

Cyberbullying: Bullying in the digital age

Patricia Agatston

Patricia Agatston begins her lecture by introducing her work at the Prevention/Intervention Centre, which is a support organization for schools in the US. She is also one of the authors of the book *Cyberbullying – bullying in the digital age*.

Since bullying is a contextual phenomenon she starts by urging the audience not to be too quick to judge. It is easy to misunderstand things encountered online, which applies to researchers as well as teachers and parents.

Teenagers and technology. In the US, 95% of all teenagers use the internet. Further, a majority of the teenagers have cellphones, 87% send texts, and 80% are active on social media sites. To teenagers it is not really important to distinguish between online and offline environments, because they are part of the same reality. When asked the question “How do you feel if you lose access to your technology?” teenagers answer that they feel alone, confused, disconnected and anxious. But these, are not unique reactions for youths and it is important not to pathologize the use of technology. Youths are not addicted to technology, but addicted to socializing with friends (which is normal).

What is cyberbullying? There are a lot of similarities between cyberbullying and traditional bullying. However, what separates them is for instance the fact that teenagers are less likely to report cyberbullying to adults. However, teenagers generally are not unwilling to report cyberbullying to adults, but that they want to decide to whom, when and how. Youths who are engaged in cyberbullying (both perpetrators and victims) have poorer psychological health, e.g. more anxiety, depression and lower self-esteem. In media it is from time to time highlighted that teenagers have committed suicide due to bullying (“bullycied”), this is unfortunate since most bullied youths do not display suicidal behavior. Research has showed that there are several different stressors that increase the risk for suicidal behavior.

Intervention/prevention. Teenagers who are aggressive online more often are victims of cyber-aggression. Thus it is important to encourage youths to be friendly online. Also, acknowledging that a majority of youths do not behave aggressive online is prevention in itself since it stops others from being aggressive. Further, fear based messaging (e.g. threatening with imprisonment) does not work to prevent cyberbullying. Instead, it is important to have a “whole school”-approach and to include cyberbullying prevention programmes in the already existing bullying programmes at the schools. It is important to include knowledge about cyberbullying wherever it fits, for instance talk about “sexting” during sex education classes. It is also a good idea to include the youths since they often know more about these matters than adults. Lastly, Patricia Agatston highlights the fact that the majority of activities youths engage in online are positive (which is important to remember), but that problematic situations always can emerge.