Strategies for Victim Service Providers for Combating Cyberbullying

Introduction

The act of bullying is a phenomenon that has been recognized for decades now, often scrutinized for whether it is a normal part of growing up or a threat toward children's safety. Far-too-common is the viewpoint that bullying is "harmless" and "kids just being kids," which leads both youth and adults to deny the serious nature of the problem. Historically, bullying happened at school or on the playground, but now bullying can go anywhere at any time. Cyberbullying is limitless. Unlike a bruise or a cut that can heal after a physical fight, cyberbullying creates mental and emotional scars that have an impact on youth long after the incident has occurred. These scars often follow children from youth into adulthood. Though several definitions exist in the field, the National Crime Prevention Council (NCPC) defines cyberbullying as the use of the Internet, cell phones, or other devices to send or post repeated text or images intended to hurt or embarrass another person. Cyberbullying does not just affect those directly involved in the attack, but also witnesses, family, friends, and others who interact with the perpetrator and victim on a daily basis. Victim service providers (VSPs) serve a unique role in combating cyberbullying by not only working with the youth but also serving as a liaison to family, friends, teachers, and more. VSPs have a professional obligation to protect and support vulnerable clients, which includes youth. Proper assistance and intervention helps ensure that the emotional devastation caused by cyberbullying does not extend beyond the point of victimization.

Before the term "cyberbullying" was widely known, many research studies cite that the first identification of electronic bullying began with a survey conducted by the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. The goal of this 2000 survey was to explore what negative risks children were encountering on the Internet. The major themes explored were exposure to sexual exploitation, sexual material, and harassment on the Internet. One of the purposes of the survey was to identify the main perpetrators of online harassment and solicitation. Finkelhor et al. (2000) report: "Nearly two-thirds (63

percent) of harassment perpetrators were other juveniles" (22). This statistic can be considered the first indication of youth cyberbullying behavior in professional research studies and suggests that children were being harassed online by adults, as well as other youth. After the identification of the problem, cyberbullying gained high notoriety throughout many professions, such as education and counseling. Across the board, researchers continue to pose questions about the victims, perpetrators, methods, and motives. As with the evolution of any problem, as it changes and develops, so must the methods of action and the solutions to fix it. What once worked to remedy the problem of bullying may not be effective in the ever-changing realm of cyberbullying. We have asked the questions of how, who, and why; but perhaps the steps are to raise awareness of issues that normally are not associated with cyberbullying and to ask new questions like "What can we do now?"

This report introduces the topic of snitching, identified as both a deterrent to reporting street crimes and a barrier to stopping cyberbullying. The report will also look at results from a survey conducted by NCPC and suggest steps VSPs can take to prepare themselves to deal with reports from cyberbullying victims. While snitching was not mentioned in the survey, it is an example of an emerging trend that VSPs should be aware of when working with cyberbullying issues. In 2010, NCPC created two survey instruments in partnership with Moessner and Associates and The CauseWay Agency. The goal of these surveys was to get a better understanding of cyberbullying from the viewpoints of teens (ages 13 to 17) and VSPs, as well as look at ways to prevent it. Not only should providers be alert to physical and digital youth interactions surrounding them but also should be prepared to intervene when necessary.

Teens, Snitching, and How To Stop It

The survey distributed to teens, further known as the Teen Nation survey, probed many issues around cyberbullying and victimization. Most respondents stated that if faced with being cyberbullied, they would most likely deal with it on their own (NCPC, 2010a). Handling the problem independently included tactics of ignoring the perpetrator and confronting the attacker. Another strategy identified was to "put up with the behavior" because they do not want to appear to be a "baby" or "snitch" (NCPC,

2010a). Today's youth are fiercely independent, so being perceived as immature is undesirable, but does this other label of "snitch" seem too harsh for the youthful topic of cyberbullying?

