick, Grotpeter, & Bigbee, 2002; Salmivalli, 2001). Sutton, Smith, and Swettenham (1999) cautioned against overlooking the importance of the group and social aspects of bullying over and above the internal cognitive processing patterns that characterize other forms of aggression (i.e., hostile attribution of intent patterns observed in reactively aggressive individuals; Orobio de Castro et al., 2002). Further, Shariff (2008) commented that the need for power and recognition in those who bully is satisfied by the recruitment of others in the victimization of an individual. Support for this can be



found in the research examining the effect of proactive aggression (the type of aggression considered typical of bullying interactions). Proactively aggressive children are seen as positive leaders with a good sense of humor, high self-esteem qualities and positive early friendship qualities, and high social status (Dodge & Coie, 1987).

This aspect of face-to-face bullying may have significant similarities with cyberbullying in that the bullying behavior (e.g., taking an embarrassing picture) becomes much more serious when viewed by a large group of schoolchildren. In fact, given how quickly and extensively images can be distributed to groups using mobile phones or the Internet, it is not surprising that the effect of such an act would be more distressing and damaging to a victim than being bullied in a face-to-face interaction which only a small group of individuals would observe. In essence, the effect of the cyber group far surpasses the schoolyard group given that the former is not bound by the school walls and the potential audience is limitless.

## Conclusion

Cyberbullying comprises a set of aggressive behaviors that are enacted via electronic media. This is a relatively new form of bullying that is receiving more and more attention in the research literature. Relatively little is still known about some aspects of cyberbullying, for example, the motivations and goals of those who cyberbully, the long-term impact of being cyberbullied, and the extent of the differences between cyberbullying and face-to-face bullying. This in turn makes it difficult to develop interventions to address this behavior with students who bully. As outlined above, several definitions of cyberbullying have been proposed, primarily based on the concept of face-to-face bullying. However, to date, there has been little or no discussion of the theoretical construct of cyberbullying and whether using electronic media to engage in acts of aggression is the same (or very similar) to engaging in aggressive acts in face-to-face interactions. In addition, to date no research has examined the nature of how information is processed in cyber interactions. Given that a large amount of cyberbullying is text based (i.e., sending text messages or e-mails), how this information is processed and how this differs from processing information in real-time social interactions are unclear. The reward for engaging in cyberbullying is often delayed (in contrast to face-to-face interactions), and this is anticipated to have an effect on how goals for these aggressive interactions are formed and pursued. With the increasing availability, use and reliance on electronic technology, the issues outlined here are going to become more important and are clearly worthy of far greater understanding. There is a clear need for further in-depth research addressing issues of power, motivation, and repetition in cyberbullying episodes.

## Acknowledgment

The qualitative data described in this article were collected by Dr. Pyżalski as part of research funded by the Polish

Ministry of Science and Higher Education, Grant No. 106 067735.

## References

- Aalsma, M. C., & Brown, J. R. (2008). What is bullying? *Journal of Adolescent Health, 43*, 101–102.
- Belsey, B. (2004). 2004-07-15. Available from [www.cyberbullying.ca](http://www.cyberbullying.ca).
- Björkqvist, K., Österman, K., & Kaukiainen, A. (1992). New trends in the study of female aggression. In K. Björkqvist & P. Niemelä (Eds.), *Of mice and women: Aspects of female aggression* (pp. 3–16). San Diego, CA: Academic Press.
- Blair, J. (2003). New breed of bullies torment their peers on the Internet. *Education Week, 22*, 6–7.
- Bukowski, W., & Sippola, L. (2001). Groups, individuals, and victimization: A view of the peer system. In J. Juvonen & S. Graham (Eds.), *Peer harassment in school: The plight of the vulnerable and victimized* (pp. 355–377). New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Camodeca, M., & Goossens, F. A. (2005). Aggression, social cognitions, anger and sadness in bullies and victims. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry, 46*, 185–197.
- Coyne, S. M., Archer, J., & Eslea, M. (2006). "We're Not Friends Anymore! Unless...": The frequency and harmfulness of indirect, relational, and social aggression. *Aggressive Behavior, 32*, 294–307.
- Crick, N. R., & Dodge, K. A. (1994). A review and reformulation of social information-processing mechanisms in children's social adjustment. *Psychological Bulletin, 115*, 74–101.
- Crick, N. R., & Dodge, K. A. (1996). Social information-processing mechanisms in reactive and proactive aggression. *Child Development, 67*, 993–1002.
- Crick, N. R., & Grotpeter, J. K. (1996). Children's treatment by peers: Victims of relational and overt aggression. *Development and Psychopathology, 8*, 367–380.
- Crick, N. R., Grotpeter, J. K., & Bigbee, M. A. (2002). Relationally and physically aggressive children's intent attributions and feelings of distress for relational and instrumental peer provocations. *Child Development, 73*, 1134–1142.
- Dodge, K. A., & Coie, J. D. (1987). Social-information-processing factors in reactive and proactive aggression in children's peer groups. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 53*, 1146–1158.
- Fauman, M. A. (2008). Cyber-bullying: Bullying in the digital age (book review). *The American Journal of Psychiatry, 165*, 780–781.
- Fontaine, R. G. (2007). Disentangling the psychology and law of instrumental and reactive subtypes of aggression. *Psychology, Public Policy, and Law, 13*, 143–165.
- Fontaine, R. G., & Dodge, K. A. (2006). Real-time decision making and aggressive behavior in youth: A heuristic model of response evaluation and decision (RED). *Aggressive Behavior, 32*, 604–624.
- Forero, R., McLellan, L., Rissel, C., & Baum, A. (1999). Bullying behavior and psychosocial health among school students in New South Wales, Australia. *British Medical Journal, 319*, 344–348.
- Guerin, S., & Hennessy, E. (2002). Pupils' definitions of bullying. *European Journal of Psychology of Education, 17*, 249–261.
- Hartman, R., & Stage, S. A. (2000). The relationship between social information processing and in-school suspension for students with behavioral disorders. *Behavioral Disorders, 25*, 183–195.
- Kowalski, R. M., & Limber, S. P. (2007). Electronic bullying among middle school students. *Journal of Adolescent Health, 41*, S22–S30.



