Cyberbullying Backgrounder

What is Cyberbullying?

For most youth, the Internet is all about socializing and while most of these social interactions are positive, increasing numbers of kids are using the technology to intimidate and harass others – a phenomenon known as cyberbullying.

The term "cyberbullying" can be a bit of a misnomer. Unlike the traditional definition of bullying, which involves a difference in power or strength between the perpetrator and the target, a lot of the activities that adults would label as cyberbullying happen between people of roughly the same status. It's also sometimes difficult to distinguish clearly between the target and perpetrator in a cyberbullying scenario. Finally, much of the abusive behaviour that takes place within offline relationships may also take place in online spaces or be abetted by digital technology.

How Common is It?

A significant minority of students have experienced both meanness and threats online: just over a third say that someone has said something mean or cruel to them, and just under a third say that someone has threatened them online by saying something like "I'm going to get you" or "You're going to get it." Roughly a quarter of students say that they have engaged in online meanness.[1]

Roles

Those who are involved in cyberbullying are generally categorized as perpetrators, targets and witnesses. But meanness is fairly often reciprocal, with a significant overlap between students who have engaged in online meanness and those who have experienced it.[2] Additionally, it's not at all unusual for both parties in a cyberbullying scenario to see themselves as being the victims.

One of the challenges in dealing with cyberbullying is that the term itself often has little meaning to youth. What adults may consider cyberbullying youth will describe as getting into fights, "starting something" or simply "drama."[3] This includes many of the activities considered forms of cyberbullying, such as spreading rumours or excluding peers from their social circles. Boys similarly refer to what they do – most often online impersonation or posting embarrassing videos – as "punking" or "pranking" rather than bullying.[4]

There is little doubt that cyberbullying can be traumatic: one third of students who were bullied online reported symptoms of depression, a figure which rose to nearly one half for those who experienced both online and offline bullying.[5] Unfortunately, youth typically underestimate how harmful online bullying can be. Researchers at the University of British Columbia found that while young people believe most of the negative behaviour that happens online is meant

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1   Steeves, Valerie. (2014). *Young Canadians in a Wired World, Phase III: Cyberbullying: Dealing with Online Meanness, Cruelty and Threats*. Ottawa: MediaSmarts.

2   Ibid.

3   Marwick, Dr. Alice, and Dr. danah boyd. *The Drama! Teen Conflict, Gossip, and Bullying in Networked Publics.*

4   Ibid.

5   Kessel Schneider, Shari, Lydia O'Donnell, Ann Stueve, and Robert W. S. Coulter "Cyberbullying, School Bullying, and Psychological Distress: A Regional Census of High School Students," *American Journal of Public Health* (January 2012) 102:1, 171-177.

as a joke, "students need to be educated that this 'just joking' behaviour has serious implications."[6] MediaSmarts' *Young Canadians in a Wired World* (*YCWW*) research found that the most common reason given for online meanness is "I was just joking around," followed by "the person said something mean and cruel about me first" and "the person said something mean about my friend first".[7]

One reason cyberbullying may be more harmful than offline bullying is the potential presence of countless, invisible witnesses and/or collaborators to the cyberbullying, which creates a situation where targets are left unsure of who knows and who to fear. Technology also extends the reach these young people have, enabling them to harass their targets anywhere and at any time. While these situations should be reported, it can be difficult for young people to step forward: how do you report an attack that leaves no physical scars? Will the consequences of telling an adult that you are being cyberbullied be worse than the bullying itself? Adults want to help, but many feel ill-equipped to handle bullying in a digital world.

