

Cyberbullying: New Approaches for School Counselors

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Abstract

Cyberbullying has become a well-documented problem plaguing the mental health and safety of teenagers in schools. An examination of the literature that includes other complex social/emotional issues provides a framework for more effective cyberbullying prevention and intervention strategies. This article examines current research, highlights existing misconceptions, and re-frames misguided intervention efforts that have prevented school counselors from effectively addressing cyberbullying. Considering these past mistakes and current misconceptions, this article provides a new philosophy with fresh approaches to cyberbullying for school counselors to accurately and appropriately intervene in schools.

Keywords: adolescents, cyberbullying, mental health, prevention, intervention, schools, school counselors

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Cyberbullying has become a well-documented problem plaguing teenagers in schools across America. For example, one study has shown that cyberbullying impacts as many as one in four students (Romera, Cano, García-Fernández, & Ortega-Ruiz, 2016). In another study of 20,406 adolescents, researchers found that only one-fifth of cyberbullied victims report incidents to school officials (Schneider, O'Donnell, Stueve, & Coulter, 2012). Kessel Schneider, O'Donnell, and Smith (2015) analyzed data from four surveys completed from 2006 to 2012 and reported that although many youth never report being a victim of cyberbullying to an adult, only one-third ($n = 16,000$) of youth who experience cyberbullying seek help from an adult at school.

Cyberbullying can be defined as “peer victimization that occurs via the Internet or other forms of electronic media” (Landoll, La Greca, Lai, Chan & Herge, 2015, p. 78). Cyberbullying can be perpetrated through a variety of electronic methods. For example, Barlińska, Szuster, and Winiewski (2013) identified different forms of cyberbullying to include online harassment, intimidation, and blackmail. Olenik-Shemesh, Heiman, and Eden (2012) added deliberate threats and attempts to hurt or humiliate another person as additional forms of cyberbullying.

For students who already have social and emotional deficits, cyberbullying can be devastating. Cyberbullying affects adolescents during a time of social and emotional development where there is a limited ability to self-regulate (Hamm et al., 2015). Current research suggests, “Cyberbullying disproportionately affects youths who are already vulnerable to mental health and behavioral health disparities including members of sexual minorities, girls, and racial minorities” (Rice et al., 2015, p. 66). O'Keeffe and

Clarke-Pearson (2011) highlighted the limited capacity for self-regulation and susceptibility to peer pressure among adolescents, which amplifies the risk from negative social media interactions. As school counselors continue to work with students to help identify their social and emotional needs, they can no longer neglect the fact that much of their social and emotional development is occurring online.

In addition to social and emotional development, recent research has shown that cyberbullying has also been associated with several other psychological problems among adolescents, which may include social anxiety (Juvonen & Gross, 2008). Additionally, Mitchell, Ybarra, and Finkelhor (2007) found adolescents ($n = 1,501$) who reported being cyberbullied to be 2.5 times more likely to experience depression symptoms, 2.2 times more likely to report delinquency, and two times more likely to report substance use than participants who were not cyberbullied. Suzuki, Asaga, Sourander, Hoven, and Mandell (2012) indicated that cyberbullying also significantly disrupts school performance. Furthermore, Hinduja and Patchin (2010) found that cyberbully victims had higher levels of suicidal thoughts and attempts than adolescents who were not cyberbullied. Suzuki et al. (2012) also discussed long-term ramifications for victims, which may include depression and trauma.

School counselors must be aware of and acknowledge the negative impact that cyberbullying has on students and the disruption it can place on the learning environment. Unlike traditional bullying, cyberbullying is often more difficult to avoid and can be anonymous (Litwiller & Brausch, 2013). As a result, the safety of one's home no longer protects individuals from cyberbullying due to the inability to escape. To cause additional anguish, cyberbullying can be permanently archived through online social

media. Although traditional bullying may come to an end, cyberbullying has the unique ability to create a feeling of hopelessness rooted in fear that there may be no end in sight. As discussed by Florang (2019), living in a constant sense of unescapable fear directly interferes with obtaining the universal human need of safety, as defined by Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Furthermore, the unique complexity of the fear related to cyberbullying goes against all inborn fear responses, commonly known as fight, flight, or freeze.

