Parenting in a digital age: A review of parents' role in preventing adolescent cyberbullying

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ABSTRACT

While parents have a critical influence on reducing adolescent risk taking, adolescents' access to online spaces presents significant and novel challenges to parents' ability to reduce their youth's involvement in cyberbullying. The present study reviews the existing literature on parents' influence (i.e., parental warmth and parental monitoring) on adolescent cyberbullying, both as victims and perpetrators. 23 mostly cross sectional articles were identified for this review. Findings indicate that parental warmth is consistently associated with lower cyberbullying, both as victims and perpetrators. For parental monitoring, strategies that are focused on parental control, such as restricting the Internet, appear to be only weakly related to youth's involvement in cyberbullying victimization and perpetration. In contrast, strategies that are more collaborative with in nature (e.g., evaluative mediation and co-use) are more closely connected to cyberbullying victimization and perpetration, although evidence suggests that the effectiveness of these practices varies by sex and ethnicity. Results underscore the need for parents to provide emotional warmth that might support adolescent's disclosure of online activity. Implications for practice and future research are reviewed.

1. Introduction

Adolescence is a developmental period marked by considerable change, including puberty, cognitive development, identity exploration, and the development of autonomy (Smetana, Campione-Barr, & Metzger, 2006). As adolescence progresses, youth tend to spend less time with their family and more time with their peers (Smetana et al., 2006). Juggling this amount of simultaneous change presents significant challenges, and it is therefore not surprising that during this period, adolescents are at increased vulnerability to psychological problems (Doremus-Fitzwater, Varlinskaya, & Spear, 2010; McLaughlin & King, 2014; Negriff & Susman, 2011). In addition, risk taking during adolescence tends to increase, leading to increased rates of binge drinking, risky sexual activity, and crime (Steinberg, 2007).

The bio-ecological theory of development emphasizes that human development is a function of both the characteristics of the individual and the environment in which one lives (Bronfenbrenner, 1999). One environmental context that has become increasingly salient in the lives of adolescents is the Internet. Today, nearly all U.S. adolescents have access to and use the Internet; a recent survey of 12 to 17 year olds indicates that 95% of adolescents in the U.S. are online, and 74% access the Internet on cell phones, tablets and other mobile device (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2014). It is estimated that adolescents in the U.S. now use technology more than 7.5 h a day (Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010) and that 25% of this time is spent using multiple forms of media simultaneously (Brown & Bobkowski, 2011).

The Internet has provided new platforms for risk taking, including adolescent involvement in online interpersonal violence. While youth are involved in many forms of online interpersonal violence (e.g., cyber dating violence, cyber-banging), cyberbullying, both as a victim and perpetrator, is the form of online interpersonal violence that has received the most significant attention. Tokunaga (2010) defines cyberbullying as "any behavior performed through electronic or digital media by individuals or groups that repeatedly communicates hostile or aggressive messages intended to inflict harm or discomfort on others" (p. 278). Many studies have indicated that this form of online interpersonal violence is widespread among youth, with some studies suggesting that nearly 75% of school-age youth experience cyberbullying at least once a year (Juvonen & Gross, 2008; Katzer, Fetchenhauer, & Belschak, 2009). Given this high prevalence and the

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likelihood adolescents will continue to use the Internet for socializing, cyberbullying represents a growing public health problem.

1.1. Parents' influence on adolescent risk taking

Parents have a critical influence on reducing youth risk taking even through adolescence as youth become more peer-focused (Steinberg & Silk, 2002). Although a range of salient parenting attributes have been proposed, two central dimensions have been relied on to reflect the quality of parenting: warmth and control. The warmth dimension of parenting – also called support and responsiveness – refers to parental behaviors that help the youth feel comfortable, accepted, and approved (Rollins & Thomas, 1979). Parental warmth offered to children through nurturance, warmth, and affection is significantly associated with positive outcomes (i.e., academic achievement, decreased substance use and greater psychological adjustment) (Gordon & Cui, 2012; Koning, van den Eijnden, Verdurmen, Engels, & Vollebergh, 2012; Minaie, Hui, Leung, Toumbourou, & King, 2015; Russell & Gordon, 2017). Moreover, families that are warm and responsive provide a context for youth to feel safe and to process difficult emotions, reducing involvement in bullying both as perpetrators and victims (Georgiou, 2008; Ok, Melahat Halat, & Aslan, 2010).

Parental monitoring – one aspect of the control dimension – has been defined as a set of parenting behaviors that involves attention to and tracking of youth whereabouts, activities, and friendships (Dishion & McMahon, 1998). Parental monitoring has been connected to lowering youth's inappropriate or risky behaviors, including involvement in violence and victimization (Beck, Boyle, & Boekeloo, 2003; Lac & Crano, 2009). Youth who are poorly monitored are at higher risk for bullying involvement, both as perpetrators and victims (Espelage, Bosworth, & Simon, 2000; Hong & Espelage, 2012). While many studies rely on reports of parental *knowledge* of youth's activities, the pioneering work of Stattin and Kerr (2000) suggests that *how* parents gain access to that knowledge is a critical distinction for the protective influence of parental monitoring. Stattin and Kerr (2000) propose that parental monitoring consists of youth disclosure, parental control and parental solicitation of activities. Evidence from their work indicates that it may be youth disclosure of activities – and not parental solicitation or control – that is connected to lower risk behaviors (Kerr & Stattin, 2000; Kerr, Stattin, & Burk, 2010). For example, in a longitudinal study of the influence of parental control, parental solicitation, and youth disclosure on delinquency among adolescents, only youth disclosure predicted changes in delinquency over time (Kerr et al., 2010).

