



Adolescent cyberbullying: A review of characteristics, prevention and intervention strategies



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ABSTRACT

Adolescence is a transitional period with considerable growth and challenge. With the advent of the Web and other electronic technologies, cyberbullying is a rising universal concern. With limited contextual cues and relative anonymity of the online environment, adolescents tend to be more disinhibited and to engage in more high risk behaviors, resulting in a higher chance of interpersonal conflict. Using the routine activities framework, adolescent variables associated with cyberbullying including Internet usage, psychosocial problems and challenges, proactive aggression characteristics and normative beliefs about the acceptability of aggression were reviewed. Likewise, parent–adolescent relationship variables, such as poor emotional bond, lack of knowledge about the adolescent's online activities, and lack of adequate parental monitoring and parental mediation, were also reviewed to be related to cyberbullying. Strategies targeting both adolescent issues, parent-related, and parent–adolescent relationship variables were highlighted as suitable targets for prevention and intervention work. A multi-pronged and multi-systemic approach would be most effective.

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1. Adolescence

The World Health Organization (WHO) views adolescence as the period of development between approximately 10 and 19 years old, after

childhood and before emerging adulthood (World Health Organization, 2014). This is a critical time of growth and transition in the life span. Understandably, biological processes such as puberty are universal and instrumental in driving many aspects of development during this phase. However, contextual, cultural, and socioeconomic factors are just as important as these shape the defining features and characteristics of this critical transition period. Over the past century, we have seen many

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changes with respect to the phase of adolescence — better nutrition and an earlier onset of puberty, a later age of marriage, and changes in values and attitudes (Sanrock, 2013). Of specific relevance to the topic of adolescent cyberbullying is the advent of the Web. Over the last 20 years, we have seen communication patterns change drastically and that has inevitably shaped social interactions for a large majority of people in urbanized cities who have ready access to information and communication technology, especially adolescents.

Especially in a globally connected world and given adolescents' ease and facility with the use of electronic technology, the period of adolescence in this current age is, therefore, not only a time of positive growth, but also a time of considerable challenge with new, emerging risks for urbanized youth. During this period of development, researchers have identified social contexts and in particular the peer context and influence as being particularly salient and powerful (Barber & Olsen, 1997; Kiesner, Cadinu, Poulin, & Bucci, 2002). In a large representative sample of Dutch adolescents, Helsen, Vollebergh, and Meeus (2000) found that perceived parental support declined and perceived friends' support increased as expected during adolescence. This comes as no surprise because adolescents spend a substantial amount of time with their peers, and compared to friendships in childhood, adolescents have a greater need for stability and intimacy in relationships with peers. In addition, Barry (2006, 2010) highlighted that peer influence should also take into account the choices young people make in their relationships and the nuances of various roles in these relationships. Concurrently, the increase in time spent with peers is also accompanied by adolescents' desire for independence from their parents. Adolescents' desire for independence from their parents does not imply that parental influence is unimportant. In fact, parental support remains crucial for adolescents' development and adjustment. In Helsen et al.'s (2000) large scale study, for example, although the degree of perceived support changes in the expected direction (with parental support decreasing and friends' support increasing) during early adolescence, parental support remains the best indicator of emotional problems during adolescence.

I argue that adolescents are particularly vulnerable, more so than children and adults. Adolescents are not so young that they need constant guidance by parents and they are like adults in some ways, yet, they are not fully capable of completely understanding the relationship between behavior and consequences. Research shows that the prefrontal cortex governing higher-order cognitive functions such as rational thinking are not fully developed until early adulthood and could possibly explain the increased likelihood of adolescents' engaging in risk-taking behavior (Dahl, 2004). At the same time, adolescents exhibit ego-centric thinking and construct personal fables — this thinking that the world revolves around them and that their life experiences are unique gives them a sense of invulnerability to the risks that threaten others (Reyna & Farley, 2006). Given that adolescents are vulnerable, it is crucial that parents work closely with schools and the community to provide the necessary support for adolescents. Adolescents too should be equipped with a wide-range of important life skills to navigate increasingly challenging social interactions on the electronic platform.

