

## **Cyber-Bullying: Developing Policy to Direct Responses that are Equitable and Effective in Addressing this Special Form of Bullying<sup>1</sup>**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The article reviews existing research on cyber-bullying, framed through a policy lens. It is clear that public policy issues for cyber-bullying involve tensions between the values of freedom of speech, the best interests of the child, and parental and school protective authority over the child. Given the complexity of the problem, as well as conflicting values, the development of effective policy requires a collaborative effort involving all stakeholders – policymakers, school officials, parents and youth. It is important to emphasize literature that delineates the differences between conventional bullying and cyber-bullying because the two are very different and must be treated and analyzed separately. Thus, the following sections set out the definitions and mechanisms of cyber-bullying for policymakers contemplating new and/or modified policies, review the characteristics of the problem and the psychology of Internet abuse, explain the physical and mental consequences of it, and outline the results of recent surveys on cyber-bullying. Finally, the article concludes with recommendations on implementing acceptable use policies at the School Board and individual school levels, as well as family contracts for home use.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

It seems youth in contemporary society have adopted a new and distinct form of bullying that has changed the rules of the taunt. In fact, the location, actors, language and gestures in face-to-face bullying have evolved and moved into the electronic venue. Children and adolescents have taken schoolyard bullying to an entirely new level by utilizing the electronic medium to bully. Cyber-bullies use emails, text messaging, chat rooms, cellular phones, camera phones, web sites, blogs, and so on, to spread derogatory and ostracizing comments about other students, teachers and other individuals (Belsey, 2006; Campbell, 2005, Shariff, 2005; Willard, 2006). Consequently, educators, parents, policy makers and legal scholars are scrambling for resolutions to this modern pervasive problem – currently referred to as cyber-bullying (Belsey, 2006; Gillis, 2006). Since the current stream of pedagogical and legal thought concentrates primarily on bullying that occurs on school grounds, there is now an urgent need for a policy analysis on this new form of bullying.

This article reviews existing research on cyber-bullying, framed through a policy lens. It is therefore important to first establish the meaning of public policy for this exercise since cyber-bullying is clearly a public and social problem. There are actually many definitions which represent differing perspectives on policy, but one that captures sufficiently the elements needed for analysis on the particular topic of cyber-bullying is the following: Public policy seeks to effect compromise between basic social values in tension. On the basis of that determination, policy direction is established by governance systems for subsequent decisions and actions to resolve the problem (Dye, 2005). In more recent times, and specific to educational policy, policy can be “conceived

in terms of multilateral, national, state, or local directives that legislate institutional structures, proper codes of conduct, and academic standards for schools” (Levinson and Sutton, 2001: 5)

It has been said that the public policy issues for cyber-bullying in particular involve tensions between the values of freedom of speech, the best interests of the child, and parental and school protective authority over the child. Given that complexity of the problem, as well as conflicting values, the development of effective policy requires a collaborative effort involving all stakeholders – policymakers, school officials, parents and youth – and at all the levels of governance referenced above. Since this type of bullying phenomenon is relatively recent, educators, academia and legal specialists are just now beginning to understand research and opine on this serious scholastic blight. Only in recent years have studies begun on elementary and secondary school children in order to comprehensively appreciate the severity of cyber-bullying (Belsey, 2006).

The body of this article assumes a policy analytic approach to the problem of cyber-bullying (Dunn, 2004). Such an approach concerns itself first with the process of definition and structuring of the problem and then examines the impacts derived from the social problem so structured and identified. This type of analysis also provides an accounting of the variables and perspectives involved in that process. The analysis also examines how those variables and perspectives can be operationalized into policies and programs. Once the relevant factors are established, the next step in the policy study is to discuss possible policy responses. This process concentrates upon the contextual and local dimensions for those responses (Levinson and Sutton, 2001).

How does each school, for example, direct pedagogy and curriculum development toward resolving the problem? How do they take responsibility for safety and good order in their own classrooms?

To assist in the first step in the process, the determination of the characteristics of the problem is made. What is it that is in need of new policy or policy reform? It is important here to appreciate that the issue is often interrelated to policy problems in other area, which has been termed an intersectional relationship (Cassidy & Jackson, 2006). For example, conventional bullying may be affected by a number of factors such as racism, poverty, health and class that require a holistic examination in order to make meaning of the impact on individual students, that is, the manner in which the factors intersect may impact individual students differentially. “Decomposing” the factors or systems of factors into independent subsets, for instance, by only examining the impact of racism on bullying or cyber-bullying, without this wider context of meaningful factors, may result in a too narrowly defined solution, perhaps even a wrong solution to the problem (Dunn, 2004: 76).

To begin then, a definitional consideration sets the stage for the rest of the analysis. What is cyber-bullying? Is in fact cyber-bullying to be subsumed under bullying as a special form or an extension of bullying (Shariff, 2005)? It is critical to note literature that delineates the differences between traditional bullying and cyber-bullying, because the two types are very different and must be treated and analyzed separately, certainly from the perspective of implementing school policies. The following sections set out the definitions and mechanisms of cyber-bullying for policymakers contemplating new and/or modified policies. The article will review the characteristics of cyber-bullies,

the psychology of Internet abuse, and the physical and mental consequences of such bullying. Further, recent surveys on cyber-bullying will be reviewed, the results of which are critical to our comprehension of the insidiousness of cyber-bullying in the school and home environments as it appears on the domestic and international scale. Taken together, this information will provide what is termed “actionable knowledge” for policy development or reform (Levinson and Sutton, 2001: 15). Finally, the actual processes for policy reform or development in response are considered at different levels of jurisdictions, with an emphasis on local context levels.