If basic human needs are not met, adolescents are unable to reach their full potential. If students are afraid, unable to fight, unable to run away, and unable to freeze (because it only amplifies the anxiety of what is being said online), then adolescents are not going to be successful without developing new skills, new supportive people, and new plans to ensure safety from cyberbullying. Unfortunately, past attempts at addressing cyberbullying in the school setting have led to unintended negative consequences, which did little to reduce or prevent the impact it had on students and in some cases, inadvertently made the situation worse for the victims.

Positive Intentions with Negative Consequences

School counselors and educators can directly intervene in cases of traditional bullying; however, there are few resources and regulations to monitor or intervene with cyberbullying (Suzuki et al., 2012). Unlike traditional bullying, which mostly occurs in school, cyberbullying occurs outside of school, which complicates the role of adult intervention further (Smith et al., 2008). Regrettably, many previous attempts at cyberbullying intervention and prevention had positive intentions, with unintended negative consequences. In the past, several misconceptions and policy loopholes about

how to respond to cyberbullying have stalled school counselors' ability to effectively intervene. In some cases, responses to cyberbullying have inadvertently fueled the helplessness many teenagers feel daily.

According to Olenik-Shemesh et al. (2012), cyberbully victims may feel hopeless to stop cyberbullying, and believe adults are less likely to understand and more likely to take away access to social media. The fear of losing social media access if cyberbullying is reported to adults and the inability of victims to find an escape from the attacks makes cyberbullying a unique problem that requires further attention (Olenik-Shemesh et al., 2012). Deplorably, many past interventions have inadvertently punished the victim instead of creating a safe environment to protect teenagers from negative online interactions. Instead of fostering safe environments to address cyberbullying, adults have isolated victims from all social interactions. Although face-to-face interaction is still possible, "a large part of this generation's social and emotional development is occurring while on the Internet and on cell phones" (O'Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011, p.800). If school counselors are going promote social and emotional growth, isolating adolescents from these situations, is only going to create resentment and stall potential growth.

In addition to the fear of losing Internet access, adolescents are reluctant to report cyberbullying due to the lack of knowledge or understanding that adults have with the new technology (Besag, 2010). The lack of understanding is evident in the harmful messages that adults have repeatedly instilled in adolescents regarding cyberbullying. For example, hearing adults ignore or minimize the impact of cyberbullying, because they don't understand it, or hearing someone say "just ignore it" may only cause more

distress. Although these situations may not fit the definition of crisis in the adult world, these negative interactions can be detrimental to adolescents. A lack of understanding and the fear of punishment make it obvious why so many teenagers choose not to report cyberbullying and feel hopeless that anything can be done to stop it.

Additional harmful messages have also been instilled among the adolescent population which include, “don’t post anything negative on social media because it will follow you forever.” Of course, statements like these are intended to keep teenagers from posting inappropriate messages or pictures online, but what if someone else posts the embarrassing, revealing, or derogatory comments online? The message is still the same – anything posted online remains in perpetuity. Without any research supporting these statements and with cyberbullying being such a new phenomenon, we don’t know whether anything posted on social media will have these types of lifelong consequences. School counselors should never convey the message that one online mistake (or someone else’s mistake) would last forever.

History also provides some important lessons on how school counselors can help educate teenagers through this complex period of social and emotional development. When reviewing other complex experiences associated with adolescence, history has shown that using scare tactics or maximizing potential consequences does very little to protect students. For example, many early intervention drug and alcohol educational interventions aimed to disseminate information to adolescents before they are exposed to tobacco, drugs, and alcohol. According to Botvin and Griffin (2007), “many of these approaches provided information in ways that dramatized the dangers associated with substance use in an attempt to evoke fear (p. 610).” Furthermore, this type of

intervention may change attitudes but does very little to change behavior (Botvin & Griffin, 2007). As school counselors, we want to not only change attitudes toward cyberbullying, but also change behavior by creating a safe environment, without dramatizing the dangers of having something negative posted online.

