Chapter 13

The Effects of Cyberbullying on Children’s School Adjustment

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ABSTRACT

Bullying is commonplace in many schools. For many it is an every-day occurrence with eight out of ten children reporting that they have been the victim of bullying in the previous month (Swayer, Bradshaw, & Brennan, 2008) and technology is increasingly being used as a medium to victimize (Dehue, Bolman, & Vollnick, 2008). This chapter will begin by providing a brief overview of bullying behavior and then discuss the differences between cyberbullying and more traditional forms of bullying. Prevalence rates from a range of studies will be presented and discussed. The chapter will then discuss the consequences of experiencing cyberbullying for children’s psychosocial and school adjustment and discuss how cyberbullying may need to be considered by researchers and practitioners with the increase in interactive learning. Finally, the chapter will discuss strategies to reduce children’s experiences of bullying, including some that make use of interactive learning.

INTRODUCTION

Children experience a wide range of behaviors that can be regarded as bullying. Traditionally researchers have conceptualized these experiences to include verbal, physical, relational, and indirect attacks on the individual (see Hawker & Boulton, 2000, for a review). However, as children are becoming proficient users of technology as a result of increased exposure, engagement, and through learning opportunities there is an increasing concern among researchers and practitioners that technology is being used as a medium to bully (Smith, 2009).

Cyberbullying represents a relatively new phenomenon (Smith, 2009). Consequently, when
compared to more traditional forms of bullying, practitioners’ and researchers’ understanding of children’s cyberbullying is somewhat in its infancy. Nonetheless, being involved in cyberbullying is still widely recognized as a risk factor for children’s psychosocial wellbeing and school adjustment. For example, some researchers have argued that we should regard cyberbullying as an increasingly important social problem that must be addressed (Smith, 2009). Whilst others have argued that cyberbullying in America represents a national health problem that affects countless children and, as such, should not be overlooked (Juvonen & Gross, 2008). Finally, some have argued that the potential consequences of cyberbullying are so severe that we must think about the phenomenon as cyberabuse in order to fully capture the potential severity (Mustacchi, 2009).

BACKGROUND

Cyberbullying has been conceptualized “as the use of the Internet or other digital communication devices to insult or threaten someone” (Juvonen & Gross, 2008, p. 498). This broad conceptualization illustrates how the term cyberbullying can be regarded as an umbrella term, incorporating a range of behaviors and experiences (Tokunaga, 2010). Cyberbullying can occur through a range of media. For example, instant messenger, social networking sites, email, small text messaging, websites, voting booths, chat rooms, and bash rooms can all be used as a tool to deliberately intimidate others (Beale & Jall, 2007). Also, using technology to send incriminating or unflattering images of individuals are further examples of cyberbullying (Diamanduros, Downs, & Jenkins, 2008). However, whilst the mediums most frequently used to cyberbully are mobile telephones and the internet, it should be noted that the bullying behaviours encountered on the internet can take many forms (Smith, 2009). Consequently, Mason (2008) argues that cyberbullying represents both a form of verbal and written bullying.

Whilst some have argued that cyberbullying represents an extension of children’s experiences of bullying at school (Juvonen & Gross, 2008), and cyberbullying can occur both in school and out of school, it is important to note that there are some key differences between children’s experiences of cyberbullying and more traditional forms of school bullying. For example, Menesini and Nocentini (2009) argue that with cyberbullying it is harder to determine intent and balance of power compared with more traditional forms of bullying that are often characterized by an imbalance of power between bully and victim. Specifically, the power imbalance with technology is more ambiguous: Weaker children may regard technology as a way of getting their own back on those that are stronger than they are. Mensini and Nocentini further question whether one off acts of intimidation constitute cyberbullying or whether there needs to be repeated acts of intimidation. The idea of repeated acts of intentional intimidation forms a central characteristic of traditional bullying definitions (Smith, 2004). However, depending on the medium used to victimize, one off instances of cyberbullying can be witnessed by many on numerous occasions providing a different form of repetition. Similarly, when cyberbullying occurs via open access chat rooms and video clips, the potential audience is much larger than for more traditional forms of bullying (Slonje & Smith, 2008).

Cyberbullying is also different from more traditional forms of bullying because the identity of the bully is often unknown to the victim. Through using technology as a medium to victimize the bully can choose to hide their identity from their victim or assume a different identity, thus affording them higher levels of anonymity (Beale & Jall, 2007). This ability to remain anonymous is of course highly desirable because it can mean that the individual is no longer accountable for their actions and, as such, can avoid any poten-