## **What is Cyber-bullying?**

According to Nancy Willard, Director for the Center for Safe and Responsible Internet Use, cyber-bullying is speech that is “defamatory, constitutes bullying, harassment, or discrimination, discloses personal information, or contains offensive, vulgar or derogatory comments” (Willard, 2003: 66). The numerous tactics students can employ to cyber-bully can include flaming (sending derogatory messages to a person(s), harassing and denigrating (put-downs), masquerading, outing and excluding (Willard, n.d.). Further, Shariff and Gouin (2005) set out critical factors pertaining to cyber-bullying:

Cyber-bullying consists of covert, psychological bullying, conveyed through the electronic mediums such as cell-phones, web-logs and web-sites, on-line chat rooms, ‘MUD’ rooms (multi-user domains where individuals take on different characters) and Xangas (on-line personal profiles where some adolescents create lists of people they do not like). It is verbal (over the telephone or cell phone), or written (flaming, threats, racial, sexual or homophobic harassment) using the various mediums available (p. 3).

Campbell (2005), a professor at Queensland University of Technology in Australia, argues that Internet technology is “transforming society” by facilitating and

advancing interpersonal communications, as the telegraph and telephone did in previous decades, as well as operating as a “mass medium”, similar to older technologies such as the radio and television (p. 69). Campbell believes there are definite advantages and disadvantages to cyberspace, wherein socially introverted people may feel more comfortable utilizing an electronic medium for social discourse, however disadvantages may include an increase and encouragement of antisocial behaviour and abusive conduct. Therefore, as a basis for initial consideration, policymakers should review and contemplate incorporating into future policies the various forms that cyber-bullying may employ. It is insufficient to define cyber-bullying as a simple, indivisible term; all potential forums for cyber-bullying must be considered in policy development in order to capture the unique venues where this new form of bullying can arise.

## **Differences Between Face-to-Face Bullying and Cyber-bullying**

It is important to delineate the significant differences between face-to-face bullying and cyber-bullying when undertaking school policy revisions. The substantial divergence between the two forms of bullying indicates there is a distinctive user mentality associated with cyberspace which may affect policy development in the area. As Berson and Berson (2005) claim, “the permeation of the Internet into the lives of children and youth can expose them to information with questionable legitimacy, ideas that can be contrary to positive behaviours, and messages that are intended to manipulate their actions or beliefs” (p. 30). Ybarra and Mitchell (2004a) also note that one significant difference between internet harassment and conventional bullying

involves the ability to withhold one's identity in cyberspace, which affords a "unique method of asserting dominance online that conventional bullying disallows" (p. 1313). This unique sense of power and control is central to cyber-bullying. According to Harris, Petrie and Willoughby (2002), face-to-face bullying takes place when there is a power difference between the bully and the victim. The authors note, however, that "sitting behind a computer working the keyboard gives students a sense of power and control that they do not have in a face-to-face situation" (as cited in Beckerman & Nocero, 2002: 2).

The potential to remain anonymous in online settings may be one of several key factors to why online harassment is expanding so rapidly (Willard, 2003). Quite simply, since there is seemingly very little supremacy difference in cyber-bullying, students who are disempowered in the real world or are victims of face-to-face bullying, may resort to aggression through anonymity or fake identities. Therefore, the potential to withhold or assume alternate identities affords youth the opportunity to possibly communicate in abusive ways online that they perhaps normally would not undertake in personal encounters (McKenna & Bargh, 2000; Willard, 2003). In cyberspace, as Berson and Berson (2005) recite, the "pseudoanonymity" and "perceived security of being protected behind the computer screen" may incline many youth to act out in an anomalous fashion, perhaps surrendering to youth social pressures. Jan Sippel, coordinator of an abuse prevention program for the Vancouver School Board in British Columbia, argues that victimized children and adolescents experience the same feelings of "powerlessness and hopelessness" as in face-to-face bullying (Snider, 2004: 1). Further, with regard to legal ramifications, if youths in cyberspace secret their identity or

take actions to create a condition of anonymity, they may feel they are impervious to sanctions if they indulge in risks and illegalities in the online world (Willard, 2003).

However, as McKenna & Bargh (2000) report, this greater sense of freedom on the Internet does not necessarily produce negative behaviour. If youth share intimate details with their online friends or engage in role playing, gender swapping or identity anonymity, possible increases in self-knowledge and awareness of other perspectives may occur. As such, positive consequences could result. Further, the level of and reasons behind anonymity or pretending practiced on the Internet may differ. According to Gross (2004) who conducted a study of 261 suburban California adolescents in Grades 7 and 10, most respondents report limiting their online interactions to private settings such as emails and text messaging, dialoguing with friends who are involved in their offline lives, and devoting a fair amount of time to topics such as gossiping. Of significance in this study is the fact that of the 175 participants who provided data with regard to anonymous identity play, 49% indicate they have never pretended, 41% have pretended a “couple of times” and 10% have pretended occasionally (p. 643). According to 82 out of 89 respondents, lying about their age to appear older is the most common reason for pretension in cyberspace. Further, this “age” playing is mainly conducted in the company of friends. Consequently, the prospect of anonymity on the Internet does not guarantee that all students will resort to harassing behaviour, but anonymity is certainly is not an available option in face-to-face interactions.