Research has shown that witnesses to bullying can be just as important as targets or perpetrators in affecting how an incident plays out.[8] Witnesses may also suffer negative effects that are as bad as or worse than those suffered by the target.[9] MediaSmarts' *YCWW* research on cyberbullying has revealed both good and bad news on this front. The good news is that many youth who witness bullying do something about it: 65 percent of the 5,436 Canadian students in grades 4 to 11 that were surveyed said that they had done something to help someone who was experiencing online meanness.[10]

There's no question that it's possible for witnesses to do a great deal of harm, whether it's by directly joining in the bullying, encouraging the perpetrator or even re-victimizing the target by sharing a bullying post or video. It's also well-established that when witnesses to bullying stand up and defend the target it can make a tremendous and positive difference – but not in every situation. There may be just as many cases where intervening can do greater harm to the target, the witness or both, and witnesses may have a number of valid reasons for not wanting to intervene:

- Fear of being a target. Saying that anyone who witnesses bullying should confront the perpetrator is not unlike suggesting that everyone who sees a mugging should try to stop it. Standing up to defend a target – especially if you turn out to be the only person who stands up – can easily lead to becoming a target yourself without necessarily having a positive effect on the situation.

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6   Bellett, Gerry. "Cyberbullying needs its own treatment strategies." *The Vancouver Sun*, April 13, 2012.

7   Steeves, Valerie. (2014). *Young Canadians in a Wired World, Phase III: Cyberbullying: Dealing With Online Meanness, Cruelty and Threats.* Ottawa: MediaSmarts.

8   Hawkins, D., Pepler, D. & Craig, W. (2001). Naturalistic observations of peer interventions in bullying. *Social Development, 10*, 512-527.

9   Rivers et al. Observing bullying at school: The mental health implications of witness status. *School Psychology Quarterly, 24 (4)*: 211.

10   Steeves, Valerie. (2014). *Young Canadians in a Wired World, Phase III: Cyberbullying: Dealing with Online Meanness, Cruelty and Threats*. Ottawa: MediaSmarts.

- Fear of losing social status. Even if intervening or reporting doesn't lead to the witness becoming a target, it can still have long-term effects on a young person's social status, either by being associated with the target (youth who are marginalized for reasons such as poverty,[11] disability,[12] being a member of a visible minority group[13] and having a lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender status[14] are substantially more likely to be targets) or by being labeled a "snitch" – both of which may easily be preludes to being a target of bullying.

- Fear of escalating the situation. Both targets of and witnesses to bullying often fear that standing up to a perpetrator or reporting bullying to a parent or teacher is more likely to make things worse rather than better. Many of the youth who participated in 2012 focus groups for MediaSmarts' *YCWW* study[15] said that they were reluctant to report bullying to teachers because they felt the situation was likely to get out of control, especially in cases where teachers were bound by "zero tolerance" policies to respond to cyberbullying complaints in a particular way. This reluctance was echoed in the *YCWW* national survey, which found that while teachers rate highly as a source of information about cyberbullying, youth are extremely reluctant to turn to them for help.[16]

A good starting principle for witnesses would be "first, do no harm." As well as not participating in the bullying, young people should be encouraged to think ethically about their responsibilities as witnesses. Instead of automatically following any single rule, young people who witness cyberbullying should think carefully about the possible consequences of the different ways they may react. Instead of telling youth to report and intervene each time they witness cyberbullying, we can teach them to see themselves as active participants in the situation and consider different approaches for different situations, such as:

- *documenting* the bullying and, if it seems that it will do more good than harm, reporting it;

- *comforting* the target and offering help privately (including help in reporting the bullying to authorities: targets of bullying are often reluctant to report it to adults[17]);

- *mediating* between the target and perpetrator; or

- *confronting* the perpetrator, either privately or in public. If the perpetrator is a friend, youth can show that they don't approve of their behaviour by not joining in or reinforcing it.[18]

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11 Cross, E.J., R. Piggin, J. Vonkaenal-Platt and T. Douglas. (2012). *Virtual Violence II: Progress and Challenges in the Fight against Cyberbullying*. London: Beatbullying.

12 Livingstone, S., Haddon, L., Görzig, A., Ólafsson, K., with members of the EU Kids Online Network (2011) 'EU Kids Online Final Report'.

