

Cyberbullying in Schools

In 2010, Phoebe Prince, a 15-year-old living in the U.S. state of Massachusetts, committed suicide after being bullied by other students. She suffered both face-to-face bullying and cyberbullying, including abusive comments made off-campus on Internet social networks. After her suicide, nine students involved in the cyberbullying faced criminal charges. Phoebe's story was widely covered in the media, but there are many stories like her in the United States of America.

Schools and children have long faced the problem of bullies. Bullying comes in many forms: physical aggression, social isolation, and emotional torment. In the past, most bullies could only hurt their victims when they were in the same place. Today's bullies can use digital technologies to harass and intimidate their victims at all hours of the day and without even confronting their prey. This is known as "cyberbullying."

Schools have a duty to protect the safety and well-being of their students. When a **bully** harms someone on a school campus, the school may punish the bully. Much cyberbullying, however, takes place **off-campus**, away from school and after school hours. Therefore, schools must decide whether to punish bullies for these actions taken outside of school.

What Is Cyberbullying?

The Cyberbullying Research Center in the United States of America has defined cyberbullying as occasions "when someone repeatedly harasses, mistreats, or makes fun of another person online or while using cell phones or other electronic devices." Victims of bullying are usually vulnerable in some way, which means they are easy targets. Unlike traditional victims of bullying, however, victims of cyberbullying have no escape.

Cyberbullying can be more than **harassment** or teasing. It may involve threats and **hate speech** and can lead to physical attacks. Other examples of cyberbullying include:

- **Flaming:** Deliberate posting or sending of hostile or vulgar messages.
- **Outing:** Posting private information about someone that leads to embarrassment or humiliation.
- **Cyberstalking:** Repeatedly threatening harm or intimidation online.
- **Impersonation:** Assuming the identity of a victim in order to publish embarrassing information.
- **Exclusion:** Excluding someone from a social group online in a mean-spirited way.
- **Harassment:** Forwarding private material without permission, spreading rumors, or posting embarrassing pictures without permission in order to embarrass or humiliate someone.
- **Sexting:** Sharing sexually embarrassing content. Young people in the United States of America are sometimes unaware that it is a crime to send sexually explicit images of persons under the age of 18, even if the person in the photo agrees.

The Internet can allow a bully to remain **anonymous**. Cyberbullies, therefore, do not feel inhibited to say hurtful things as they might if they were in the presence of their victims. Psychologists call this the **disinhibition effect**.

The Extent and Consequences of Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying appears to be common around the world. In the countries of Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Mexico, Peru, and Venezuela, an estimated 12.1 percent of all teenagers have experienced some form of cyberbullying. A recent survey conducted by the Pew Internet and American Life Project found that 32 percent of all U.S. teenagers who use the Internet have experienced harassment online. Thirteen percent of U.S. teenagers have received threatening messages online. Twenty-six percent of youth between the ages of 12 and 17 have been bullied or harassed through their cell phones.

In Mexico, a study by the Federal District Secretary of Education has shown that as many as 480 students in 29 public primary and secondary schools are victims of bullying. In all of Mexico, an estimated 10 percent of students in primary and secondary schools are victims of bullying at school. Cyberbullying is one of the ways that bullies send threats of violence and insults to their victims. Abuse often leads to victims feeling fear, anxiety, and depression. In some cases, cyberbullying has even more tragic outcomes. In Mexico City, a majority of 190 cases of teen suicide in 2010 occurred after those teens were victims of bullying, including cyberbullying.

Mexico's Movement Foundation studied these suicide cases and found that cyberbullying made it hard for victims to avoid abuse when not in school. When they got home, the victims were often confronted with abusive comments on Internet *social networks*.

School Responses to Cyberbullying

The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution states, "Congress shall make no law...abridging the *freedom of speech*." However, in 1969 the U.S. Supreme Court decided that schools could prohibit student speech that "substantially interfered" with discipline at the school. In later cases, U.S. courts have had to decide if student speech about other students, teachers, or the school interfered with the school community.