According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, the word "snitch" means "to inform, tattle" (2011). A person who reports information on criminal activity to the police is referred to as a "snitch" or "snitcher" and is usually frowned upon by his or her peers in the community. The "stop snitching" street code, originating from witness intimidation, has gained popularity over the past couple of decades from the release of t-shirts, threatening videos, and other media, most notably a DVD, titled *Skinny Suge Presents: Stop F****** Snitchin', Vol. 1*, released in Baltimore, Maryland, in 2004 (Honigman, 2009). Now the street code is a pervasive issue that most all communities struggle with today. So what does snitching, a problem usually associated with street violence and gang activity, have to do with cyberbullying? Not to snitch means concealing perpetrators' identities and incidences from authority figures. By leaving incidences unreported, the cycle of inescapable abuse, harassment, and fear can continue uninterrupted for as long as the bully desires. "We believe that bystanders can make a huge difference in improving the situation for cyberbullying victims, who often feel helpless and hopeless and need someone to come to the rescue" (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010, 5). In order to stop cyberbullying, we need to provide a way for identification of victims and bullies to occur. This can only be done if reporters feel safe, which can't happen as long as "stop snitching" is considered a cultural norm among youth and others.

So how do we combat the popularized "stop snitching" code? The Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) released a report in 2009 called "The Stop Snitching Phenomenon: Breaking the Code of Silence," which provided historical background to the issue, as well as suggested ways to go against the popularized social rule in some communities. These strategies were written in response to the problem of witness intimidation in communities with violent crime; however, the concept of silencing bystanders who are witnesses of power abuse also applies for students and youth in schools. Therefore, the main points highlighted in this report will be ones that are relevant for the school setting.

The first suggestion is to meet with neighborhood associations to initiate a counteractive campaign (COPS, 2009). Counteractive campaigns like this are often referred to as "Start Snitching" campaigns, which encourage community members to cooperate with law enforcement officers to share information on criminal activity. This strategy can be implemented in schools by speaking with extracurricular groups and teams about the problem. Administrators and teachers should encourage community activists, clergy members, and community leaders to work with students (COPS, 2009). Outside guests and experts such as former bullies, victims of bullying, and parents of bullying victims, may assist in changing students' perceptions of "snitching" and "tattling" as synonymous. Tattling can be seen as a juvenile method to stir up trouble with little consequence or threat of danger, whereas reporting incidences of bullying or cyberbullying is putting a stop to an activity that places another person in a threatening situation. An example of an outside guest could be Tina Meier, mother of Megan Meier and founder of the Megan Meier Foundation, who travels across the country telling the story of her daughter Megan's victimization and the dangers of cyberbullying. Hinduja & Patchin (2010) discuss that law enforcement officers play a role in stopping cyberbullying (5). These stakeholders could be a valuable resource for schools looking for outside assistance.

Another strategy suggests in the COPS document is to increase police presence in high-crime areas (2009). In the case of cyberbullying, an example is increased presence of administrator or student monitoring groups on the school campus and other locations where bullying and physical altercations frequently occur. Williams & Guerra (2007) report "a peer and school culture that supports bullying is more likely to have individuals who view this behavior as acceptable, further increasing normative support for bullying" (S15). Increased visibility will help students feel supported within the school, thus instilling more trust and confidence in the administration system. A supportive school climate will encourage students to report acts of bullying and cyberbullying. Hinduja & Patchin (2010) state, "we collectively need to create an environment where kids feel comfortable talking with adults about this problem and feel confident that meaningful steps will be taken to resolve the situation" (2).

Finally, to support people who want to assist with identification, but fear retaliation, COPS suggests providing a way to submit anonymous tips (2009). An anonymous tipping strategy that gained popularity in the school environment was a "bully box," where students were able to write their experiences with bullying and "mail" it to school officials, by placing it inside the locked container. If successful, anonymous tips will be the first step toward members of the school becoming willing to assist in identification of traditional bullying and cyberbullying. An example of a successful bully box program is Benjamin Franklin Middle School in Kenmore-Town, New York. Assistant Principal Richard Jetter reported that the box was announced on the first day of the academic school year, and by January, 120 complaints had been filed in the box (Lewin-Epstein, 2004).While many believe they are protecting themselves and others around them by not reporting a cyberbullying incident, the truth is that when left unaddressed, the problem only becomes more painful. Only when people—youth, adults, everyone—feel comfortable and safe enough to disclose information to law enforcement and other officials, will "Stop Snitching" ever lose its power of fear and intimidation.