The dimensions of parental warmth and parental monitoring coexist, and the parenting literature has demonstrated the importance of identifying not only the specific contribution of individual family characteristics, but also their synergistic effects (e.g., parenting styles) (Baumrind, 1991; Everri, Mancini, & Fruggeri, 2014; Gorman-Smith, Henry, & Tolan, 2004). Four parenting styles have been delineated on the balance of control and warmth: authoritarian (low warmth, high control), authoritative (high warmth and control), permissive (high warmth and low control), and neglecting (low warmth and control) (Maccoby & Martin, 1983). Authoritative parenting reflects a degree of sensitivity and developmental awareness through supportive parenting that scaffolds adolescents' independence as they leave childhood and mature into young adults (Baumrind, 2013; Darling & Steinberg, 1993). Evidence suggests that families that exercise high levels of control accompanied by high levels of warmth are particularly effective in reducing the risk for a range of risks, including violence exposure (Gorman-Smith et al., 2004), delinquency, and externalizing problems (Steinberg, Blatt-Eisengart, & Cauffman, 2006; Steinberg, Darling, & Fletcher, 1995). Taking the evidence on families and youth risk behaviors together, it is clear that parents have an important role in reducing adolescent risking taking broadly. Less work has examined families' influence specifically on cyberbullying, yet existing evidence

suggests parents have an important role.

1.2. Parenting in a digital world

Adolescents' access to online spaces presents significant and novel challenges to parents' ability to reduce their youth's involvement in cyberbullying. Online, adolescents can consume content and connect with others in ways that often are not mediated by parents (Goldstein, 2015). With access to the Internet, adolescents now have the ability to communicate with others from anywhere without leaving their room. Moreover, parents often lack sufficient knowledge of rapidly changing social networking technology, creating another barrier to sufficiently monitoring online activity. One study of Canadian adolescents found that while parents report familiarity with email, they are the least familiar with social networking platforms, a disconcerting finding given that adolescents report that social networking platforms are the most frequent location of cyberbullying (Cassidy, Brown, & Jackson, 2012).

Emerging evidence suggests that parents struggle to control their adolescents' activity online, including youth involvement in cyberbullying. Parents underestimate the amount of time their adolescent spends on the Internet and the extent of negative interactions present in this setting (Dehue, Bolman, & Völlink, 2008; Liau, Khoo, & Ang, 2008). For example, studies conducted in Europe (Dehue et al., 2008) and Canada (Cassidy et al., 2012) comparing parental and student self-reports of cyberbullying have found that parents underestimate the extent to which adolescents participate in cyberbullying as victims and perpetrators. In a qualitative study of parent-adolescent pairs in the U.S., parents expressed a sense of loss of control over their adolescents' online activities (Erickson et al., 2015). Some scholars suggest that youth access to online spaces, combined with parents' barriers to controlling such access, has shifted the very nature of autonomy during adolescence, increasing the autonomy adolescents have traditionally had from their parents (Bradley, 2005; Erickson et al., 2015).

Yet in spite of the challenges that parents face in monitoring their adolescents' online experiences, parents have a critical role in prevention and intervention efforts of cyberbullying. While most traditional bullying occurs at school – highlighting the important role of educators in prevention – most youth who experience cyberbullying do so while at home (Dehue et al., 2008). Moreover, parents often have direct influence over adolescents' access to electronic devices. Given the common occurrence of cyberbullying at home and parents' influence on access to devices, the importance of the family's role in preventing online interpersonal violence is considerable.

A number of studies have emerged over the years examining the connection between the family and cyberbullying. However, the absence of a literature review that synthesizes existing research on the connection between the family and cyberbullying is notable. An exception is Kowalski, Giumetti, Schroeder, and Lattanner (2014)'s comprehensive meta-analysis of cyberbullying research, which includes a section on parental factors as a correlate of cyberbullying. Although Kowalski et al. (2014)'s review provides a critical summary of parents' role in cyberbullying, no review to date has considered the evidence of family's influence on cyberbullying by distinct parenting qualities (e.g., warmth, control), as well as how the influence of these factors might vary by sex and ethnicity. A review of the evidence on the relation between specific parenting strategies and cyberbullying is important, since this might offer concrete guidance on gaps in knowledge as well as intervention strategies.

2. Method

2.1. Goals of the study

The goal of the present study is to review the existing literature on parental influence (i.e., parental warmth and parental monitoring) on adolescent cyberbullying, both as perpetrators and victims. Given the