Recent U.S. court decisions have addressed harassment on the Internet, such as a student web site that made insulting and threatening comments about a teacher. In most decisions, the courts ruled against school districts that punished students for off-campus Internet postings. For example, in 2002 a student posted on another student's website. He included a list of people at school called "people I wish would die." He also recommended that "Satan's mission" of the week was to "stab someone for no reason." A parent reported it to police and school officials. A federal court ruled that the school violated the student's freedom of speech after the principal temporarily suspended him from school. According to the court, the school could not prove that the off-campus threats on the web page were a substantial interference at the school.

U.S. school officials, parents, and legislators have addressed cyberbullying in other ways. The California education code, for example, states that school officials may recommend that a student be suspended or expelled for "bullying committed by means of an electronic act...directed specifically toward a pupil or school personnel." The cyberbullying, however, must be "related to school activity" to be punishable. Schools in Fairfax, Virginia, are required to have students discuss the dangers of cyberbullying at the

beginning of each school year, and again in the middle of the year. Schools also must provide *character education* and, in elementary schools, use a bullying prevention curriculum.¹ According to Maryland law, school administrators can suspend a student who commits cyberbullying off campus if the incident leads to the “substantial disruption of the school.”

Punishing Off-Campus Cyberbullying: Supporters and Opponents

People who think schools should *intervene* in off-campus cyberbullying argue that it causes significant school disruptions and poisons the learning environment. Whenever a student suffers off-campus harm, it affects their on-campus behavior. Victims suffer from sadness, depression, and low self-esteem. They also experience failure in school and even avoid school. In the worst cases, bullies (as well as victims of bullying) commit violence at school. Many victims think about suicide. Others, like Phoebe Prince, commit suicide.

Supporters also argue that schools would not have to use too many resources in investigating cyberbullying. Digital technologies like text-messaging often leave evidence behind. A text-message is recorded on cell phones of both the sender and receiver of the message. Messages on the Internet are not private. The results of a cyberbullying incident are also noticeable at school almost immediately.

School districts that are required by law to stop cyberbullying are more likely to work with schools, parents, and students to implement anti-bullying programs. In turn, these programs can prevent cyberbullying by punishing harmful off-campus student actions. If students see that cyberbullying has consequences, they will be less likely to become cyberbullies. Parents, too, often demand that schools take action to protect their children from embarrassment and harm.

People who think schools should not intervene in cyberbullying often have serious concerns about punishing free speech. For example, they argue that cyberbullying is an ambiguous term. Many young people view “cyberbullying” as a modern form of teasing, a normal part of growing up. What makes one student depressed might not affect another student. It is too hard for schools to make broad rules about what words are “bullying” and what words are just “teasing.” This also means schools are in danger of violating students’ freedom of speech if the schools punish off-campus communications.

Opponents of school punishments for off-campus cyberbullying also argue that educating students is more effective than punishing students. They suggest that a more useful way to address cyberbullying is a *grassroots approach*. Individual schools can create comprehensive strategies for fighting bullying and violence based on the administrators, staff members, and students’ understanding of the problem. Bullying itself is an “age-old” problem. Opponents argue that programs such as character education, supported by parents, school officials, and students working together can be effective to control the harm of bullying.

Many people who oppose school actions against off-campus cyberbullying do not believe punishment by school authorities can effectively stop cyberbullying. As a practical matter, they note that school administrators have a harder time keeping track of off-campus incidents. “Suggestions” or “recommendations” for confronting cyberbullying often do not result in concrete actions. Even when there are stronger anti-bullying policies, some people argue that these policies are often not enforced. This is particularly true if no funding is available to develop successful programs. Students who send offensive or abusive messages online or with cell phones might violate civil or criminal laws. Therefore, police and courts of law should discipline them, not schools.

Will schools that punish off-campus cyberbullying improve school safety and protect the dignity of individual students? Or will they exceed their authority and violate students’ right to freedom of speech? Citizens must consider which policies best balance individual rights and public safety.