Cyberbullying: What American Indian and Alaska Native Parents Need to Know

This paper provides background information about two forms of cyberbullying and their impact on Native American youth with disabilities, and offers action steps for parents. Please read and share this resource with others. Parent Centers are encouraged to share this resource during trainings offered to Native parents and on exhibit tables when conducting outreach at Native community events.

What is Cyberbullying?

Bullying others online is known as *cyberbullying*. Unlike traditional forms of bullying, cyberbullying is not carried out in person. Instead, cyberbullying takes place in cyberspace when young people use cell phones and text messaging. It also occurs on the Internet when cyberbullies use email, chat rooms, discussion groups, social networking sites, instant messaging, or web pages to send or post damaging material. Examples of cyberbullying include sending intentionally mean or insulting messages, starting rumors, sharing another's embarrassing information, cruelly excluding someone socially, and pretending to be someone else while posting harmful content.

> We invite you to read a companion paper, **Bullying: What American Indian and Alaska Native Parents Need to Know**.

Cyberbullying is most common during the middle and high school years. One large study of this age group found that, in 2019, 1 in 5 students reported having been a target of cyberbullying.[1]

What is the Impact of Cyberbullying?

Cyberbullying can be more damaging to youth because it can be anonymous, and it can occur around the clock. Since this form of bullying is not done face-to-face, perpetrators tend to be more vicious than they would be in person. Young people also may feel cyberbullying is easy to get away with, since most adults don't see it. Malicious texts or photos can be disseminated quickly and widely, far beyond one's community, and it may be impossible to fully recover or remove them.[2] The impact on the cyberbullied youth can be devastating.

Cyberbullying can affect a targeted youth in many of the same ways experienced by the targets of other forms of bullying. However, because cyberbullying can begin suddenly and escalate quickly, the effects are felt more immediately and intensely. Targets feel powerless. Cyberbullying causes withdrawal, sadness, depression, frustration, anger, and avoidance of peers, school, and social events. The stress that targets feel impacts their sleeping habits and academic performance.

What is Sexting, and How is it Related to Cyberbullying?

Sexting is a term that combines the two words *sex* and *texting*. Sexting includes sending or forwarding nude or semi-nude photos, videos, or messages from a mobile phone or other digital device through cyberspace to others. Generally, sexting occurs between two romantic partners or between two people where at least one of them hopes a relationship will result.[3]

Most often, boys will ask girls to demonstrate that they like them by sharing a sexually explicit photo. Girls may ask boys to do the same. Boys may voluntarily send photos of their private parts to girls or boys. Sexting also includes sharing unauthorized photos of partially nude boys or girls in locker rooms.

What is the Impact of Sexting?

Young people think their relationships will last forever. When they don't, any explicit photos or videos can be sent or posted, intentionally or unintentionally, to peers, who post them to even larger audiences, until the images have gone viral. The subject feels betrayed and shattered. Additional negative impacts for the subject of sexting include damage to their reputation; likely bullying, especially name-calling; sexual harassment; and refused admission to the college of their choice.[4]

Young people also don't realize there are federal laws that treat all sexually explicit images of youth under age 18 as child pornography. This means that, if minors take a nude or semi-nude photo of themselves or another, or if they receive and keep the photo on their devices, or if they forward it to others, they can be charged with producing, possessing, and/or distributing child pornography, which is a felony.[5]

What is the Impact of Cyberbullying on Native Youth?

There are few statistics about the amount of cyberbullying experienced by American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) youth. While Native families may not always have a computer in the home, most AI/AN youth between 12-18 years have mobile phones, so can still be targeted for cyberbullying.

The intensity of cyberbullying can deeply affect Native youth, especially those with self-esteem issues. All forms of bullying cause youth to avoid peers and school. For AI/AN youth, the risk of dropping out of school is already high and can be made worse by cyberbullying, because they feel they can't escape the taunting. Intense bullying and cyberbullying also might increase the very high risk of suicidal thoughts or actions in Native youth. Depression and feelings of hopelessness remain serious warning signs for parents.

What is the Impact of Cyberbullying on Native Youth with Disabilities?