Milson (2002) points out that cyberspace could be considered a parallel universe where online users go to conduct ordinary communications without engaging in any physical mannerisms normally associated with such personal endeavours. In



cyberspace, however, there is “no central power”, “no real territory” and “no hierarchical structure” (p. 1). Milson confirms a user’s ability to remain anonymous is the prime difference between online communications in cyberspace and the real world. As such, online behaviour may be exacerbated by a user’s “lack of inhibition” and the disconnection that occurs when users are in cyberspace. Joinson (1998) coins this lack of inhibition as “disinhibition” and defines it as various modes of behaviour that are characterized by decreasing concerns for both self-representation and the judgment of others.

Willard (2003) identifies five factors that facilitate disinhibition. First, technology facilitates the illusion of invisibility. Since some students who abuse online can be cloaked under the umbrella of anonymity or fake identities, they believe that officials will be unable to identify them. Secondly, there is no corporeal visual or aural feedback from online abuse or harassment; therefore, students may lack empathy for the victim. Thirdly, contemporary social norms may foster online misbehaviour, that is, because other students are doing it, it is alright to act in the same manner. Fourth, many students adopt “avatars”, which are individualized online personas that users can create for online interactions. If students are bullying through their “avatars”, they may be prohibited from feeling personally responsible for online bullying since blame can be placed on the user’s “fantasy” avatar. Finally, Willard emphasizes that because students may feel more comfortable communicating online, especially victims of schoolyard bullying, they may retaliate through the online medium taking revenge and cyber-bullying to new heights. Therefore, it is imperative for educators to understand, although they must try to stop cyber-bullies, they must also be very careful not to further

victimize a cyber-bully who is retaliating online because he/she is a victim from conventional face-to-face bullying (Willard, n.d., 2003). In many cyber-bullying cases, the behaviour may be a strong online reaction to a serious conventional bullying action, or vice versa, where schoolyard bullying may ensue from cyber-bullying. As such, both male and female students, who are submissive and/or intimidated or victimized in traditional schoolyard settings, may feel empowered and sanctioned to verbally offend electronically, either in retaliation or as initial abusers. Traditional inhibitions displayed on school grounds are absent in electronic settings, which may level the online social playing field for many users (Ybarra and Mitchell, 2004b).

However, Willard (2003) also clarifies that disinhibition can have positive or negative consequences. Disinhibition in online interactions may lead to “hostile communications”, but it can also allow youth who are introverted or socially ostracized in the real world to form online friendships or express their feelings more openly and comfortably (p. 74)

Interactions in cyberspace can take place during leisure activities as well (Berson and Berson, 2005), but negative communications may result in complications for school personnel. When cyber-bullying occurs during leisure time in the evenings and/or weekends outside of the school environment, the consequences of online harassment may arise on the school grounds the next day. Students may come to school angry or upset over something that happened online at home the night before, and teachers and administrators are left to assist and comfort the student (Blair, 2003). Although educators may sometimes be legally stifled in their ability to prevent exigent behaviour outside of school grounds, they can provide staff counsellors to whom students can turn

to discuss cyber-harassment (Blair, 2003). Berson and Berson (2005) found in their comparative analysis of online use between United States and New Zealand female adolescents, that almost 93 percent of the American females report the primary site for Internet access is the home compared to 94 percent of New Zealand females who access the Internet from their home residences (p. 33).

In sum, cyber-bullying can be a more pervasive form of bullying because victims cannot easily escape from their tormentors. Online harassment can happen both at school and home, and at any time in the day or evening. As Willard (2006) claims, “online abuse can be especially vicious and for victims, there is no escape. The abuse is ongoing, 24/7. Hurtful Web posts are broadcast worldwide and are often irretrievable” (p. 55). Thus, the limitless boundaries of cyber-bullying, and the mentality associated with cyberspace users, can pose challenges for educators and policymakers in formulating policies that capture every conceivable facet of cyber-bullying.

## **Characteristics of Cyberbullies**

In order to formulate appropriate policy initiatives and reformation, a profile of internet harassers might be helpful for educators to get a better sense of the types of students who may be more inclined to engage in cyber-bullying practices. Ybarra and Mitchell (2004b) conducted one of the largest studies on the characteristics of youth engaging in online harassment behaviours. They conducted their survey between September 1999 and February 2000 and telephone canvassed 1,501 male and female youth between the ages of ten and seventeen, along with one caregiver in each household. Their findings reveal many online abusers suffer poor parent-child relationships, and many may incline to misuse both legal and illegal drugs. Further,

there is a high level of delinquency amongst cyber-bullies. With regard to the correlation between online harassment and poor caregiver relationships, 44 percent of cyber-bullies report a very poor emotional attachment to their caregivers as opposed to 16 percent of harassers who report strong emotional ties. Therefore, the authors conclude that a weak emotional relationship between child and caregiver is a significant characteristic of online bullies (Ybarra and Mitchell, 2004b).