Similarly, previous attempts at sex education has also provided some important information for how school counselors should approach cyberbullying. Educators now accept that ignoring, minimizing, or teaching abstinence as the only solutions were not appropriate interventions and may have created more harm for students attempting to navigate adolescence. According to Stanger-Hall and Hall (2011), abstinence-only education was not only ineffective in preventing teen pregnancy, but also may have contributed to high pregnancy rates among teenagers. Like drugs, alcohol, and sex, many people initially labeled cyberbullying as a problem that happens outside of school, thus making it a parental problem and not a school problem. Thankfully, current educational systems now recognize that teenagers need help understanding these complex periods of adolescence and they are now addressed in most school curriculums. Cyberbullying has become the new “uncomfortable discussion” plaguing teenagers that can no longer be ignored, minimized, or left for someone else to address.

New Approaches for Schools

Teen tragedies have been highly publicized in the media related to cyberbullying. Unfortunately, many of these heartbreaking stories have ended in suicide. Instead of relying on Internet usage contracts, which place accountability on students and parents, schools must become actively involved in identifying and intervening in cyberbullying,

whether it is at school or outside of school (Ford, 2009). Morrow and Downey (2013) suggested that school personnel should reevaluate current cyberbullying policies to address and clarify the definition and consequences of cyberbullying from a school perspective and highlighted the importance of establishing consequences at school, for a behavior that was once seen as a problem that happened primarily outside of school. According to Smith et al. (2008), schools must adopt specific cyberbullying policies, provide direct cyberbullying training to teachers, and provide education to students.

Crepeau-Hobson (2013) emphasized that all school staff members are required by laws and ethics to not only recognize the mental health needs of their students, but also appropriately respond to ensure student safety. Cyberbullying can clearly be categorized as both a potential mental health issue and a student safety concern, thus requiring immediate attention from school personnel. With this new understanding, school counselors have a responsibility to advocate for a new approach, where all school staff are encouraged to take an all-inclusive approach to change the culture, update policies, and teach proper online social and coping skills.

Due to the social and emotional consequences associated with cyberbullying, school counselors must advocate for systemic awareness, training, and a collaborative approach to cyberbullying intervention strategies. Walrave and Heirman (2011) recommended a proactive school preventative approach directed at the entire student population. It is recommended that schools create a positive climate (Patchin & Hinduja, 2012), where pro-social tendencies are encouraged and adolescents are empowered to act upon negative feelings related to cyberbullying (Macháčková, Dedkova, Sevcikova, & Cerna, 2013). Specifically, Green (2013) highlighted how systems may benefit from

delegating teaching responsibility to all school employees, in a multidisciplinary approach, which may include a nurse, counselor, teacher, or administrator. School stakeholders must implement programs of support and intervention to address negative online experiences, in addition to supporting the mental health of students (Rose & Tynes, 2015).

In addition to school personnel, Patchin and Hinduja (2012) recommended that parents, students, and law enforcement officers all play an active role in creating a positive environment that discourages cyberbullying. Effective anti-bullying programs include several different elements: community involvement, an assessment of the school climate, a consensus on the definition of bullying, student and parent engagement, professional development for faculty and staff, and ongoing program evaluation (Jones & Augustine, 2015). Additional cyberbullying prevention strategies include building awareness, reporting online issues, and linking parental involvement and the home environment (Irvine, 2012).

According to Beale and Hall (2007), schools should use focus groups, class meetings, or surveys to gather information from teachers, parents, and students to ensure that school personnel are providing an atmosphere that is free from harassment, intimidation, and fear. Furthermore, Twyman, Saylor, Taylor, and Comeaux (2010) suggested that parents should be educated on how to appropriately intervene in cyberbullying situations, while simultaneously creating an environment conducive to open communication regarding online experiences. Additionally, mental health professionals, school counselors, and school administrators must work together to improve supportive environments and facilitate meaningful connections for the

adolescents they serve (Duong & Bradshaw, 2014). School counselors may serve as the link between students, teachers, parents, community resources, and law enforcement. "School personnel and parental training are needed to increase awareness of what cyberbullying is, how to prevent it, and how to deal with cyberbullying that has already occurred" (Chang et al., p.461, 2013).

