

Cyberbullying: To Remain a Silent Bystander is Not an Option

By Rona Walter

Cyberbullying has taken traditional bullying to a new level. Advances in technology provide more arenas for action and the consequences can be tragic, leading to mental health issues for the bullies as well as the victims. The mental health of our youth should always be of high concern. Since the majority of cyberbullying transpires among relationships established at school, what can educators do to intervene? Can we alter a behavior that has stood the test of time? With internet use on the rise, more of a focus needs to be given to creating a culture in schools and in the classroom that promotes awareness of inappropriate behaviors and cultivates social and moral development in students.

I think most people can recall some form of bullying behavior from school. I have three snapshots that come to mind. My first snapshot takes me back to high school and I am hanging out in the halls with friends. Laura Jones the school photographer is at her locker and Jeff starts his rant, "Hey Laura, you sure look fine with your gear. You wanna take some shots of me? What about after school?" On it goes at Laura's expense. She is a very quiet shy girl, who never responds; Jeff is one of the so called "populars" who thinks it's all very entertaining to his peers. His behavior is intentional, repeated and he certainly has power over her, all of the elements of bullying. I never say a word, a silent bystander, and think of it still to this day; I wonder what Laura thinks? Next, I am student teaching in Dayton and the teacher leaves me alone in class with no plans in place and an altercation ensues in an instance. The students are in the 6th grade and one of the boys grabs a girl's shirt ripping it open exposing her before the class. I think to myself, what did we learn in school for this one? I am at a loss and take no clear action. My last snap shot is from this past school year. One of my students has had more than

her share of life struggles. She was abandoned by her birth mom, adopted at five, is extremely overweight, and her emotional health issues are heightening with adolescence approaching. One day she is missing from school. One of the boys is upset because he has shared with friends that he received a text that she is considering suicide. He has told her never to text him again because the situation frightens him. She has endured verbal affronts face to face as well as a great deal of inappropriate text messages. She was admitted to Children's Hospital for treatment. I question, what can I do?

These snapshots may be varied, but the results are the same. Children are hurting. "Being taunted or attacked physically can be one of the most painful experiences of childhood and can leave lasting psychological scars" (Shore, 2009). A stronger initiative on my part is overdue.

The three criteria for a social science definition of bullying are: the behavior is intentional, repetitive, and one person has more power over another. Cyberbullying is basically another form of traditional bullying using a variety of 21st century technologies. The primary tools utilized in cyberspace are instant messaging, cell phones, chat rooms, social networking sites, blogs, chat rooms and even school sites open for postings.

"Historically bullying has not been seen as a problem that needed attention, but rather has been accepted as a fundamental and normal part of childhood" (Limber & Small, 2003). Now with the rise in Internet use, the access to bullying in an anonymous capacity is on the rise. Traditional bullying took place in the environment of a few with a small audience, and primarily in the school setting. Cyberbullying is limitless and can reach the masses in an instant and there is no safe zone. Additionally, it is in print to be viewed repeatedly and has a residual affect so to speak. The vast majority of American youth is connected or at least has access to the internet.

“In the United States, i-SAFE.org conducted a survey of 1500 students in grades 4 to 8 in 2004. Their findings indicated that 42% of students in the sample reported being bullied while online, and one in four reported it happening more than once” (Bhat, 2008). What are the implications? We know that this behavior impacts a student. “Cyber bullying and being a cyber victim have adverse consequences on an individual’s psychology” (Aydogan, Dilmac, 2010). The students behind Columbine actually implied that their own aggressive actions were linked to the fact that they were bullied. Suicide is increasing; this past school year resulted in 2 cases of suicide threats from my own homeroom in an upscale suburban school district. Both students displayed depressive traits, and both utilized technology on a regular basis. Clearly one of the students fell into a bullying and cyberbullying category, as a bully and a victim. It is not uncommon for victims to seek revenge and cyberbully themselves. The other student at least utilized social networking for a cry out for help and a high school student took the initiative to tell an adult.

Mental health concerns and overall well-being are the driving forces behind curricular action. Low self-esteem, loneliness, poor school attendance, and low academic performance have all been linked to cyberbullying. Students who are bullied as well as the bullies themselves are much more likely to be depressed. When students are affronted by bullying on or off the internet, development is impacted. Studies report repeatedly about the mental scars that bullying can leave behind. Even the bullies experience consequences. Gallo & Milsom (2006) refer to (Kaiser and Rasminsky 2003) who report that “as bullies go through adolescence they are more at risk for severe problems such as delinquency, alcohol and drug abuse, and dropping out of school.” Jeff, our perpetrator from the high school snap shot, fit that description by abusing drugs and alcohol until his 3rd marriage and the birth of his 2nd child, a girl with Down’s Syndrome. I thought this would either make him or break him. He ended up being a loving

devoted father, but in a conversation later in years he was open about his offensive behavior; he had not forgotten, either. Seeing the challenges faced by his daughter even elevated his feelings of regret. It's the old adage that no one wins, but Laura, the victim from the high school shot, I doubt that she has forgotten. I would imagine that she bore deeper scars than regret. "The social networks that develop among children and youth play a critical role in their overall social and emotional maturation" (Gable et al., 2011). Now the stakes are yet higher because so many more students are involved in cyber opportunities. Implementation of prevention and intervention strategies need to be embedded in the curriculum.