In addition, Ybarra and Mitchell, 2004(b) recognize three significant psychosocial factors in the variance of harassment behaviour – delinquent behaviour, being the victim of traditional face-to-face bullying, and frequent substance use. Six percent of online aggressors contrasted with one percent of non-aggressors reveal physical and/or sexual mistreatment. Moreover, 32 percent of harassers versus 10 percent of non-harassers report frequent substance abuse, and approximately 20 percent of youth who report online harassment behaviour also indicate they have been the target of internet harassment in the previous year. Further, the authors report males and females are equally likely to report aggressive online behaviour in the past year, and age plays a large factor in online profiling, since 27 percent of reported bullies are between the ages of thirteen and fourteen as opposed to 8 percent who are ten to twelve years old.

Ybarra and Mitchell, 2004(b) also infer that bullies are more likely than non-bullies to frequently engage in drinking alcohol, smoking tobacco and fighting, and show indications of academic under-achievements which may lead to early school dropout. Lastly, they contend use begets abuse, suggesting that frequent daily Internet use leads to elevated Internet abuse. The authors found 64 percent of harassers use the Internet four or more days each week.

A general profile of potential cyber-bullies may assist local educators in policy strategizing that focuses on specific student characteristics whereby empathetic and online user skill workshops can be introduced and incorporated into school board policies. These programs can introduce students to proactive measures that can assist them to modify or even overcome their urges to cyberbully as a form of “acting out” problems as a result of caregiver or other issues they may face in their personal lives. Such programs would be consistent with the policy intent of reduction of cyber-bullying behaviours.

This kind of development, however, moves us to consider the next stage in the policy analysis, that of examining local sites where policy actually becomes implemented as practice. Instead of a top-down policy as doctrine imposition, this focus shifts to an interactive and dynamic process whereby the recipients of educational policy have a say in policy development and implementation (Fitz, Haplin, and Power, 1992). The place and role of values, beliefs and identities at that level in the policy processes are identified across a sociocultural context in education, not just the political systems context (Levinson and Sutton, 2001: 3).

## **Psychology of Internet Use**

In keeping with the second stage process of having input from the recipients of educational policy, the user mentality in the digital world should be explored, especially from the perspective of the younger generation.<sup>2</sup> It is mandatory that educators and parents understand that the Internet is the formal line of communication and social well-

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<sup>2</sup> A more qualitative approach of listening to the youth voice in this regard is also consistent with the idea of recipient input (Levinson and Sutton, 2001: 4)

being to many youth (Berson, 2003; Campbell, 2005; Gross, Juvonen and Gable, 2002). In fact, the Internet is the primary mode by which users can take on the role of others through playful department, and where they also may assume different perspectives. As Huffaker and Calvert (2005) point out, cyberspace allows users to “try on different facets of who they will become” (p. 2). In other words, while the physical environment in which bodily features such as stature, gender, race or age can have an acute effect on “self-definition and self-presentation”, these characteristics can become extremely flexible in online environments (p. 2). As they explain:

In a virtual world, one even gets to construct one’s body. The anonymity afforded to youth within virtual worlds allows adolescents more flexibility in exploring their identity through their language, their role play and the personae they assume (p. 2).

In essence, identity is an integral component of the human experience, and as Calvert (2002) makes clear, it marks a monumental milestone in adolescent development. Therefore, the virtual world provides a venue for adolescents to explore a whole new and multifaceted realm of relationships, a virtual environment previously unavailable in the older generations.

In order to understand youth in their online world, it is imperative to understand their language. Huffaker and Calvert (2005) explain that youth language on the Internet exhibits an “evolution of discourse” and adolescents are in the middle of a “language evolution” (p. 3). The authors refer to this new language as “netspeak”, the language of the Internet (p. 3). This new language is creating a “generation technology gap”, disabling parents and educators to understand this form of “speak” that entails acronyms, variations on words, emoticons or graphical icons called avatars - language

that is rarely used in the offline world (Huffaker and Calvert, 2005). Therefore, in order to create cyber-bullying policies that are relevant to today's youth, educators should initially understand the youth mentality underlying online use and behaviours through this new form of language, and begin to narrow the generational "netspeak" gap if adolescents are to identify with and defer to guidelines set out by adults, who they believe do not understand "their technological world". Communication and dialogue with the youth facilitates this kind of knowledge acquisition.

David Huffaker conducted postgraduate research work studying blogs created and maintained by thirteen to nineteen year olds, and the ways blogs could be used in the classroom as an educational technology tool (Twist, 2004). As he muses, "the average blog post is over 2,000 words (per page), which is really interesting when you are trying to get kids to write essays" (p. 2). His research revealed 52 percent of blogs are created and maintained by thirteen to nineteen year olds, and 56 percent of the total bloggers are female and 44 percent are male (Henning, 2003; Huffaker and Calvert, 2005; Twist, 2004). In fact, blogs have exploded in popularity amongst youth in the last eighteen months, with many blogs being used for self-therapy and self-expression (Huffaker and Calvert, 2005; Twist, 2004).

As a result, Huffaker and Calvert (2005) contend scholars and educators need to further examine blogs as a communication and educational tool, which the authors insist "are important for teachers, parents and researchers who are interested in computer-mediated communication, online communities, children and technology and adolescent development" (p. 26). If educators and administrators could create and use blogs to educate students about cyber-bullying in language that students can understand and to

which they can relate, it may be a more appropriate medium for implementing guidelines as opposed to the more traditional and older-fashioned approaches. Web blogs represent a new medium for computer-mediated communication that may offer discernment into the ways of young people's self-expression and relationships in peer groups.