As more technology is utilized in the classroom, the more likely students and teachers are going to be involved with cyberbullying. Teachers must acquire more knowledge about technology in order to understand cyberbullying better (Ayas & Horzum, 2011). Due to the immediate risk cyberbullying may pose to the student population, school counselors may be the highest qualified individual in the school who may provide some of this very important education, training, and new awareness to other staff members. In addition to advocating for system changes and providing education, there are also specific interventions that school counselors can directly implement to help students overcome negative online experiences.

School counselors' beliefs, attitudes, and response to cyberbullying need a complete overhaul. School counselors must work to provide a new message about cyberbullying, teach new skills to teachers and students, and instill a new hope that cyberbullying can be stopped. Advocating, teaching, and modeling this shift will instill hope to the students who experience cyberbullying on a daily basis. School counselors must actively work to change the negative messages that have become ingrained in the adolescent population. Adolescents deserve to have adults who understand cyberbullying, don't minimize the impact, don't punish the victim, and teach the skills

necessary to overcome cyberbullying. It is time that the passive reactionary approach to cyberbullying is replaced with aggressive prevention and intervention strategies.

To advocate for a new systemic philosophy that addresses the impact of negative online interactions, school counselors may work to educate and promote new holistic approaches to address cyberbullying in schools. The first step in stopping cyberbullying is to ask about it and acknowledge that it is occurring (Carpenter & Hubbard, 2014). Sahin (2012) suggested parents, schools, teachers, and other educational institutions must work together to prevent cyberbullying. Before school counselors can start to address these issues directly and begin to solve this problem, schools must first acknowledge that cyberbullying is indeed a school problem and rebuff the assumptions that schools cannot become involved in issues that arise online or outside of school.

Practical Strategies for School Counselors

As mentioned previously, the first step is to acknowledge that cyberbullying is happening. Due to the potential health risks that cyberbullying may pose to the student population, school counselors need to update risk assessments and safety screening tools to include direct questions about cyberbullying, and to accurately and appropriately identify the students who are impacted by cyberbullying (Sourander et al., 2010). Updating current prevention and intervention strategies will increase early identification of adolescents who are at risk, thus helping to minimize negative consequences (Hyunjoo, Dancy, & Chang, 2015). Furthermore, incorporating new strategies will ensure school counselors and professionals appropriately identify and intervene during cyberbullying incidents, which may include contacting parents and

administering consequences, regardless of whether the incident happened at school (Patchin & Hinduja, 2012).

New Message, New Skills, New Hope

School counselors may directly teach students the skills necessary to cope with cyberbullying and advocate for updated school policy, improved school culture, and provide education to teachers, administrators, and parents. Improving communication and educating adolescents about cyberbullying will also help reduce the negative effect of cyberbullying. Ramos and Bennett (2016) recommended continued education, assessment of past-experiences, screening tools, and social skills training to improve current cyberbullying prevention and intervention strategies.

At times, educators have falsely assumed that students already have the ability to understand empathy, fairness, and the ability to aid victims, when in reality these skills need to be taught to reduce bullying in schools (Jones & Augustine, 2015). Sahin (2012) stressed the importance of supporting the mental health of adolescents through emotional and social skill development. Landoll, La Greca, and Lai (2013) suggested interventions designed to help adolescents cope with negative experiences with thoughtful, nonaggressive, and assertive responses to reduce the likelihood of experiencing adjustment difficulties. School counselors already work with students to develop appropriate coping and social skills, so incorporating the skills necessary to successfully respond to cyberbullying should not be problematic.

“Programs for adolescents should focus on strengthening social networks, social skills, and peer support in order to prevent a sense of loneliness and depressive mood, and to help build a ‘social protection layer’ against becoming cyberbullying victims”

(Olenik-Shemesh et al., p. 372, 2012). Romera et al. (2016) found that cyber victims reported having less peer support or friends than other victims, which school counselors can help remedy through psychoeducational support groups and school-based social group referrals. Furthermore, Jones, Mitchell, and Turner (2015) suggested that school counselors and educators should help adolescents develop better bystander and response skills that specifically target all adolescents who might witness or experience cyberbullying.

