Cyberbullying Research Summary
The Influence of Parent, Educators, and Peers

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Over the last decade, youth have almost universally embraced computing technologies and benefited greatly from the social and relational benefits that the Web and electronic communication provides.[1] A meaningful proportion of teens, however, are being exposed to interpersonal violence, aggression, mistreatment, and harassment while online – through what has been termed "cyberbullying," defined as "willful and repeated harm inflicted through the use of computers, cell phones, or other electronic devices."[2:5,3]

Much research has explored the nature and extent of cyberbullying[4] yet relatively little has attempted to uncover the causes and consequences. In the current study, we look at two primary influences of adolescent behavior (meaningful adults and peers), to determine the extent to which these significant relationships are related to cyberbullying behaviors.

Influence of Parents, Educators, and Peers on Adolescent Behavior

Research has shown that youth are induced directly or indirectly to make conventional and normative choices largely because of relationships with peers, parents, educators, and other valued and respected adults.[5,6] In a child's early years, the role of parents and educators is most prominent, as children seek out affinity with, and approval from, these adults in their lives.[13,14] During this growth and socialization process, children observe and internalize behavioral norms and standards of conduct from those adults, and proceed down a pathway of general societal conformity. As adolescents continue to develop, however, the peer group has a much stronger impact in shaping their attitudes and actions.[9-11]

Generally speaking, parents and educators serve to compel adolescents to behave in positive and prosocial ways while deviant peers may try to lead them in the opposite direction.[5,6, 9-11] To be sure, these forces do not work in isolation but play off of each other as well. Parents and educators might serve to weaken the effect of deviant peers if they carry out their roles effectively, while ineffec-

tiveness on their part perhaps enhances the power of delinquent peers. Failure to properly monitor, train, and discipline youth increases the likelihood that they will lean towards deviant peers and delinquent choices.[15,16] Appropriate monitoring and instruction tends to lead to a healthier connection and bond between the adult and child, which can serve to buffer against unhealthy peer relationships.[10,14]

These observations lead us to the main questions of the current work: If a student's close peer group bullies others online, is she more likely to do so than if those in her social group did not participate in cyberbullying? If a student has internalized the fact that his parents and school are not dismissive of online bullying and take it seriously by meting out sanctions, is he less likely to participate in cyberbullying?

Results

Using data collected in 2012 from a random sample of 4,441 students from 33 middle and high schools (6th through 12th grades) in one of the largest school districts in the United States, we found that students who reported that many of their friends had bullied others (at school, using a computer, and using a cell phone) were significantly more likely to have also reported that they too had cyberbullied others.

Summary Table of Means for the Effect of Adult Response and Peer Behaviors on Cyberbullying
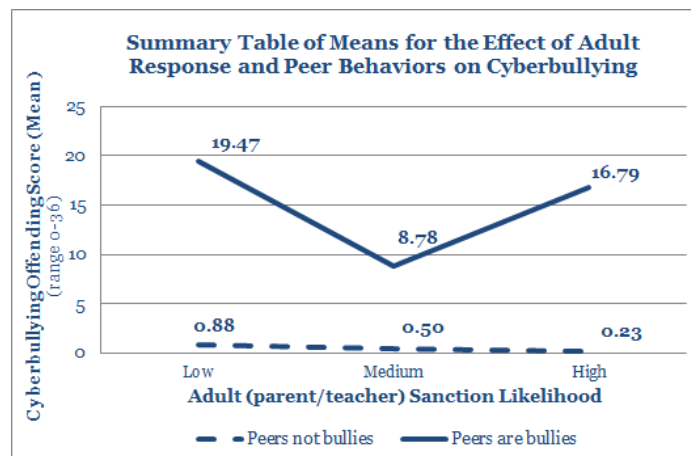
In addition, respondents who reported that a sanction was likely from their parents or school were significantly less likely to report involvement in cyberbullying. It is clear that when parents or teachers at school explicitly convey to their children and students that bullying behaviors are not appropriate, the youth are less likely to participate in those behaviors. This was especially true for the respondents who did not associate with peers who bully others, but even true among those who did.