Service Provider Strategies

"Start Snitching" campaigns and anonymous tips are strategies that can be implemented in the school environment that may also succeed in community organizations. This will work for VSPs that work in those types of settings, but there are other strategies that can be used regardless of the provider's setting. Because of the pervasive nature of cyberbullying, prevention and intervention strategies need to be in place in the school systems, as well as in the community. NCPC's survey of VSPs revealed that the majority (77 percent) of respondents strongly agreed that they had a unique and important role to play in stopping cyberbullying (NCPC, 2010b). While cyberbullying identification is something that any person can do, VSPs believe that they are expertly qualified to do so because of their experiences observing teen behaviors and social patterns (NCPC, 2010b). VSPs are able to recognize changes in

interactions, behaviors, and attitudes that may not be noticed by someone who did not have experience working with youth. While many VSPs recognize that they are trained and qualified to deal with cyberbullying incidences, only 27 percent state that they are "extremely or very well prepared in assisting victims" (NCPC, 2010b). This suggests that there is a gap between belief in the role of the VSP and the perceived ability to succeed in the role. What can be done to enhance a level of confidence and competence among VSPs?

Training

"VSPs who do not work in a school setting say it is harder for them to identify the signs of cyberbullying and feel that more training is necessary" (NCPC, 2010b). Practitioners who are not in a school-based setting may not encounter cyberbullying victims as regularly and need extra training on how to identify victims, spot different methods of cyberbullying, and know who to contact once a victim is identified. Knowing this information will help practitioners in placements where Internet safety may not always be the first priority. Warning signs, emerging trends, intervention skills, policy development and writing, and threat assessments are examples of trainings that would be beneficial to any practitioner. When considering trainings, VSPs should look at the populations most served, the most reported problems, and if any of those problems have the potential to be linked to cyberbullying. In an article targeting school psychologists, Diamanduros, Downs, and Jenkins (2008) suggest that information available on the internet, in addition to a formal training or workshop, would be beneficial (p. 695). Supplemental electronic information would also be helpful for those that need to review information independently and at times that are convenient for their busy schedules (Diamanduros et al., p. 695). Lessons developed from other organizations or school districts, and a compilation of Internet resources could all be accessed and reviewed on an individual basis. As

a professional, there is a constant flow of learning new ideas and having new experiences, and independent learning on this topic is no different. Once VSPs learn the information, they should share that knowledge with peers, parents, and the community. Information can be shared through workshops, local media coverage, one-on-one interactions, through the school board, and online. Regardless of the vehicle, any transfer of information about cyberbullying will only help to prevent it in the future.

Educating Students, Parents, and the Community

Formal training may not be a need for all VSPs, but tips on how to prevent and intervene on cyberbullying are always helpful. VSPs can educate the youth, parents, and community about the problem. The topic of cyberbullying is widespread, thanks to the media highlighting tragedies around the issue, but some may believe that their children and communities are immune to the problem. Diamanduros et al. (2008) said it best: "Awareness is the first step to prevention" (p. 695).

Educating Students

One way to prevent youth from cyberbullying is to address the issue with them before it starts. Students should understand the hurtful side effects of their electronic actions, as well as know the consequences that can be associated with them. "Students should be educated about the consequences of engaging in cyberbullying. They must be made aware that their identities could be traced even if they have used an online name, and they must understand that criminal charges could be filed against them under several state and commonwealth laws" (Bhat, 2008, 62). The threat of criminal charges is scary, especially for youth, but concrete examples will convey how cyberbullying is not something that is taken lightly, in school or throughout the community.