School counselors should be prepared to deliver direct interventions and teaching methods related to online communication and relationships. Fridh, Lindström, and Rosvall (2015) highlighted the importance of strengthening communication and relationship skills to help reduce the negative effects of cyberbullying on adolescents. In addition, Hyunjoo et al. (2015) detailed the importance of providing individualized interventions designed to help individuals who have already experienced cyberbullying and are at risk of depression. School counselors should play an active role in reducing the negative consequences related to cyberbullying by supporting individualized interventions and systemic prevention programs.

Direct interventions may take a variety of forms; however, Floros, Siomos, Fisoun, Dafouli, and Geroukalis (2013) suggested providing adolescents with skills necessary to regulate online impulsiveness through role-playing. Additional teaching techniques useful to reduce the impact of cyberbullying include increasing self-awareness, guided practice, modeling, and implementing coping skills (Jacobs et al., 2014). Furthermore, Schmidt (2008) identified other methods designed to help individuals learn appropriate skills, which included, teaching, doing, developmental

environment, and providing support. Schools already utilize many of the identified educational methods throughout the school day and school counselors could work to incorporate these techniques to help adolescents cope with cyberbullying as well.

Future Research

As technology continues to develop and evolve, prevention programs must remain flexible in order to appropriately reduce the effects of cyberbullying (Walrave & Heirman, 2011). Future research is necessary to aid in the development and the consistent reevaluation of individualized programs to confirm that interventions are still beneficial to the individual student population that they are intended to help.

Additionally, research should not only focus on victims, but should also focus on adolescents who are the cyber aggressors or those students who may witness cyber aggression on a regular basis. Parris, Varjas, and Meyers (2014) suggested utilizing input from adolescents to develop strategies, policies, and suggestions based on their own experiences to help develop policies and psycho-educational interventions.

Similarly, Cunningham et al. (2015) highlighted the benefit of acquiring information from college students who recommended education, prevention, anonymous reporting, and logical consequences as key practices to reduce involvement in cyberbullying. By focusing on the school community as a whole and utilizing student input in the development of prevention and intervention strategies, school counselors can implement unique strategies, which address the needs of the student population.

Summary

Current research highlights the negative impact that cyberbullying has on the mental health and safety of the adolescent student population. Previous attempts to

classify cyberbullying as a “home issue,” have only fueled the negative consequences and hopeless feelings that teenagers face daily in the school setting. School counselors must be prepared to support policy changes, advocate for proactive approaches to prevention and intervention, model changes in philosophy, provide education to students, teachers, and parents, and most importantly help directly instill the positive coping and social skills necessary to help adolescents appropriately respond to cyberbullying. Until adolescents and educators have the awareness, education, and skills necessary to combat cyberbullying, school counselors must provide a safe environment where students receive some form of relief from the multifaceted consequences associated with being cyberbullied.

If school counselors continue to ignore or minimize the negative impact that cyberbullying has on the student population, schools may experience harmful consequences, resulting in an overall increase in cyberbullying occurrences and an overall decrease in student mental health. If school counselors do not spend considerable time investing in focused direct proactive approaches to decrease the incidents of cyberbullying, there is a likelihood that school counselors will be forced to react to more and more teen tragedies related to cyberbullying. School counselors cannot afford to repeat history and wait for someone else to address this intricate issue or hope that adolescents will navigate this complicated segment of social development on their own. Like drugs, alcohol, and sex, cyberbullying has been shown to potentially become a life and death situation, where even one more suicide is too many.

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Biographical Statement

Dr. Jesse E. Florang resides in Kearney, Nebraska and serves as an adjunct graduate lecturer in the University of Nebraska-Kearney graduate school of counseling and school psychology. He is also an adjunct faculty advisor for Franklin University, where he works with doctoral students in the Doctor of Healthcare Administration program, with an emphasis on mental health. He is also the behavior interventionist for Kearney Public Schools, serving students who are verified with social, emotional, or behavioral disabilities. Dr. Florang has a passion for mental health and education, as evidenced by his commitment to serving students of all ages from kindergarten to doctoral level. His research interests include adolescent mental health, cyberbullying, and systemic improvements for schools and inpatient health care settings.