13 Cross, E.J., R. Piggin, J. Vonkaenal-Platt and T. Douglas. (2012). *Virtual Violence II: Progress and Challenges in the Fight against Cyberbullying*. London: Beatbullying.

14 Hinduja, S., and Patchin, J. (2011) 'Cyberbullying Research Summary Factsheet: Bullying, Cyberbullying and Sexual Orientation'.

15 Steeves, Valerie. (2012). *Young Canadians in a Wired World, Phase III: Talking to Youth and Parents About Life Online*. Ottawa: MediaSmarts.

16 Ibid.

17 Dinham, Peter. "Kids Reluctant to Speak Up About Bullying, Bad Experiences." iTWire, June 2, 2014.

18 Patchin, Justin W. "Empower Bystanders to Improve School Climate." Online: <http://cyberbullying.us/empower-bystanders-to-improve-school-climate/>. Posted July 18, 2014.

Methods of Cyberbullying

There are several ways that young people bully others online. Seventy-eight percent of those students who have done something mean or cruel online say they have called someone a name (18% of the total sample). Self-reporting of other problematic behaviours is much lower. Around six percent of all students report that they have harassed someone in an online game, five percent have spread rumours and four percent have posted an embarrassing photo/video of someone. Three percent say that they have made fun of someone's race, religion or ethnicity and two percent report making fun of someone's sexual orientation. One percent report that they have harassed someone sexually (e.g. said or did something sexual when the person did not want them to).[19]

Cyberbullying and the Law

Young people should be aware that some forms of online bullying are considered criminal acts. Under the Criminal Code of Canada, it is a crime to communicate repeatedly with someone if your communication causes them to fear for their own safety or for the safety of others. It's also a crime to publish a "defamatory libel"—writing something that is designed to insult a person or is likely to injure someone's reputation by exposing him or her to hatred, contempt or ridicule.

A cyberbully may also be violating the Canadian Human Rights Act if he or she spreads hate or discrimination based on race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, age, sex, sexual orientation, marital status, family status or disability. A thorough explanation of federal and provincial laws relating to cyberbullying can be found at http://mediasmarts.ca/digital-media-literacy/digital-issues/cyberbulling/cyberbullying-law.

The Role of the School

Almost two thirds of students say their school has a rule relating to cyberbullying; of these, three quarters say the rules are "often" or "sometimes" helpful. This does not, however, seem to translate into actual effects on students' behaviour: unlike with household rules, there is almost no correlation between the presence of school rules and whether or not a student has engaged in or experienced either meanness or threats online. Perhaps because of this, students who have personally experienced online threats or meanness are much less likely to feel that school rules are helpful.[20]

Schools have started to become more proactive about confronting bullying, but too often these efforts fall into stereotypes, emphasize unrealistic worst-case scenarios and are presented as one-time-only interventions. Youth participants in MediaSmarts' *YCWW* focus groups repeatedly said that they had experienced anti-cyberbullying programs – usually one-time assemblies – that not only failed to resonate with them but made them take the issue less seriously. They were also often reluctant to report bullying because they felt that teachers were likely to escalate a situation into more than what it was, possibly due to teachers being bound by zero-tolerance policies.[21]

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19   Steeves, Valerie. (2014). *Young Canadians in a Wired World, Phase III: Cyberbullying: Dealing with Online Meanness, Cruelty and Threats*. Ottawa: MediaSmarts.

20   Ibid.

21   Steeves, Valerie. (2012). *Young Canadians in a Wired World, Phase III: Talking to Youth and Parents*. Ottawa: MediaSmarts.

