

Preventing and Responding to Cyberbullying: Why Collaborative Efforts Matter and What's Getting in the Way

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What you need to know

It can be difficult for any one individual or stakeholder group to independently prevent or respond to cyberbullying, which refers to repeated behaviours performed by one or more people through electronic media for the purpose of harming a less powerful individual. Drawing upon in-depth qualitative interviews with 34 members of relevant stakeholder groups, including parents, teachers and school administrators, and police officers, this study examines the extent to which stakeholder's work collaboratively to prevent and respond to cyberbullying. The results indicate that although parents, educators, and police officers possess unique expertise, collaborative responses to cyberbullying are fragmented if they exist at all. Barriers inhibiting collaboration, and solutions to overcoming these barriers, are discussed.

What is the issue?

The complexities of cyberspace make it difficult for any one individual or stakeholder group to prevent or respond to cyberbullying on their own. More specifically, teachers and school administrators are unlikely to witness cyberbullying first hand; many parents are disadvantaged by a 'digital generation gap;' and structural, organizational, and cultural barriers problematize police efforts to address cyberbullying. Given these challenges, some have suggested that coordinated interventions may better support youth who are cyberbullied. Although some research has examined adults' *responsibilities* for responding to cyberbullying, little scholarship exists related to stakeholders' *responses*.

Why is this important?

In Canada, the United States, and elsewhere high profile cases have highlighted the limitations of relevant stakeholders in addressing cyberbullying on their own. As a result of identified challenges, collaborative efforts have been encouraged. Coordinated interventions are not a new phenomenon suggested in response to cyberbullying. Rather, risk management has long relied on the differentiated expertise of several institutions. Each institution, or group of stakeholders (e.g., teachers, parents, police), possess unique forms of expertise that determine the structure of the larger security network and their relative contribution to the goals of that network—in this case, preventing or responding to cyberbullying. While schools were generally understood to be responsible for addressing traditional forms of bullying, such as physical, verbal, or social bullying, the distributed nature of cyberspace means that cyberbullying cannot simply be resolved by any one stakeholder group. Instead, cyberbullying may be better addressed by groups of stakeholders working together within collaborative relationships wherein the unique expertise of multiple actors can be accessed with the objective of protecting vulnerable young people from harm.

What did the researchers do?

Data for this study were drawn from in-depth qualitative interviews conducted between 2012 and 2013 with 34 parents, teachers and school administrators, and police officers in

Southern Ontario. Parents included the parents or guardians of young people who had been cyberbullied or who had cyberbullied others. Teachers and school administrators were employees of both public and Catholic school boards, all of whom had some experiences dealing with cyberbullying. Lastly, all police officers interviewed had some exposure to cyberbullying, either because they investigated a case that featured cyberbullying-like behaviours or because they worked in schools as School Resource Officers or doing crime prevention work.

What did the researchers find?

As a result of their close relationship with their children and being the group of adults to whom cyberbullying is most commonly reported, parents are the most important stakeholder group in this 'security network.' As a result, parents serve as an 'information router,' sharing their knowledge of their children's experiences with others. Teachers and school administrators run many prevention and awareness campaigns throughout the school year, and increasingly are teaching lessons on safe social networking and cyberbullying. Although in the most serious cases police officers describe addressing cyberbullying through formal or informal legal remedies, most often they indicated serving as a resource, or 'knowledge broker' for parents and teachers by providing strategic advice to help guide them "in the right direction."

Tips for effective practice:

Although parents, teachers and school administrators, and police officers possess unique expertise, their combined strengths are not currently realized. Indeed, parents and schools often try to act on their own first, only calling the police as a last resort. Thus, collaborative responses to cyberbullying are fragmented, if they occur at all.

Interview results suggested five barriers to collaboration. First, desired outcomes differ, with teachers and police officers preferring to improve youths' education and awareness, and parents advocating for punitive sanctions. Second, definitions of cyberbullying vary—teachers and police officers rely on structured definitions of cyberbullying established in legislation, whereas parents' definitions are fluid and related to their specific circumstances. Third, mistrust exists; specifically, parents reported not trusting that teachers, principals, or the police would take their concerns seriously. Fourth, there was some disagreement about timelines to resolutions. Parents desire swift responses, but principals and police officers must undertake full investigations of incidents. Fifth, the role of parents was contested. Notably, several educators and police officers expressed concern that, too often, in their view, parents desired to be friends with the children first and parents second, which resulted in a lack of structure and guidance.

Several strategies were identified to address these barriers to collaboration. First, prevention should be encouraged. Second, continued professional development for educators and police officers, and continued education for parents, is important to assist individual stakeholder groups to overcome their own limitations. Third, parents should be educated about realistic timelines to resolution, and police officers and educators should remain mindful that

children are being harmed and parents are under duress. Fourth, other relevant stakeholders should be involved in prevention and response efforts where relevant.

Additional resources:

- *Bullying Today: Bullet Points and Best Practices* by Justin W. Patchin and Sameer Hinduja
- Cyberbullying Research Center (www.cyberbullying.org)
- Promoting Relationships and Eliminating Violence Network (PREVNet; www.prevnet.ca)
- Get Cyber Safe resources on cyberbullying (<https://www.getcybersafe.gc.ca/cnt/cbrbllng/index-en.aspx>)

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