## **The Impact of Cyber-bullying**

Numerous physical and mental ailments can ensue from online harassment in youth and adults all over the world. Whereas traditional bullying is confined usually within school boundaries, cyber-bullying can take place at any time or place, even in the privacy of one's home. Therefore, students who are electronically engaged can be cyberbullied at any time. Options for escape are extremely limited, with the principal options being either to cease using the Internet or ignore the harasser. Preliminary research by Willard suggests cyber-bullying may produce even more damage to youth, with such consequences ranging from low self-esteem, anxiety, anger, depression, school absenteeism, poor grades, an increased tendency to violate against others, to youth suicide (Willard, 2006). For example, in June, 2004, the New Zealand Catholic News reported one student committed suicide following incidences of text bullying (New Zealand Catholic News, 2004). Further, a sixteen-year-old-female in Hungary developed *anorexia nervosa* after online sexual harassment (Gáti, Tényi, Túry and Wildmann, 2001). In Japan, one young girl resorted to murdering her classmate over a contentious website (New York Times, 2004).

It is important to emphasize the lasting effects of the "power of the written word" with regard to cyber-bullying (Campbell, 2005: 71). As Campbell explains,



conventional bullying may be severe at the time of the incident, but over time memory fades and words and taunts become vague. Notwithstanding the seriousness of conventional bullying, cyber-bullying, on the other hand, can involve the written word which lasts forever. Therefore, students may revisit the written taunt over and over again and re-live the experience. This may cause a prolonged sense of victimization which may lead to depression and other physical and mental disorders. If the author(s) of the taunts is unknown, the anonymity, combined with the fact the victims may be forced to limit or even temporarily eliminate their online use because of continual harassment, may make a youth's life unbearable.

Finkelhor, Mitchell and Wolak (2000) recount out of the six percent of American youth who reported being harassed in the prior year, 31 percent report feeling extremely upset, and at least 32 percent claim they experiences a minimum of one stress-related symptom following the incident. Further, reports out of the State of New Hampshire have emerged that indicate cyber-bullying has intensified teen "angst", where bullies "unleash putdowns, nasty rumors, humiliating pictures in emails, blogs and chat rooms and verbal threats that can strike victims at home and at any time" (Portsmouth Herald, 2005: 2).

## **Incidents of Cyber-bullying – A Comparative Review**

Two of the key issues necessary for policymakers and educators to have in hand before addressing the urgency of understanding the need for policy development and/or reform are the extent and severity of the problem. Although there have been limited studies over the last few years, they must be summarized here to underscore the fact cyber-bullying is indeed a very new and serious form of bullying. Public policy and legal

analysts may ignore the problem if quantitative and qualitative research is not presented corroborating the mental, physical and academic damage that arises from cyber-bullying. It is also important from a policy perspective to substantiate the international extent to which the electronic communication forum is used. For example, in Sydney, Australia, the media called attention to the fact mobile phones have become the dominant form of communication in that country, and SMS (text messaging) the most popular communication format for adolescents between the ages of fourteen and seventeen. Australia has become a global leader in SMS, with about 500 million SMS messages being sent each month as opposed to a mere 10 million in 2000 (Lee, 2005). Approximately 12 percent of children aged six to nine use text messaging at least once per day, with 49 percent of youth aged ten and fourteen, and 80 percent of fifteen to seventeen-year-olds using SMS daily (Giles, 2004). Furthermore, in 2002, approximately 61 percent of Australian households have access to home computers (an increase of 17 percent since 1998) and 46 percent of homes have internet access (an increase of 30 percent since 1998) (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2003). In addition, 46 percent of fourteen-year-old Australian youth, 55 percent of fifteen-year-olds, and 73 percent of sixteen-year-olds have their own cellular phone (Davidson, 2004).

Campbell (2005) conducted a recent study of 120 Australian students in Grade Eight. Her results indicate over one-quarter reveal they know someone who had been bullied using technology. Further, 11 percent of the students admit they have cyber-bullied and 14 percent reveal they were targets. Campbell's study also reveals that most of the targets are bullied through text messaging, followed closely by chat rooms and then by electronic mailing.

In Japan, a country considered to be digitally ahead of the rest of the world by at least two generations (Mitchell, 2004), children are exposed to digital gadgets at a very early age. Approximately half of Japanese children aged eleven use the Internet, however only about 20 percent are regular users (Dickie, Merchant, Nakamoto, Nuttall, Terazono & Yeager, 2004).

In the United Kingdom, more than 80 percent of children and adolescents have access to home computers. Interestingly, more than 75 percent of children aged eleven years old own a cellular phone (Dickie, et al, 2004). Further, in a National Children's Home study conducted in the United Kingdom in 2002, the findings indicate that:

- Approximately 16 percent of children and adolescents report receiving threatening text messages or being bullied over the Internet.
- Approximately one in four aged eleven to nineteen have been bullied or threatened via their cellular phones or personal computers.
- Approximately 29 percent of those children and adolescents surveyed report they have not told anyone about being bullied.
- Of the remaining 69 percent who did tell someone, approximately 42 percent have confided to a friend and 32 percent have reported the events to a parent. (National Children's Home, 2002)

The impetus for Ybarra and Mitchell's (2004b) study was a 1999 report from the U.S. Attorney General to Vice President Al Gore confirming the growth of cyberspace harassment was becoming an increasing problem for law enforcement officials (Beckerman & Nocero, 2003). Ybarra and Mitchell report that 19 percent of regular Internet users are involved in online harassment in some variation over the past year. Further, 15 percent of the respondents reveal themselves as cyber-bullies as opposed to 7 percent who admit they are victims. Of those students admitting being harassed

online, over one-third reveal being the target of traditional face-to-face bullying in the previous year.