Effective intervention programs, on the other hand, have a number of characteristics in common: they include the whole school; they provide support both for targets and perpetrators after an incident; and they work at multiple levels – in the classroom, school-wide and in connection with parents and the surrounding community.[22] Zero-tolerance and one-size-fits-all approaches to dealing with online conflict are not only unsuccessful, but can be actively harmful as they prevent students from turning to what should be one of their main sources of help and support. Instead of a greater emphasis on punishment and criminalization, we need to foster empathy in youth; teach them to avoid the "empathy traps" of digital communication; provide them with effective tools for managing their emotions and dealing with online conflict; and promote awareness of the power of parents to teach their children to treat others with respect.

Finally, in order to fight cyberbullying effectively we need to make an effort to change the culture in which it happens. Both at school and at home, we can help kids understand that what may seem like "just a joke" may have a powerful effect on someone else. It's also important to teach kids that cyberbullying may be less common than they think it is: youth often overestimate how common this sort of bullying actually is, even though most report their own experiences as being positive.[23] This is significant because research indicates that when youth believe that bullying behaviour is the norm, they are more likely to exhibit and tolerate this behaviour – and that when youth are made aware of how uncommon bullying actually is, bullying rates drop.[24]

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22   Craig, Wendy. Testimony before the Senate Committee on Human Rights, December 12, 2011.

23   *Teens, Kindness and Cruelty on Social Network Sites*. Pew Research Institute, November 9, 2011.

24   Craig, David W. and H. Wesley Perkins, *Assessing Bullying in New Jersey Secondary Schools: Applying the Social Norms Model to Adolescent Violence*, Presented at the 2008 National Conference on the Social Norms Approach, July 22, 2008.

Advice for Avoiding Online Conflict

In the course of the activities in this lesson, students will develop strategies for minimizing the risks of online conflict caused by the inability to see or hear the people we're interacting with online.

Here are some tips to help youth avoid online conflict:

Remember that the people we talk to and play with online are real people. Even if you don't know them offline, try to imagine a person sitting next to you before you say or type anything.

- Don't respond right away. When something happens that gets you upset, take some time to let the first rush of anger or fear fade away.

- If you can, talk things out in person rather than online. Remember that other people can't tell how *you're* feeling online either, so it's easy for drama to blow up.

- Talk to your friends and family about how you're feeling. Kids consistently say that just having someone listen to them is one of the most effective ways of dealing with online conflict.

- Don't ask your friends to back you up. Research suggests that getting the same message over and over again – even if it's from your friends taking your side in an argument – can make angry feelings a lot more intense. It can also make the drama spread and turn into a much bigger conflict.

- Keep an eye on how *you're* feeling! It's hard to make good decisions when you're mad, scared or embarrassed. If your heart is racing or you're feeling tense, it's time to get offline for a while.

Parents' Guide to Cyberbullying

For most youth, the Internet is all about socializing and while most of these social interactions are positive, increasing numbers of kids are using the technology to intimidate and harass others – a phenomenon known as cyberbullying.

The term "cyberbullying" can be a bit misleading. Unlike the traditional definition of bullying, which involves a difference in power or strength between children who bully and the children they target, a lot of the activities that adults might see as cyberbullying happen between children of roughly the same status. It can also be difficult to tell who is bullying whom in a cyberbullying scenario. Finally, much of the abusive behaviour that takes place within offline relationships may also take place online or be enhanced by digital technology.

How Common is It?

Just over a third of Canadian students say that someone has said something mean or cruel to them online, and just under a third say that someone has threatened them online (posting things like "I'm going to get you" or "You're going to get it"). Roughly a quarter of students say that they have been mean to someone online.

Parents have an important role to play in helping their children and teens learn how to respond to cyberbullying. In fact, parents are the number one group of people that they turn to for help with online meanness.

How Do I Know if my Child is Being Cyberbullied?

Signs that your child is being bullied online can include fear of using the computer or going to school, anxiety and distress, and withdrawal from friends and usual activities.

What Should I do if my Child is Targeted?