Establishing clear expectations and consequences of actions is just one example of how a school can produce a positive school climate. The National Crime Prevention Council created the Be Safe and Sound in School campaign in 2002, which focused on developing a safe and secure school environment. In this campaign, three primary issues are identified that affect school safety and security: school climate, school layout and organization, and physical security (NCPC, 2003, 9). School climate relates to the social atmosphere of the school. Strong leadership, opportunity for growth, established expectations, and universal respect are examples of a positive school climate. An example of opportunities for growth is to encourage youth to create and join groups or clubs that promote positive relationships and have a clear message against bullying and cyberbullying. Mentoring programs that help facilitate positive personal relationships are available inside or outside of the school setting. The National Crime Prevention Council has launched its newest campaign, the Circle of Respect, to help youth engage in respectful, positive, and empowering relationships. By joining initiatives, like the Circle of Respect, youth will learn that positive social relationships are more desirable than cyberbullying and the negative interactions that come with it.

<u>Educating Parents and the Community</u>

Like youth, parents and community members also need to know about cyberbullying. "In cyberspace, there is an apparent lack of authority, and it is not clear with whom the responsibility for responding to cyberbullying resides—the parents, the school, police, or the Internet Service Providers or website administrators" (Cross, Monks, Campbell, Spears, & Slee, 2011). When working with multiple groups of stakeholders, make it clear that the responsibility lies with everyone. More information needs to be given on how cyberbullying happens, how to look out for it, and what actions can be taken for prevention and intervention. Hinduja & Patchin (2011)

state "parents will probably want guidance about how they might spot clues that their child is a target…or a bully" (p. 50). VSPs are usually the ones that help identify incidences as they occur, but that doesn't mean they should be the only ones with that task. By educating and engaging parents and the community, more eyes will be watching youth and their electronic behaviors, hopefully limiting the opportunities for cyberbullying to occur. Families and community members should have access to trainings, print materials, lectures, or open forums about cyberbullying so that they have a variety of options for gaining knowledge and can learn in ways that will best suit their learning styles and availability. Training parents and the community will only be successful in stopping cyberbullying if the audience is receptive to the information provided to them. The key to having the audience be receptive is proper distribution of prevention materials (teaching materials to community leaders and school officials, fact sheets and tip sheets to youth and potential victims, etc.), as well as the integration of solutions to the cyberbullying epidemic.

Intervening on cyberbullying

Preventing cyberbullying from occurring isn't always possible, but VSPs can shape how to deal with the incident. If an incident of cyberbullying is witnessed, they should confront the students/children involved. Hinduja & Patchin (2011) state "it's essential to address any incident quickly. Even seemingly trivial actions like online name calling or social exclusion should be dealt with so behaviors don't escalate" (p.51). To build on this, intervening as soon as possible is crucial because, in addition to the reason above, victimization has psychological and social effects on the targeted youth, and minimizing that exposure is important for the overall well-being of the victim. VSPs that are not in an organized institution (e.g. school, church) may not witness the victimization immediately. However, once the problem is recognized, the VSP

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should know who to contact: parents of the victim, schools, and law enforcement. In addition to confronting the situation, professionals should support the victim, assessing his or her safety and emotional state. Diamanduros et al. (2008) also suggest that evidence be saved, which will be necessary if legal action is followed (p. 699). Even if the situation has not escalated to the level that requires a formal response, VSPs can confront cyberbullying by letting perpetrators know that the act is not tolerated, bullying in any format is wrong, and it is subject to disciplinary action. Increased intervention on cyberbullying attacks will help youth acknowledge the serious nature around the "harmless" act and potentially lead to a decrease of incidences.

Conclusion

"Protecting young people from forms of relational aggression and/or verbal, social, and emotional bullying via cyberspace is becoming an essential responsibility" (Bhat, 2008, p. 60). VSPs are on the front lines in the battle against cyberbullying. It is their expertise and determination that is necessary to educate students, adults, and other professionals about this issue. Their compassion is needed to support and empower victims of cyberbullying. VSPs are essential in creating an environment where youth understand the harmful effects of cyberbullying and do not engage in the behavior.