In another study conducted by the Washington, DC based firm of Pew Internet & American Life Project, the results of which were released in the summer of 2003, 74 percent of the 17 million teenagers who used the Internet in 2000 use AOL's Instant Messenger (Blair, 2003). Remarkably, more than one-third of the adolescents using Instant Messaging admit saying things they would not normally say in face-to-face conversations. In this regard, approximately one out of five youth has used Instant Messenger to ask someone out and more than one in ten has used it to sever a personal relationship with a girl/boyfriend (Blair, 2003). Another organization in the United States which monitors young peoples' use of the Internet – Wirekids.org – asserts that 1,500 youth report either being bullied, are guilty of cyber-bullying or know someone who was bullied. In fact, the Portsmouth Herald (2005) reports cyber-bullies, averaging nine to fourteen years of age, use anonymity to cyber-bully.

In Westchester County in the State of New York, school officials invited 600 students, parents, educators and law-enforcement officials to a one-half day conference on cyber-bullying. When officials asked approximately 200 students how many had personally been a cyber-victim or perpetrator, or knew a friend who was either, 194 students raised their hands (Swartz, 2005).

To date Canadian research on cyber-bullying is minimal, although literature is currently emerging (Shariff, in press; Shariff, 2005; Shariff, 2006; Shariff and Gouin, 2005; Shariff and Johnny, in press; Shariff and Strong-Wilson, 2005). Although there have been studies on students' Internet use over the last few years, few have focused

on cyber-bullying. However, a recent study did reveal that one-quarter of Grade Seven students in two Alberta schools report being bullied online (Gillis, 2006). Notwithstanding the apparent dearth of Canadian cyber-bullying data, the Environics Research Group conducted two substantial surveys regarding Internet usage, one in 2000-2001, entitled *Young Canadians in a Wired World, Phase I* (YCWW-I) and the other in November, 2003 (YCWW-II) (Media Awareness Network, 2004). The YCWW-I project comprised a three-fold component: first, a telephone survey of 1,080 Canadian parents with a home computer; second, focus groups of children aged nine to seventeen in Toronto and Montreal; and third, a survey of 5,682 students in grades four to eleven across Canada. The project examined the online activities of young Canadians and their personal risk to Internet harassment, inappropriate communications and invasion of privacy, and the strategies utilized to protect themselves. Further, the survey tested parents on their knowledge and cognizance of Internet challenges and dangers their children face when online (Media Awareness Network, 2004).

Although the report determines both the extent and diversity to which the respondents use the Internet, as well as parents' lack of knowledge and awareness of such online use, it does not specifically explore Internet bullying. The data reveal, however, that 79 percent of Canadian youth have Internet access at home and almost one-half (48%) say they use it from home at least an hour each day (Media Awareness Network, n.d.). From the parents' perspective, the Internet is beneficial for pedagogical purposes, but for youth it is used primarily for socializing and communicating. In fact, almost four out of ten secondary school students reveal that communicating is the most

significant benefit of the Internet (Media Awareness Network, n.d.). The dichotomy between parents' and students' intent in using the Internet could not be more obvious in light of the fact that 57 percent of youth state they use the Internet for playing and downloading music and 56 percent use it for electronic mailing, while on the other hand, 65 percent of parents think their children primarily use the Internet for schoolwork (Media Awareness Network, n.d.). Further, a study released last year reveals an incalculable gap between what the parents "think their teens are doing" and the "reality of risky activities" that teens undertake (Shaw, 2006: A1). Once again, evidence is surfacing that there is an informational generation gap between parents' discernment of their children's online use and what their children are actually doing online. As Belsey succinctly states, "cyber-bullying is practically subterranean because it lives in the world of young people and kids know there is a gap in understanding of technology between themselves and their parents, and their fear is not only that the parents' response may make the bullying worse, but that the adults will take the technology away" (as cited in Snider, 2004: 2).

Jan Sippell of the Vancouver, British Columbia School Board is also concerned about parents' misinformation and lack of awareness of cyber-bullying practices. She believes part of the problem is the difference in how parents and children understand and use the technology. From the parents' perspective, computers are functional tools to be used for practical or business purposes, while students view this technology as a "lifeline to their peer group" (as cited in Snider, 2004: 2). In fact, Sippell has organized about a dozen parent information meetings that focus on cyber-bullying issues (Snider, 2004).

Berson and Berson (2005) conducted a comparative analysis of online behaviours of adolescent girls in the United States and New Zealand. In the end, the number of responses totaled 10,800 American females and 347 New Zealand females. The findings indicate that in both the United States and New Zealand, less than 4% of adults monitor children's Internet use, which may be a possible contributor to online (mis)behaviour. Berson and Berson further argue that:

In cyberspace, the pressures to fit in and to act a certain way were moderated by the pseudoanonymity and perceived security of being protected behind the computer screen, often in the comfort and safety of one's home. Cyberspace provided girls with a context where they could shed their traditional expectations and explore alternative aspects of themselves (p. 33).