- Watch out for signs that your child is being bullied online – a reluctance to use the computer or go to school may be an indication.
- Listen and provide advice if your child asks for it. Make sure to check in regularly to make sure things are going better.
- Report online bullying to your Internet or cell phone service provider. Most companies have Acceptable Use Policies (AUPs) that clearly define privileges and guidelines for people who use their services, and the actions that can be taken if those guidelines are violated. They should be able to respond to reports of cyberbullying over their networks or help you track down the appropriate service provider to respond to.

Report incidents of online harassment and physical threats to your local police. Some forms of online bullying are considered criminal acts. For example: under the Criminal Code of Canada, it is a crime to communicate repeatedly with someone if your communication causes them to fear for their own safety or the safety of others.

We also need to teach our kids how to respond to an online bully. Your child has received a handout titled *What to Do if Someone is Mean to You Online*. Go through it together and emphasize the key points:

- Don't fight back
- Save the evidence
- Talk to someone about it
- Report it to the site where it's happening or to police if it's making you feel scared; making it hard for you to go to school or do things you enjoy; if you are being physically threatened; or if someone is threatening to publish something that would hurt or humiliate you.

How Can I Prevent Cyberbullying?

We can reduce the risks associated with Internet use by having open, ongoing conversations with our children about their online activities and by setting up rules that will grow along with them. MediaSmarts' research shows that having family Internet rules on things like treating people with respect can have a positive impact on your children's online behaviour. (This tip sheet can get you started: http://mediasmarts.ca/sites/default/files/pdfs/tipsheet/ TipSheet_FamilyOnlineRules.pdf.) Research has also shown that bullying rates drop when kids know that it is against the rules and how to report it.

Tell your children to come to you right away if they feel uncomfortable or threatened online. Don't take it for granted that your child will do this: only eight percent of teens who have been bullied online have told their parents.

Encourage your children to take action when they witness someone being bullied. This doesn't necessarily mean confronting the bully: they need to consider what they can do that is most likely to help the person being bullied and least likely to make the situation worse. This may include:

- *recording* the bullying by taking screenshots (see take-a-screenshot.org for tips on how to do this) and, if it seems that it will do more good than harm, reporting it;
- *helping the person who is being bullied feel better* and offering help privately (including help in reporting the bullying to authorities: young people who are being bullied are often reluctant to tell adults);
- *trying to help* both the person being bullied and person who is doing the bullying make up; or
- *confronting* the person who is doing the bullying, either privately or in public. If this is a friend, the best way to show that you don't approve of their behaviour is by not joining in or encouraging it.

In order to fight cyberbullying effectively we need to change the culture in which it happens, starting with helping kids understand that what may seem like "just a joke" can have a powerful effect on someone else. It's also important to teach them that cyberbullying may be less common than they think it is: young people often overestimate how common bullying actually is, even though most report their own experiences as being positive. Knowing the facts is important because research shows that when young people believe that bullying behaviour is the norm, they are more likely to engage in and tolerate this sort of behaviour – and that when they understand how *uncommon* bullying actually is, bullying rates drop.

What Should I <u>Avoid Doing</u> if my Child is Being Cyberbullied?

It can be difficult for a young person to come forward when they are being bullied; even to mom or dad. To build trust, try not to overreact. Don't forbid your child to use the Internet in the hope of eliminating the source of the problem: for your child, this is equal to social death and will leave her or him feeling even more victimized (not to mention the fact that an extreme reaction such as this will probably cause your child to avoid confiding in you again when feeling threatened).

Other things to avoid:

- Telling them to stop "tattling" or "snitching"
- Telling them they should solve the problem themselves
- Blaming them for being a target
- Minimizing or ignoring the situation

How Can I Learn More?

As much as possible, show an interest in your child's online life: where does he or she go online? What does he or she do? What is it about these online experiences that are so absorbing? If you're in the habit of sharing your own online experiences with your child, she or he will be more likely to talk to you when having a negative experience.

If you want to better understand your child's online experience, check out MediaSmarts' resources at: http://mediasmarts.ca/digital-media-literacy/digital-issues/cyberbullying.