Youth with disabilities are known to use the Internet as much as their nondisabled peers. This can be a good thing, because those with disabilities may be able to expand their social circle in positive ways. Although they may be uncomfortable talking face-to-face or with other in-person social conventions and nonverbal cues, communicating online with others at their own pace may be ideal for youth with disabilities. On the negative side, the Internet allows cyberbullies to take advantage of unsuspecting youth. Peers may manipulate youth with disabilities into unwittingly cyberbullying another or downloading pornography. Wanting to fit in, they follow the cyberbully's lead and get in trouble.[6]

What Can a Parent Do about Cyberbullying?[7]

Set rules for using technology. Discuss what's proper and improper to share online. For example, a child's home address and other personal information should not be shared.

Discuss the pros and cons of sharing photos or videos. Remind your son or daughter not to reveal anything that they wouldn't share with a stranger.

Know what your child is doing online. It's a parent's responsibility to establish rules about passwords so you can access your child's cell phone, text history, social networking sites, and other computer accounts. Limit children's time online. Keep the computer your child uses in an open area, where you can supervise their online activity. Install security filters and other protective software (parent controls).

Talk to your child/teenager. If you notice signs of cyberbullying, such as school avoidance or increased sadness, but your child hasn't mentioned it, start a caring conversation with him or her. Some youth don't realize that sending or receiving hurtful or mean messages online is a form of bullying. Others worry they'll lose access to their technology if they tell parents about cyberbullying. Try to remain calm and don't overreact. Instead, help them get a new user name, email account, and cell phone number.

Save the evidence. Download any inappropriate material; save chats and instant messages. Electronic messages leave a trail that can lead back to the perpetrator.

Identify the persons responsible and tell them to stop. Get the names of the youths doing the cyberbullying. With your child, send the cyberbully a private, non-emotional message telling him or her to stop sending messages and to take down the offending posts.

Ignore; don't retaliate in kind. Often if the target doesn't overreact, the cyberbullying will stop. Work with your child to untag him or her from all offensive posts or photos, and unfriend the cyberbully.

File complaints. Most web sites and services prohibit bullying. In an email request to your phone or Internet provider, attach the hurtful content and request that it be removed. They can help your child block messages or calls from select senders, and even close the cyberbully's account. If the cyberbullying could constitute a crime, contact the police. And if American Indian or Alaska Native youth are cyberbullied for their race or disability, that can be discrimination and harassment, which are against federal civil rights laws. Contact the Office for Civil Rights in the U. S. Department of Education at ocr@ed.gov. Visit OCR online for information about how and where you can file a complaint: http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/complaintintro.html

References

[1] Cyberbullying Research Center. (2019). *2019 cyberbullying data*. Available online at: https://cyberbullying.org/2019-cyberbullying-data

[2] Stopbullying.gov. (2019). *What is cyberbullying?* Available online at: https://www.stopbullying.gov/cyberbullying/what-is-it

[3] Common Sense Education. (2015). *Sexting handbook*. Available from the Common Sense Media website: https://www.commonsense.org/education

[4] Same as endnote 3.

[5] Same as endnote 3.

[6] Ruderman Family Foundation. (2019). *The Ruderman white paper on social media, cyberbullying, and mental health: A comparison of adolescents with and without disabilities*. Available online at:

https://rudermanfoundation.org/white_papers/ruderman-white-paper-reveals-students-with-disabilities-are-almost-twice-as-likely-to-be-victims-of-cyberbullying/

[7] All of the following resources were used in compiling the list of actions parents can take with respect to cyberbullying of their children.

- Willard, N.E. (2007). *Cyberbullying and cyberthreats*. Champaign, IL: Research Press.

- AbilityPath.org. (2015). *Walk a mile in their shoes: Bullying and the child with special needs*. Available online at: http://abilitypath.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/walk-a-mile-in-their-shoes.pdf

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- https://rudermanfoundation.org/white_papers/ruderman-white-paper-reveals-students-with-disabilities-are-almost-twice-as-likely-to-be-victims-of-cyberbullying/

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