An ounce of prevention can make a difference and there are a multitude of strategies that can be utilized. Building character and focusing on integrity is a must. Integrity matters and it would be irresponsible for the development of these social skills not to be woven into the fabric of the curriculum. "Adult guidance is an essential ingredient in transforming children's natural moral inclinations into dependable and effective character traits" (Damon, 2010). Students left alone do not always make good choices. Being intentional in direction is essential.

Staff members have a responsibility to model desirable behavior. There should always be respect towards others, and sarcasm should never be used at the expense of a student. There was an incident on the playground this year where an educational assistant told a student to just leave her alone and to never touch her. Desirable behavior is the goal; students learn by what they see. Had the educational assistant been a student, I would have intervened, but again I was a silent bystander.

Bystanders can be key players in the continuation or elimination in cyberbullying. Recent research supports this factor. Infusing empathy in curriculum approaches can give the bystanders the strength and motivation to speak out. "Bystanders, usually peers, play an

important role in perpetuating the cycle of bullying. Thus bullying by whatever means, is a social problem and needs to be solved in a social context” (Campbell, 2005). Making students aware in and of itself can create change.

There are various curriculum approaches to provide this awareness and cultivate empathy and more tolerance towards others. One instructional strategy is utilizing literature in the classroom. Our class reads *The Breadwinner* by Deborah Ellis. This story addresses the themes of oppression, persecution, religious struggles, and discrimination. Through the story we have critical conversations about tolerance of ideas, compassion for others and acceptance.

“Empathy, the capacity to experience another’s pleasure or pain, provides the very foundation for caring and compassion” (Damon, 2010).

Bringing in guest speakers from other cultures, backgrounds, and religions can be another approach in the development of character. Many schools have a diverse student population. Inviting family to come and present to the class could be informative, providing a positive arena for growth and critical conversations that provide awareness.

Interventions are also a key component to changing the school culture and there are numerous web sites and programs available. “Research indicates that schools can cut bullying by as much as 50% with a comprehensive schoolwide prevention program” (Shore, 2009). Additionally, “studies show that bullying tends to peak in late childhood/early adolescence, making prevention and intervention efforts in middle school crucial” (Gallo & Milsom, 2006).

One program that surfaced repeatedly in my research is the iSafe Internet Safety Program. The program offers training directly or indirectly through DVDs to educators. Students learn the basics and participate in interactive activities. This is a K-12 program.

www.cyberbullying.ca out of Canada is an informative web site that provides great opportunities to educate. This site was developed by Bill Belsey who is actually credited with coining the term cyberbullying. The site provides an overall view of different forms of cyberbullying, provides facts, legal information, and tips on prevention. One component that was particularly interesting related to tracing on-line activity. Very specific guidelines with captured computer screens are presented to show how to actually do your own detective work. Proper steps are also provided for informing the proper authorities making legal consequences clear. This could really deter many students. Much of the allure to cyberbullying is that the perpetrator can remain anonymous. The risk of an identity being “discovered” could certainly curtail involvement. This site offers much and provides insightful information to parents, educators and students. Another fun component of this site was a section titled “talk the talk”; it provides an extensive list of acronyms and emoticons for better understanding of cyberspace language that students are utilizing.

Another link worth mention is <http://erikangelmanriquez.blogspot.com>. This is a blog page created by Erik Manriquez, a graduate student from the University of Texas at El Paso. He too provides some general information and literature review. Cyberbullying video clips are provided to implement in class lessons. Stories always leave a strong imprint that can make an impression on students. We showed a few video clips this year in our classes/school to make cyberbullying more real; students are better connected when they see the faces of the bullies and victims.

In order for success, one must have teacher buy in. The best prevention and intervention program cannot succeed without the supportive passion of the teacher. It is like anything else. Even the most inane topic can become of interest if the presenter is committed to the material.

We implemented a school-wide bullying plan this year with perhaps 30% commitment. Teachers were already inundated with pull out time for OAA test prep and found it difficult to change gears in the middle of academic time during another bell for bullying. For a comprehensive school-wide program to be effective, teachers must believe in it and scheduling needs to be designed in a sensible manner or better yet simply embedded within the curriculum.

There are many options for preventions and interventions; the key is to take some course of action in an attempt to create a positive school culture where ultimately students feel connected and safe. Research is supporting a school-wide approach as being most affective with the prevention of traditional bullying, but developing overall integrity in our classrooms is an additional responsibility that staff must model and incorporate into the curriculum as well. Gable et al. present the positions of (e.g., Mason, 2008; Olweus, 1992) that “schools should consider incorporating antibullying strategies such as cooperative learning, peer mediation, and social skills into the fabric of daily instruction.” An awareness of one another and of bullying and cyberbullying behavior must also be presented in an effort to educate and promote action from bystanders, and direction for offenders. Technology seems to have outpaced not only educational policies, but legal ones as well. Schools must have a plan. This leads us back to what matters most? I believe character development and moral integrity should rise to the top of the list. Research on cyberbullying is still relatively new, but clearly it is apparent that schools have a responsibility to intervene in some capacity. To remain a silent bystander is truly not an option.

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