2. Cyberbullying

The Internet age has brought with it numerous benefits but it is not without drawbacks. With the advent of the Web and other electronic technologies, bullying has taken on a new face and form. Bullying has extended its reach from the physical to the virtual; the Internet has become a new platform for social interactions, giving adolescents the liberty to interact with some degree of anonymity and limited oversight by adult monitors. Cyberbullying has been defined as the use of electronic communication technology as a means to deliberately threaten, harm, embarrass or socially exclude another (e.g., Patchin & Hinduja, 2006). Additionally, Law, Shapka, Domene, and Gagne (2012) also suggested that bullying whether traditional face-to-face bullying or

cyberbullying should include the component of a power differential between bully and victim.

Kowalski and Limber (2007) examined cyberbullying in a large sample of 3767 middle school students in the United States. Results suggest that 11% had been victims of cyberbullying, 7% had been cyberbullies/cybervictims, and 4% had been cyberbullies at least once over the past couple of months. In a different study, Spriggs, Iannotti, Nansel, and Haynie (2007) used a nationally representative sample of 6th to 10th graders from the United States, and found that parental communication, social isolation, and classmate relationships were similarly related to bullying across racial/ethnic groups. Cyberbullying is not isolated to certain parts of the world — it is recognized to be a global phenomenon cutting across cultural groups and contexts (Ang, Huan, & Florell, 2014; Ang, Tan, & Mansor, 2011; Li, Cross, & Smith, 2012). Even though it is a universal phenomenon, in some Asian countries, such as Japan for example, the low reported prevalence rate could be an underestimate due to possible under-reporting or translation issues (Aoyama, Utsumi, & Hasegawa, 2012).

Adolescent bullying in cyberspace is an important issue because it has extensive and potentially severe consequences such as school refusal, depressive symptoms and suicide (Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2007). In a qualitative study, results showed that 68% of the victims reported experiencing a combined emotional, social and behavioral impact for each cyberbullying experience (Dredge, Gleeson, & de la Piedad Garcia, 2014). This suggests that the impact of cyberbullying is not just isolated to a single domain; rather its impact cuts across several domains. In part, cyberbullying has been facilitated by the speed with which adolescents are using the Internet and social networking sites. According to the Pew Internet and American Life Project research, 66% of Internet users are social networking site users (Rainie, Lenhart, & Smith, 2012). This rate is even higher among adolescent Internet users between the ages of 12 and 17 (80%), which suggests that having a presence on a SNS is almost synonymous with being online for adolescents (Lenhart et al., 2011). The rise in the number of adolescents online may also point to an increase in the number of adolescents at risk for engaging in dangerous and aggressive online social interactions even though a majority of adolescents report positive online experiences (Finkelhor, Mitchell, & Wolak, 2000; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004).

This review focuses only on school-going adolescents broadly between the ages of 10 and 19 (World Health Organization, 2014). Research studies selected for review in this paper center around relevant characteristics and features of adolescent and parent variables known to be associated with cyberbullying. More specifically, routine activities theory (Cohen & Felson, 1979) was used as a guiding framework for understanding adolescent and parent variables associated with cyberbullying in this paper. Additionally, this review also examined the prevention and intervention strategies aimed at protecting vulnerable young people online. These strategies are those that target and specifically address adolescent-related and parent-related variables including the parent-adolescent relationship.

Routine activities theory (Cohen & Felson, 1979) argues that three key elements must converge in time and space for crime to occur and these are proximity to motivated offenders, a suitable target and inadequate guardianship. Routine activities theory has received considerable empirical support; for example, it has been used to explain cybercrime in college samples (Bossler & Holt, 2009), online harassment victimization in juvenile populations (Bossler, Holt, & May, 2012), and traditional crime such as robbery and vandalism in diverse populations (Tewksbury & Mustaine, 2000; Wang, 2002).

3. Adolescent and parent variables associated with cyberbullying — proximity to motivated offenders

The first key element in routine activities theory that will be examined centers around proximity to motivated offenders and here various aspects of Internet usage will be reviewed. When adolescents are placed

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