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Fall 2019

Bullying:
The Crisis Still Plaguing American Schools

Brandy Vela was like many American teenagers, she was well loved by her family and many members of the Texas City high school she attended in Houston, Texas. Like many other teens, Brandy was relentlessly tormented by a subsection of peers about her weight. She was bullied through harassing messages in online messaging apps and fake websites that displayed her phone number alleging she was a prostitute. Brandy contacted school officials and the police to stop the harassment but many of her tormentors used anonymous screen names so nothing could be done except changing Brandy's phone number. Ultimately, it was not enough to keep the bullies at bay. On November 29th, 2016, Brandy sent one last message to her family alerting them of her plans to commit suicide. Despite family members racing home to find Brandy alive, and desperately pleading with her to put down a gun, Brandy fatally shot herself in the chest.

Bullying is not a new phenomenon and remains a pervasive problem amongst American teens. The issue has grown as social media apps and websites have become popular, often anonymous forums where teens can communicate online without supervision. Contemporary bullying has evolved beyond schoolyard harassment to comprehensive destruction of self with devastating consequences for victims and perpetrators alike. In addition to tormenting victims at school, today's bullies carry their harassment over from the physical school yard into the digital world. Because internet access is so widespread, victims are continually exposed to hate and always reminded of the bully's presence. Parents and educators need to acknowledge the generational differences in internet cyberbullying from the traditional understanding of bullying

to prevent the normalization of online harassment and the destructive consequences of

bullying in any form.

For decades scholars have tried to understand how complex social factors push students

to bully their peers. In many cases students seem to bully peers because they are trying to be

"proactive" about avoiding targeting by other school bullies or "reactive" to someone else

bullying them. Bullying a peer may be the only way some individuals feel they can express

frustration or regain power. Traditionally, bullying has been defined by three principles:

negative actions that are intentionally harmful to a specific victim or group, repeated targeting

of a victim by one or more perpetrators, and measurable harm inflicted upon the victim by the

perpetrators. Bullying can manifest as verbal teasing, physical aggression, violence,

embarrassment, acts of exclusion, or other intentionally harmful behavior.

When gauging how bullying affects students it is important to evaluate the reported

impact from the victim in addition to the reported intent by a suspected perpetrator, or bully.

Many teens may not understand the impact of their actions or claim abusive behaviors are "just

a joke" (Sanders and Phye 230). Research shows that bullying peaks in middle school when

teenagers are often insecure about themselves and how they fit in with peers. Middle schoolers

and high schoolers can be particularly vulnerable to attacks based on their identity because the

way teens view themselves in relation to their peers serves a key role in their psyche. A positive

self-perception allows teens to be confident in their physical appearance or abilities while a

negative self-perception can lead to decreased mental health, thoughts of self-harm, and in

some cases suicide.

To fully understand the impact of bullying in American schools, researchers must

consider how students are individually affected in addition to quantifying the prevalence of

bullying in school climates. In a 2017 study, "Ten-Year Trends in Bullying and Related Attitudes

Among 4th- to 12th-Graders", researchers found significant improvements in school climates

directly related to a decrease of 13 separate indicators of different types of bullying and

attitudes towards it (Jenco 3). Despite marked improvement, almost half of students reported

witnessing bullying. Similarly, school communication to prevent or resolve bullying did not see

the same improvements despite student awareness around bullying increasing or increases in

family support networks and adult intervention (First 4). Adults play a critical role in identifying

when children or teens are being bullied so a large discrepancy between adult awareness and

action is very concerning. This disparity is predicted to increase as bullying evolves with the

internet to take on new forms through social media or other online messaging apps that

parents are largely unfamiliar with.

Teens connect online through many channels including social media, online games, and

messaging apps. Even well-meaning parents who attempt to monitor their children can miss

nuanced signs of teasing or exclusion if they are unfamiliar with how online platforms can be

used for destructive purposes. Cyberbullying is one negative repercussion of increased

connectivity through the internet. Like traditional bullying, cyberbullying seeks to undermine an

individual's sense of self through intentionally derogatory comments, slurs, posting of

embarrassing private messages online, exclusion from online groups or events, or even revenge

porn. Individuals can take advantage of the anonymity that these platforms provide to explore

cyberspace through an alter ego which shields their identity so they can avoid punishment for

more nefarious actions including harassment, stalking, or coordinated hate. A growing portion

of researchers and scholars believe cyberbullying is significantly more detrimental to today's

youth than traditional bullying.

Prior to the rise of the internet bullying was largely face to face. Perpetrators of bullying

relied on verbal gossip, laughter, and face-to-face shaming to cause victims pain (Martocci 5).

The internet has allowed bullies to amplify themselves by using copy and paste functions to

spread or "spam" a negative comment repetitively in a message feed. This effect compounds if

multiple people with multiple accounts decide to harass vulnerable individuals. One person can

create multiple online aliases to parrot hurtful comments and give victims a false impression of

overwhelming hate and disgust within an online group or geographical community.

Digital harassment overlaps significantly with traditional bullying and often if a victim

experiences cyberbullying, they are also the subject of traditional bullying in school settings.

Sociologist, professor, and founder of Students Against Relational Aggression (S.A.R.A.) