Cyberbullying Research Summary
Cyberbullying and Self-Esteem

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Cyberbullying is a unique form of bullying that has gained a significant amount of attention in recent years. While an embryonic body of literature concerning cyberbullying and online harassment has been established, most research has simply focused on identifying the prevalence of cyberbullying behaviors among adolescent populations. No research to date has explored the relationship between cyberbullying and self-esteem, which seems a key construct to consider based on its relationship to traditional bullying, academic performance, criminal behavior, and host of other factors associated with adolescent development.[1, 2]

Rosenberg defined self-esteem as "a favorable or unfavorable attitude toward the self."[3:15] Moreover, Leary and Downs consider self-esteem to be an internal representation of social acceptance and rejection, and a psychological gauge monitoring the degree to which a person is included vs. excluded by others.[4] These two conceptualizations underscore the fact that self-esteem is a perception – one's belief as to their personal value and affected by one's participation in the social world – where there are often interpersonal conflicts that lead to behavior such as bullying.

Highlights from the Research:

- 30% of middle school students were victims of at least one of nine forms of cyberbullying two or more time in the past 30 days
- 22% of middle school students admitted to engaging in at least one of five forms of cyberbullying two or more times in the past 30 days
- Cyberbullying victims and offenders reported significantly lower self-esteem than youth who hadn't experienced cyberbullying

The literature regarding bullying and self-esteem consistently finds that victims of bullying tend to have lower self-esteem than non-victims.[5-7] The precise reasons for this relationship are far less agreed upon and clear. It may be that the experience of being victimized decreases one's self-esteem, or that those who have low self-esteem are more likely to be targeted as victims.[6] Interestingly, the relationship between bullying offending and self-esteem is much less consistent. Studies have found evidence to suggest that bullies tend to have both higher[7, 8] and lower[9, 10] self-esteem than non-bullies. There is also research indicating no significant difference between the self-esteem of bullies and non-bullies.[11] While the direction of the relationship between bullying and self-esteem is not fully clarified by the available literature, research has consistently found that the relationship to self-esteem, regardless of its direction, is weaker among bullies than it is among victims.[9, 11]

Results

In our research involving approximately 2,000 randomly-selected middle-schoolers from one of the largest school districts in the United States, cyberbullying victims and offenders both had significantly lower self-esteem than those who have not experienced cyberbullying. This relationship persisted even while controlling for gender, race, and age, though our results suggest that males, non-Whites, and older middle-schoolers tend to have lower levels of self-esteem than their peers. Based on the standardized regression coefficients and percent of variance explained, the relationship between cyberbullying victimization and self-esteem is stronger than that of cyberbullying offending and self-esteem.

Discussion

Based on these analyses and consistent with expectations, cyberbullying was found to be correlated with lower self-esteem. While previous research has pointed to the negative emotional and psychological effects of cyberbullying victimization,[12, 13] this study is important insofar as it is the first to isolate low self-esteem as a potential correlate. It is important to point out that this study was cross-sectional in nature and we are therefore unable to conclude that experience with cyberbullying *caused* youth to have lower self-esteem. We can only identify that a relationship between the two constructs exists.

Through its exclusive focus on the relationship between self-esteem and cyberbullying, the current work provides additional evidence that electronic forms of adolescent aggression require the attention of educators and other

youth-serving adults. Experience with cyberbullying, both as a victim and as an offender, was associated with significantly lower levels of self-esteem, even after controlling for demographic differences. As such, it is important for educators to make an effort to prevent and respond to all forms of bullying – whether it is manifested in fistfights on school campuses or through disparaging and threatening instant messages in cyberspace, since both directly or indirectly affect the climate of the school and the well-being of the youth involved.

These results are also significant because during the late 1970s and early 1980s, educators began to recognize that low self-esteem was one of the primary predictors of many adolescent problems that directly and indirectly affected school health by impacting the overall academic and behavioral performance of students.[14] Specifically, previous research has shown a weak to moderate correlation between self-esteem and academic achievement, absenteeism, poor health, criminal behavior, and other problematic consequences.[1, 2, 15]

It is imperative that school health professionals identify and intervene in cyberbullying incidents. Results of the current work point to at least one psychological problem (i.e., lower self-esteem) associated with cyberbullying experiences, and previous research suggests that there are other co-occurring problematic behaviors or dysfunctions. School officials are sometimes reluctant to get involved in incidents that frequently originate or occur away from campus, but failure to do so could place students at risk for multiple developmental issues. Without question, district personnel have a clear and court-endorsed role in addressing online harassment by contacting parents and disciplining students when their off-campus behavior results in a substantial disruption of the learning environment at school.[13] School health professionals can also serve as advocates for those who are cyberbullied by teaching ways to deflect or shrug off minor forms (e.g., blocking harassing text messages, logging off when tempers start to flare, not responding to hurtful messages). In short, this study provides additional evidence that adults who work with adolescents should take all forms of harassment seriously and work to develop a culture that recognizes the harm associated with such behavior.

Note: This Fact Sheet is an abbreviated version of a full-length journal article entitled "Cyberbullying and self-esteem" which was published in the Journal of School Health.

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