- Kowalski, R. M., Limber, S. P., & Agatston, P. W. (2008). *Cyber bullying*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Leishman, J. (2005). *Cyber-bullying* CBC News Online. Retrieved 27 November, 2008, from [http://www.cbc.ca/news/background/bullying/cyber\\_bullying.html](http://www.cbc.ca/news/background/bullying/cyber_bullying.html).
- Li, Q. (2006). Cyberbullying in schools: A research of gender differences. *School Psychology International*, 27, 157–170.
- Mishna, F. (2004). A qualitative study of bullying from multiple perspectives. *Child Schools*, 26, 234–247.
- Mishna, F. (2006). Factors associated with perceptions and responses to bullying situations by children, parents, teachers and principals. *Victims and Offenders*, 1, 255–288.
- Monks, C. P., & Smith, P. K. (2006). Definitions of bullying: Age differences in understanding of the term, and the role of experience. *British Journal of Developmental Psychology*, 24, 801–821.
- Nansel, T. R., Overpeck, M., Pilla, R. S., Ruan, W. J., Simons-Morton, B., & Scheidt, P. (2001). Bullying behaviors among US youth: Prevalence and association with psychological adjustment. *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 285, 2094–2100.
- Olweus, D. (1993). *Bullying at school: What we know and what we can do*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.
- Olweus, D. (1997). Bully/victim problems in school: Facts and intervention. *European Journal of Psychology of Education*, 12, 495–510.
- Orobio de Castro, B., Veerman, J. W., Koops, W., Bosch, J. D., & Monshouwer, H. J. (2002). Hostile attribution of intent and aggressive behavior: A meta-analysis. *Child Development*, 73, 916–934.
- Pepler, D., Jiang, D., Craig, W., & Connolly, J. (2008). Developmental trajectories of bullying and associated factors. *Child Development*, 79, 325–338.
- Raskauskas, J., & Stoltz, A. D. (2007). Involvement in traditional and electronic bullying among adolescents. *Developmental Psychology*, 43, 564–575.
- Rigby, K. (2007). *Bullying in schools: And what to do about it*. Camberwell, Victoria: ACER.
- Salmivalli, C. (2001). Group view on victimization: Empirical findings and their implications. In J. Juvonen & S. Graham (Eds.), *Peer harassment in school: The plight of the vulnerable and victimized* (pp. 398–419). New York, NY: Guilford.
- Schwartz, D., Dodge, K. A., Coie, J. D., Hubbard, J. A., Cillessen, A. H. N., Lemerise, E. A., & Bateman, H. (1998). Socialcognitive and behavioral correlates of aggression and victimization in boys' play groups. *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology*, 26(6), 431–440.
- Shariff, S. (2008). *Cyber-bullying: Issues and solutions for the school the classroom and the home*. London: Routledge.
- Slonje, R., & Smith, P. K. (2008). Cyberbullying: Another main type of bullying? *Scandinavian Journal of Psychology*, 49, 147–154.
- Smith, P. K., Mahdavi, J., Carvalho, M., Fisher, S., Russell, S., & Tippett, N. (2008). Cyberbullying: Its nature and impact in secondary school pupils. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 49, 376–385.
- Sourander, A., Helstela, L., Helenius, H., & Piha, J. (2000). Persistence of bullying from childhood to adolescence: A longitudinal 8-year follow-up study. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 24, 873–881.
- Sutton, J., Smith, P. K., & Swettenham, J. (1999). Social cognition and bullying: Social inadequacy or skilled manipulation. *British Journal of Developmental Psychology*, 17, 435–450.
- Tattum, D. P. (1989). Violence and aggression in schools. In D. P. Tattum & D. A. Lane (Eds.), *Bullying in school* (pp. 7–19). Stoke-on-Trent: Trentham Books.
- Underwood, M. K. (2003). *Social aggression among girls*. New York, NY: Guilford.
- Vandebosch, H., & van Cleemput, K. (2008). Defining cyberbullying: A qualitative research into the perceptions of youngsters. *CyberPsychology & Behavior*, 11, 499–503.
- Williams, K. R., & Guerra, N. G. (2007). Prevalence and predictors of internet bullying. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 41, S14–S21.
- Wolak, J., Mitchell, K., & Finkelhor, D. (2006). *Online victimization: 5 years later*. Alexandria, VA: National Center for Missing & Exploited Children.
- Wolak, J., Mitchell, K. J., & Finkelhor, D. (2007). Does online harassment constitute bullying? An exploration of online harassment by known peers and online-only contacts. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 41, S51–S58.
- Ybarra, M. L., & Mitchell, K. J. K. (2004). Youth engaging in online harassment: Associations with caregiver-child relationships, Internet use, and personal characteristics. *Journal of Adolescence*, 27, 319–336.

Julian J. Dooley

Child Health Promotion Research Centre  
Edith Cowan University  
Room 18.204  
2 Bradford Street  
Mt. Lawley  
WA 6050  
Australia  
Tel. +61 8 9370 6101  
Fax +61 8 9370 6511  
E-mail [j.dooley@ecu.edu.au](mailto:j.dooley@ecu.edu.au)

