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Cyberbullying in adolescents: The prevalence of mental disorders and suicidal behavior

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Abstract

This paper defines the phenomena of cyberbullying in relation to traditional bullying, along with its negative consequences on adolescents in modern society. The reasons for the highly destructive effects of cyberbullying are given along with information about psychological instability resulting from the occurrence of cyberbullying. The correlation of cyberbullying with suicidal thoughts and behaviors is also discussed. Finally, some prevention techniques are listed in an attempt to lower the prevalence of cyberbullying.

Keywords: Cyberbullying, electronic bullying, "cyberbullicide," traditional bullying, digital self, internet use

Introduction

With the rise of advanced technology and increased online communication in modern society, an unforeseen, unexpected killer has managed to sneak into the lives of today's youths: cyberbullying. Cyberbullying most often occurs in middle and high school-aged adolescents, with a rate of occurrence of 5 to 20% (1). The appearance of cyberbullying is often correlated with wide daily use of the Internet and personal cell phones. It was shown in a study of adolescents ranging 12-18 years old that 97% surveyed used the Internet more than one time a week (2). Although many negative side effects have been researched in relation to traditional forms of bullying, recent studies have shown that cyberbullying may have even greater effects on youth development. This is most likely due to the reason that a "greater power imbalance" is created due to the fact that the victims of cyberbullying do not and may not ever know their bully's identity. Another reason for the greater devastation of cyberbullying is that with this form of

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bullying, the bully no longer remains on the school playground, so to speak, but follows the victim home (2). Cyberbullying, also known as electronic bullying, is most often carried out through the use of text messaging, 32.1% of cases, secondly by the Internet, 15.5%, and finally by picture phones, 9.5%. The effects of cyberbullying include increased stress, anxiety, lowered self-esteem, increased likelihood of suicidal behavior, and school failure (2).

Definition

Traditional forms of bullying occur when an adolescent becomes a victim of harmful behavior that is repeated over time and an imbalance of power exists, such that the victim no longer feels safe or that he or she can do anything about the situation (2). Cyberbullying, on the other hand, refers to the use of the Internet as a medium through which this harmful behavior is inflicted, yet again targeting a specific person (3). There are several important differences between cyberbullying and traditional bullying that make cyberbullying a more serious issue, as briefly mentioned before. Cyberbullying can occur at any point during the night or day, leaving victims feeling as if there is no escape from harassment as long as they have their cell phone or are online. Another devastating consequence of cyberbullying is that harmful messages and images can be quickly distributed across large amounts of peers. Finally, this form of bullying leaves the bully anonymous, making interference by an adult much more difficult (4). The combination of these factors has led to victims of cyberbullying fearing for their safety at all times (1).

Mental disorders as a result

Cyberbullying often leads to depression, feelings of helplessness, anxiety, and vulnerability (5). Adolescence has proven to be a very important time for identity development, which is, in turn, largely influenced by a youth's peer environment. Victims of cyberbullying during this time suffer from more long term sociological and psychological consequences than victims of traditional bullying. Some victims have even been shown to carry symptoms of

psychological, mental, and sociological issues into adulthood. Both victims and perpetrators of cyberbullying are also four times more likely to commit crimes in the future (6).

Another very important psychological consequence of cyberbullying has to do with the "online self." Silvasanker (5) introduced the concept of an online, or digital, self as being very importantly affected by cyberbullying. The digital self consists of an adolescent's online pictures, quotes, comments, and contacts. When cyberbullying of this digital self occurs to a great extent, the online self is destroyed. Silvasanker claimed that as long as the adolescent feels that this online self is destroyed, he or she will continue to be depressed, have suicidal thoughts, and recovery will be hindered. He recommended that instead of prohibiting a youth from being able to use the Internet or cell phone in an attempt to prevent further bullying, the parent or guardian should encourage the youth to create an online blog where only the friends he or she invites can view their information and writings, in order to create a more positive online environment (5). This has been proven to have more positive effects than completely cutting off an adolescent from social media and other technology. These effects of cyberbullying on the "digital self" are just one in-depth example of the mental effects of this form of bullying. Often times, though, cyberbullying may lead to such dangers as suicidal thoughts and behaviors.

Correlation to suicide

Suicide is the third leading cause of death among adolescents in the United States. 13.8% of high school students have considered suicide and 6.3% have attempted it in the past year. Depression is highly correlated as a pre-cursor to suicidal behavior and it has been found that females were 1.73 times more likely to be depressed and to consider suicide than males (7). Researchers have coined the term "cyberbullicide" to refer to suicide influenced by experiences with online aggression (6). Many extreme cases of this form of suicide have recently occurred. For example, Tyler Clementi from Ridgewood, New Jersey was secretly recorded by his dorm roommate having private sexual encounters with another male

student and then exposed on the Internet through video broadcasting. This shy, unsuspecting student ended up jumping from the George Washington Bridge into the Hudson River and committing suicide (6). Another similarly extreme case occurred with a thirteen year old Megan Meier. Ms. Drew, the mother of Megan's former friend Sarah, created a fake MySpace account stating to be a fictional boy in order to trick Megan into thinking that "he" liked her, and then stating "the world would be a better place without you" in an attempt to redeem her daughter Sarah from a failed friendship. Megan killed herself that same afternoon (8). Such extreme cases of adolescent suicide serve as a warning of what is to become much more common if an attempt to decrease cyberbullying is not made.

Discussion

Cyberbullying clearly has very negative psychological effects, often times leading to suicidal thoughts and behaviors. Fortunately, cyberbullying can be prevented or at least minimized. Many schools have instated "zero tolerance" policies for cyberbullying, although they also attempt to non-punitively reprimand bullies so as not to alienate them. Removing these students would deprive them of the opportunity to engage in more positive behaviors through learning and may deepen their depression. Often times, cyberbullies are just as depressed and stressed as cyber victims (2). For this reason it is important that programs addressing the needs of victims and bullies are created. Many people are also looking for a legislative response to the occurrence of so many cyberbullicides. The reality of the situation is that lengths must be taken in order to prevent further adolescent mental, psychological and physical damage by cyberbullying. Involvement of parents, schools and society as a whole is imperative to prevent the negative outcomes related to cyberbullying and more in depth research is needed in this area. Primary care providers should be aware of this problem and comfortable screening for it.

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