The summary graph on page 1 also shows the interaction between adult and peer influence. Among students who did not have friends who were bullies, as the likelihood of adult sanction for bullying and cyberbullying increased, participation in cyberbullying markedly decreased (the dotted lines). This pattern was not as evident, however, among students who associated with others who bully. Confirming the earlier analyses, students who reported that their peers had been involved in bullying were much more likely themselves to cyberbully, although the effect of perceived adult sanction was not as prominent (solid line). It appears that one of the most important steps a parent can take to protect their children from participating in cyberbullying is to insulate them from peers who bully.

As discussed above, research has consistently shown that parents, educators, and peers influence a variety of adolescent behaviors. Moreover, close monitoring and supervision by parents of adolescents does tend to lead to a lower likelihood of deviant peer associations.[16] Furthermore, opening the lines of communication between parent and teen children tends to provide a protective benefit in decreasing a variety of specific risky behaviors,[17] including those that are largely peer-driven.

Implications

Based on these findings, it seems promising to empower a critical mass of youth to step up as leaders to model positive choices that personally matter to them (e.g., peer respect and acceptance rather than exclusion, rejection, and harassment) in a very visible manner in their schools. As a consequence, positive anti-bullying behavioral models will then become available, accessible, relatable, and ideally attractive to other youth who know "right" from "wrong" but may be hesitant to step up without others leading the way. These positive choices may gain traction and allegiance among the student body over time, further strengthening the social identity that those leaders – and now the peers that support and mirror them – represent. One formal way this can be fostered is through the use of peer mentoring programs. These generally involve student leaders advising and counseling other students about issues affecting them, and have been shown to be effective in reducing traditional bullying and interpersonal conflict within schools.[21,22] This programming should be an integral part of any comprehensive approach to address cyberbullying because it focuses on the role of the peer group and social setting in which harassment and interpersonal conflict occur. Furthermore, it naturally implicates some of the nuances of peer group dynamics – which strongly affect the overall behavioral choices of students at school.[23,24]

In addition marshaling the power of peers, results of the current work also speak to the importance of school-based responses to bullying and cyberbullying. As such, schools should have a policy prohibiting all forms of peer harassment and mistreatment. All forms of bullying that ultimately result in, or have a foreseeable likelihood of resulting in, a substantial disruption of the learning environment – regardless of where and when the behaviors occurred – are well within the legal authority of the school to address.[25] The school, then, needs to make it clear to students that these behaviors are unacceptable and will be subject to appropriate discipline. In addition, it is important that all school staff repeatedly convey to students that cyberspace-based wrongdoing is just as serious as on-campus bullying because of its real world consequences and fallout.

Finally, parents need to encourage the responsible use of technology among their children. Parents should do their best to keep up with the online behaviors of their children and have regular conversations with them about the importance of responsibly using technology. In addition, they can monitor their child's activities while online – especially early in their exploration of cyberspace. This can be done informally (through active participation in their son or daughter's Internet experiences) and formally (through rule-setting). Parents also should cultivate and maintain an open, candid line of communication with their children, in order to convey certain familial standards and lessons that may not be grasped easily by a comparatively shortsighted adolescent.

Overall, parents, educators, and teens themselves need to work together to establish a climate at school and in the community where bullying in all its forms is socially condemned and formally prohibited and sanctioned (when necessary).[3] Through such efforts, the quality of relationships between all stakeholders will be enhanced. Ideally, this will also contribute towards the establishment of

healthier behavioral norms and choices among those youth – both online and offline.

Note: This Fact Sheet is an abbreviated version of a full-length journal article entitled "Social Influences on Cyberbullying Behaviors among Middle and High School Students" published in Journal of Youth and Adolescence. Please consult the full paper for more details about the study.

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