Therefore, it is important for policymakers to incorporate the technological discrepancies of knowledge between parents and children into guidelines when drafting policy initiatives. Parents' lack of knowledge about the use and abuse of Internet practices must not only be addressed, but workshops need to be created to educate the older generation on current cyberspace uses and practices so they can begin to understand their children's cyber-world. Of course, increased supervision could cause additional problems, as Nancy Willard (n.d.) laments, because if more adults begin supervising and monitoring their children's electronic environment, there is an increased likelihood that children will use increasingly new and advanced technological strategies to secret their online activities. Therefore, it is important to concentrate on proactive strategies that will modify students' behaviour in online environments, empower victims of cyber-bullying to report misdeeds, and dissuade bullies from further acting out in cyberspace (Willard, n.d.). In addition, of course, is the need for educators to pay attention to teachers' responsibilities to maintain good supervision in the classroom and

to develop pedagogy that engages the students' interest in the positive aspects of Internet communication through respectful use.

## **The Need for Policy Balance in Cyber-bullying Responses**

Directions for policy development to address the diverse aspects of cyber-bullying often suggest a holistic approach. Campbell (2005), for example, believes holistic school policies stressing the values of care and kindness and restorative justice approaches are the most effective preventive tools in tackling cyber-bullying. However, and consistent with the importance of localized context, she does believe that each school must adopt its own policies and guidelines tailored to its own individual requirements and context. Further, she does emphasize that policies must be in force on a continual basis in order for them to be effective, and some policies may need to extend beyond school boundaries, given the realities of students' use of the computer at home. It should be added, though, that this needs to occur within a locally informed process whereby educators make meaning of such policies in practice with reference to their own jurisdictional culture (Levison and Sutton, 2001: 3).

One standard approach to more local policy development, in contrast to the "umbrella" governance policies such as the *Charter*, are acceptable use policies (AUPs). It is felt they should be implemented at both the Board and individual school levels as the current onus to prohibit and/or discipline cyber-bullies appears to lie primarily with the school. More recently, however, it is felt that acceptable use policies must involve the parents as well, either through family contracts and control or with the extension of the AUP's to home use – again, demonstrating sensitivity to the local realities of the recipients and their families.



The Internet Service Providers (ISPs) mandate their users to abide by the terms of individually tailored AUPs (Bell Sympatico Internet Services, n.d.; Rogers Business Solutions, n.d.; Shaw Internet Services, n.d.), but they do not always recognize and acknowledge breaches of acceptable internet use or impose sanctions for libelous or defamatory websites or anomalous behaviour. They argue that it is not their job to act as censors of web material, prohibitors of free speech, or morality police (CBC News, 2005). In a January, 2006 British Columbia Supreme Court decision (*Newman et al v. Halstead et al*), plaintiffs in a defamatory lawsuit, most of whom were educators in the Comox Valley region on Vancouver Island, British Columbia, were awarded \$676,000 in damages against a parent in the education system who posted serious allegations against the plaintiffs on an Internet website, chat rooms and emails over several years. The defendant continued her assault on the plaintiffs, without admonishment or Internet Service Provider intervention, until the plaintiffs were forced to take the matter to trial, obtain judgment and injunctive relief to stop the abuse. Further, according to Nancy Knight, the mother of David Knight, a young teenager who was severely cyber-bullied for years, the ISP hosting a denigrating website aimed at her son refused to take it down. Although Knight notified the ISP that her son was the victim of a malicious website, which was clearly in breach of the ISP's acceptable use policy, it took months and numerous phone calls to the ISP before they removed it from the worldwide web. This occurred only after Mrs. Knight threatened legal action (CBC News, 2005).

Therefore, if the ISPs are unwilling to take responsibility as vetting agents for surceasing cyber-bullying or removing inappropriate website material, then the duty does seem to fall back onto schools and their boards to amend policies, to have

educators teach appropriate netiquette, and enforce breaches of acceptable standards or circumstances. Notwithstanding the importance of district schools to have AUPs in place for the use and misuse of computers, the Internet and numerous other electronic devices, Board policies should use a broader brushstroke (McKenzie, 1995). A comprehensive Board policy should be designed with three factors in mind. According to McKenzie:

1. Although a Board's policy should reflect the contents of its district schools' AUPs, it should also additionally create a nexus between acceptable student behaviours and students' rights and responsibilities. (McKenzie, 1995). This is the level at which policy and legal standards can be established through dialogue with students, educators and administrators.
2. A Board policy should also establish its position and keep pace with ever-changing controversial information about the Internet, and whether students should have access to such new material, all the while vigilantly monitoring, adding and amending its curriculum to conform to current and accepted standards and outlining explicit expectations for supervising school staff (McKenzie, 1995). This is the level at which policy and legal standards can be established within the local context.
3. A Board policy should establish the responsibilities and rights of school administrators, teachers, employees and volunteers who manage such utilities (McKenzie, 1995) – again, through a dialogue with those same actors.

Therefore, as McKenzie (1995) points out, a comprehensive Board policy should address what schools should do when students, teachers, administrators, staff and volunteers are confronted with any type of unacceptable communications, either written and/or oral or have contact with aberrant individuals, and then elaborate on the various facets of privacy and access rights violations. Operational policies (policies in practice) can then be crafted to deal specifically with the particular unacceptable communications such as cyber-bullying.

