

INTRODUCTION: CYBERBULLYING MORE THAN JUST SYMPATHIZING: A SPECIAL ISSUE ON RECOGNIZING AND ADDRESSING THE EFFECTS OF CYBERBULLYING

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Sometimes it's the expert who misses the point. A year or two ago, I was speaking in front of a group of parents. One mother rose to her feet and described a situation that was clearly very distressing. Her daughter's friends were exchanging vicious insults online, and it was escalating. I understood her angst but pointed out that when all parties participate equally, the situation is probably more like fighting than like bullying (an important distinction when considering how to respond). "Well, it's bullying to *me*," she tartly replied.

In a literal sense, she may have been wrong, but I still understood her point. What was happening online may not have fit precisely into the bullying rubric, but it was still a serious and very upsetting problem. These situations are not only emotionally distressing; they demand our attention, as the use of digital devices becomes a predominant method of human communication. Almost every child and teen in the United States uses digital technology. The Pew Internet American Life Project reports that 92% of teens are online daily, and 24% are online "almost constantly."¹ A 2014 survey of 453 teens by the Massachusetts Aggression Reduction Center found that 5% reported being connected *at all times*, even when they're asleep, because their device is set to wake them up if any communications are incoming.² Any behavior so widely engaged in requires detailed understanding.

Yet, when trying to understand social conflict and abuse that occurs in digital realms, we've largely attempted to simply force digital behaviors into the rubrics formed to understand more traditional interactions. Certainly the behaviors lumped under the category of "cyberbullying" may be much more varied and may involve many more different motives than traditional bullying. "Bullying" is a behavior that can certainly vary but that also has several central characteristics, as defined by Olweus.³ He conceptualized it as cruel interpersonal behaviors that are intentional and repetitive, and that involve a power imbalance between the perpetrator and the target. Digital behaviors do not always fit well into that rubric, despite the broad use of the term "cyberbullying" to describe virtually any electronic cruelty.⁴

For example, cyber-behaviors may be more frequently characterized by a lack of awareness and sensitivity, rather than by the deliberate intent to harm that is generally seen in traditional bullying. It's easy to see how digital

exchanges that lack facial expressions, body language, and tone of voice can easily be unintentionally hurtful. A target who is being hurt will typically express that first in body language and facial expression – elements that are entirely absent online. Likewise, in person, a bully will examine his or her target to ensure that he or she is being hurt, but online, mean words may have more to do with the aggressor's self-focus. In a digital environment, where the target is not physically present, a user's focus may shift inward, and they may be thinking more about themselves and less about the recipient of a remark. Thus a child may issue a cruel statement, thinking not of the impact it will have, but instead, on how funny or clever it makes the child appear. The point is that in digital environments, intent can become a complex, difficult concept. Similarly, while we tend to assume that social power is a stable characteristic, it can in fact be very fluid and changeable online. A socially powerful bully in school may become the target of, say, a scary, anonymous peer on the Internet, and may begin to feel very powerless, indeed. We may call many digital behaviors "cyberbullying," but whether or not these behaviors are actually bullying, they can clearly be impactful and damaging to youth. Someone accused of cyberbullying may have lacked intent. Someone who's popular at school may still be vulnerable online.

Still, it is important for adults who work with children to understand the complexity of what we call cyberbullying, if only to understand the motives and limitations of the children they work with. Damages resulting from unintentional or naïve behaviors abounds. While issues such as adult predators online have been greatly exaggerated in the press, deceptions do seem to regularly occur online.⁵ One typical example encountered in the lab at the Massachusetts Aggression Reduction Center involved an older teen who had been disciplined after taking an embarrassing photo of a teacher. The teenager described feeling baffled at the fallout. Taking the photo and showing it to others was defended by saying that "The photo wasn't 'real,'" precisely because it was designed to disappear almost immediately. If an adult isn't familiar with the currently popular app called "Snapchat," which advertises itself as a picture-taking app wherein the photos disappear after a set period of time, they might be confused by such statements about this technology. Snapchat is relatively new and has not yet been studied by researchers –

and may not be, as it is likely to become obsolete or unpopular by the time studies about it are in print. But that doesn't mean it doesn't matter. The naiveté of youth may lead teens to believe the app makers when they state that any photo will disappear, so adolescents may view taking an embarrassing photo of a teacher as an action that constitutes little risk, since no one would see it beyond a few friends, perhaps. The truth is that Snapchat photos can be copied and retained, and copies remain on the app's servers and in the phone's memory. Thus it happens that the photos can come back to haunt Snapchat users.

Parents and clinicians must continue to learn new technology, language, and perspectives.

Pediatric practitioners are in a unique position to hear about and discuss children's uses of technology. Because of their repeated interactions with children and teens, practitioners tend to be near the head of the line in hearing about contemporary technologies (like Snapchat) that can put new twists on old problems (like bullying). What good does it do to teach kids that photos put online are there forever, when an app maker readily counters that by claiming that the photos their app takes will actually disappear? While facile advice is tempting, conversations with youth about their digital activities need to encourage thoughtful and sometimes skeptical use of technology.

Conclusion

This special issue of *JAACAP Connect* seeks to help practitioners gain a better handle on the types of issues that

technology brings, and how to approach these with children and adolescents. Using both research and personal experiences, the authors of the articles in this special issue bring insights and facts that are designed to be both edifying and practical. Digital behaviors do not always fit neatly into the "bullying" rubric, but they can be emotionally and developmentally impactful nonetheless. It is critical to understand the complexity of concepts such as "intent" and "power" when it comes to electronic interactions. The researchers and practitioners who contributed to this special edition bring their first-hand experiences with youth and their data to bear on these difficulties. With data such as these, we may begin to better understand the digital behaviors we call "cyberbullying."

Take Home Summary

Digital behavior problems and social conflicts are common today, as use of digital devices is near universal. Not all problems fit the bullying rubric, and the term "cyberbullying" is overused. Despite that, digital conflicts can be very emotionally distressing for youth, even when intent to harm may be absent. Staying abreast of common digital trends can help practitioners and researchers have meaningful conversations with youth about their electronic activities.

References

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About the Author

Elizabeth Englander, PhD, is a professor of psychology and the director of the Massachusetts Aggression Reduction Center at Bridgewater State University, which delivers anti-violence and anti-bullying programs, resources, and research to K-12 education, reaching about 100,000 children every year. Dr. Englander's research and publications are nationally recognized, and the curricula she has authored are used in about half of the states in the US, as well as in several other countries. She was named Most Valuable Educator of 2013 by the Boston Red Sox and was a 2015 nominee for the National Crime Victims' Service Award from the Office of the Attorney General of the United States. She is the author of *Understanding Violence*, and of *Bullying and Cyberbullying*, recently released by Harvard Press. Dr. Englander has been named the chair of the Cyberbullying Workgroup for the Institute of Digital Media and Child Development, a project supported by the National Academy of Sciences to define the nation's research agenda regarding children and digital technology.