

Cyberbullying: Hiding behind the screen

Erin Peebles MD FRCPC

In recent years, the term 'cyberbullying' has become relatively common in the media, often cited as a contributor to several high-profile suicides of young adolescents. A review of the literature published in 2010 (1) showed that no articles referenced 'cyberbullying' before 2004, confirming its recent emergence. There is no universally accepted definition; however, most definitions describe a repeated activity conducted via electronic means with an intent to cause psychological torment.

Cyberbullying can take many forms. It can include harassment (insults or threats), spreading rumours, impersonation, outing and trickery (gaining an individual's trust and then using online media to distribute their secrets) or exclusion (excluding an individual from activities). These activities can be performed via e-mail, instant messaging, text message, social networking sites such as Facebook or Tumblr, and other websites (2).

The prevalence of cyberbullying and cyberbullying victimization is difficult to accurately determine. The variable definitions and the typical challenges of accounting for self-reported activities contribute to this difficulty. A study conducted in the United States involving nearly 4000 students in grades 6 to 8 showed that in the preceding two months, 11% of the students had been cyberbully victims, 4% reported acting as cyberbullies, and 7% had been both a cyberbully and a cyberbully victim (3). In a Canadian study published in 2010 involving >2000 students in grades 6, 7, 10 and 11, 25% reported experiencing a cyberbullying event in the previous three months. Eight percent reported acting as a cyberbully, and 25% reported being both a cyberbully and cyberbully victim. The authors postulated that the rates were higher in their study because they did not describe the activity as 'cyberbullying', but instead asked about specific behaviours (name calling, threatening, spreading rumours, etc) (4).

Cyberbullying differs from traditional bullying in several key ways. Perhaps the most obvious is that it requires some degree of technical expertise – children who are not 'plugged in', either through computer, cell phone or video games, do not partake in cyberbullying, either as bullies or victims. Cyberbullying also provides anonymity to the bully not possible with traditional bullying. Because of this, bullies cannot see the reactions of their victims and studies have shown that they feel less remorse (5). Cyberbullying is opportunistic because it causes harm with no physical interaction, little planning and small chance of being caught. Despite this, 40% to 50% of cyberbully victims report knowing who their tormentor is (3).

Cyberbullying can be more pervasive than traditional bullying. While traditional bullying is generally limited to school and home is a reprieve, victims of cyberbullying can be reached anywhere, anytime, and the potential audience is huge. This is compounded by the fact that there is a lack of supervision. With traditional bullying, teachers are regarded as enforcers. With cyberbullying, there is no clear authority, and children express reluctance to tell adults for fear of losing computer privileges or being labelled as an informer (6).

Studies have also shown that there is a large amount of overlap among traditional bullying and cyberbullying behaviours. Children

who act as cyberbullies report high rates of being a traditional bully, and are also traditional and cyberbully victims. Cyberbully victims report high rates of traditional victimization, but are also involved in traditional bullying and cyberbullying activities (3,7).

The relationship between traditional bullying and cyberbullying is not well understood, but what is clear about children involved in cyberbullying is that they report high rates of Internet use. Juvonen and Gross (8) found that cyberbully victims were significantly more likely to be heavy Internet users (>3 h/day) than noncyberbully victims (OR 1.45). A study by Mishna et al (4) published in 2012 found that cyberbullies, cyberbully victims and cyberbully/victims were significantly more likely to use the computer for >2 h/day versus students who were not involved in cyberbullying activities.

WHAT ARE THE EFFECTS OF CYBERBULLYING?

Affected children have reported varying rates of informing authorities regarding cyberbullying (2% to 40% would tell a teacher). When asked if they would inform a friend, studies have reported rates of 13% to 74%. When asked about telling a parent, rates vary from 9% to 57%. Anywhere from 9% to 25% of children reported they would not tell anyone about being cyberbullied. Approximately 50% of children report using prevention tactics such as blocking a screen name, changing passwords or restricting their buddy list (6,8,9).

Cyberbullying behaviour has negative effects on both the victim and the bully. The negative effects increase with the frequency, duration and severity of cyberbullying. Victims who endure frequent cyberbullying can experience a decline in academic performance, begin 'acting out' and some report difficulties at home. These children are at increased risk for depression, anxiety and externalized negative behaviours, as well as an increased risk for suicide (10,11).

As previously mentioned, cyberbullies feel a lack of remorse and have more behavioural difficulties (police contact, property damage, school absenteeism, low grades) than children who are not involved in cyberbullying (5,12). One study has shown that children who act as cyberbullies are also at increased risk for suicide, although they score lower on measures of suicidal ideation than their victims (11). Children who are both a cyberbully and a cyberbully victim are at risk for the emotional difficulties associated with being a victim, as well as the behavioural difficulties associated with being a bully (13).

WHAT CAN HEALTH CARE PROFESSIONALS DO?

To help identify at-risk children, health care professionals need to ensure that they ask their patients if they are experiencing cyberbullying, being careful to specify the actual behaviours (name calling, spreading rumours, outing and trickery, etc) Affected children should be screened for comorbid disorders. Parents should be counselled about the negative effects of cyberbullying and instructed on safer Internet use. Parents have a critical role in

Correspondence: Dr Erin Peebles, Department of Pediatrics, Children's Hospital, Schulich School of Medicine and Dentistry, Western University, 800 Commissioners Road East, London, Ontario N6A 5W9. Telephone 519-685-8500, e-mail erin.peebles@lhsc.on.ca

providing online education for their children. Parents should be encouraged to keep computers with Internet access in open areas, monitor the child's online activities and behaviour, encourage their children to never reveal passwords or secrets, and never open a message from someone they do not know. Parents should remind their children not to believe everything they read, and the entire family should be encouraged to spend time together away from the online world. Parents can also model appropriate use of technology and teach children that posting harmful content about others is not appropriate (14).

CYBERBULLYING AND THE LAW

In Canada, there are currently no laws specifically addressing cyberbullying. A Cybercrime Working Group established in 2012 identified several sections of the Criminal Code that could allow charges relating to cyberbullying, but noted that the Code needed to be modernized to include messages sent via electronic means. The Working Group also recommended a new criminal offense relating to the nonconsensual distribution of intimate images be created. These changes were included in Bill C-13, Protecting Canadians from Online Crime Act, which was introduced in 2013. The bill criminalizes the nonconsensual distribution of intimate images, and updates terminology regarding telecommunications technologies by removing reference to radio, telegram and telephone. This allows for harassment charges to be filed when messages are sent via any electronic means (15).

There are privacy concerns regarding Bill C-13 because it also deals with lawful access legislation. The bill, among other things,

would allow police to request personal information from Internet service providers without a warrant through a 'preservation demand' (15). The Canadian Bar Association has recommended that a preservation demand be allowed only in exigent circumstances, and only for a short period of time until a warrant can be obtained. Overall, the Canadian Bar Association has recommended that the bill be split into two: a bill specific to cyberbullying, and another specific to lawful access. This would enable timely passage of the bill on cyberbullying while allowing for debate and changes to protect privacy in the lawful-access bill (16). This has not occurred, and Bill C-13 remains before the government. It has not yet become law.

CONCLUSION

Cyberbullying is public, pervasive and provides anonymity not observed with traditional bullying. Studies are increasingly showing the negative effects of cyberbullying on both the bully and the victim. While it is possible to be charged with some aspects of cyberbullying under the Criminal Code of Canada, the Code has not yet been modernized to reflect the information technology era. Health care professionals need to be informed about the manner in which cyberbullying can occur, the negative effects of it, and be prepared to counsel parents on how to prevent it.

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