Ultimately, McKenzie (1995) sets out key issues that board policies must address -- namely, "a broader philosophical stance, inclusively addressing school/home responsibilities, staff responsibilities, and student responsibilities" (pp. 5-7). Basically, they should provide the broader framework. Similarly, family online agreements or contracts, it is argued, should detail what constitutes acceptable netiquette and what is considered reprehensible online behaviour, and conclude with mutually agreed upon family mediations, interventions, sanctions, or other recourses should such misbehaviours occur. Incorporating this aspect into family acceptable use online agreements allow these contacts to become inclusionary in their purpose and intent, which ultimately is to create a safe, harmonious and suitable learning environment for children and adults alike.

Finally, procedures should be developed and derived from the policy level to deal with actual misbehaviour on the internet by students. Willard (2003) believes school officials face a legal conundrum when imposing penalties for electronic abuses. They may encounter serious consequences if they inadequately respond to cyber-bullying incidents while, on the other hand, if they do respond, may become embroiled in civil law suits launched by parents who believe their children were unfairly treated. At the same time, some areas of cyber-bullying are considered criminal acts under the *Criminal Code* and therefore are outside of the authority of educational authorities. For example, if one repeatedly communicates with another person that eventually causes that person to fear for his or her life or safety, the perpetrator could be charged under the *Criminal Code*. Further, it is a criminal act if one publishes defamatory comments which sole purpose is to insult or injure a person's reputation, or expose him or her to

“hatred, contempt or ridicule” (Web Aware, 2004: 2). It is also true that a violation of Canada’s *Human Rights Act* – another most relevant Canadian policy document – can occur when hateful or discriminatory comments based on “race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, age, sex, sexual orientation, marital or family status or disability” are made (Web Aware, 2004: 2). Accordingly, the onus is on schools to ensure precise policies are in place, clearly stated to students and their caregivers, that mandate students’ use of all electronic equipment, including mobile devices, in a safe and friendly manner.

Belsey urges school boards to change the boundaries of school policies to capture all Internet use, including classroom, home, and cellphones. If schools set out explicit online protocols that should be followed on school grounds and family dwellings, caregivers may assume, along with teachers, some of the responsibility for monitoring their children’s online behaviour more diligently (Gillis, 2006: 35).

## Conclusion

In summary, a review of the literature and policies dealing with cyber-bullying reveals the following:

1. At the school level, the need for acceptable-use policies that expand on online use and behaviour to include **both** school and home use. This level remains the most sensitive to the needs of the local context;
2. At the divisional level, the concurrent development of board or higher administrative policy that interconnects local school policies for government and public accountability, which establish standards for responsibility in responding for staff;
3. The need, in an ongoing basis, to allow students to have voice into the development of relevant policies in the area, so that new or reformed policies are more consensual than autocratic<sup>3</sup> or imposed;

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<sup>3</sup> And, as is true for the development of violence prevention policies for youth more generally, policies formulated to address cyber-bullying problems should include partnerships among government officials, school administrators and teachers, parents and children (see Casella, 2002).

4. The critical need to evaluate the effectiveness of policies in order to determine if they are actually achieving their policy intent and not undermining other relevant policies and systems already in place (Farrington, 2001). Zero-tolerance policies in particular have this need, given the oft demonstrated exacerbation of harm to students sanctioned by them, such as exclusion from the school learning environment and psychological effects of negative labeling.

As Cassidy and Jackson (2005) discuss, as a basic principle, expansion of existing policies on harassment and bullying or creation of new policy specific to cyber-bullying should set out the social values underpinning the policy such as:

1. Caring and respectful behaviours in student to student exchanges;
2. Safe and nurturing environments for healthy development of identity and netizenship;
3. The principles of tolerance and impartiality.

In returning to the opening consideration of how policy gets developed, overall, a best interests of the child policy lens assists in setting the balance between the values in tension, such as freedom of expression and the rights to privacy, liberty and security. When policymakers consider how to develop more comprehensive and effective policies in this area, they also should follow the steps to development as set out in policy studies literature. That is, as in this review, they should first describe and define the policy problem. Is/why is cyber-bullying a problem? Second, they should consider the implications different perspectives have on developing specific policy to address cyber-bullying, e.g., the psychological, the social, the legal, and how they are to be weighed or prioritized in making meaning of the problem. Third, they should show how this actionable policy knowledge can be transformed into articulated policies that fit into the wider social context of cyber-bullying in the local community, in order to assure that

changes in policy in one area anticipate how those changes may impact on other parts of an interconnected system in the policy environment – for example, health, justice, social welfare systems (Stewart & Ayres, 2001). Otherwise what results may be unintended consequences which not only do not prove effective in addressing the problem, but could actually exacerbate the problem, not unlike what happened with the development of zero-tolerance policies to resolve conventional bullying problems in the school environment (LaRocque & Shariff, 2001). The actual practice in implementing the zero-tolerance policies often resulted in marginalized children being suspended from school, leading some to hit the streets without resources and thus often come into contact with the justice system.

Finally, in developing the policies, policymakers must attend to the psychosocial realities of the behaviour of cyber-bullying for both the bullied and bullier, in order to assure their needs are being addressed. This can only be achieved through an understanding of the scope of the problem (incidents and severity); the theories formulated about the causative factors of the behaviour; and the awareness and the knowledge about cyber-bullying amongst the stakeholders (e.g. the students, parents, and practitioners who have to deal with the issue). Only then can informed policy be created and standards established and monitored for effectiveness in the programming derived from the policy.

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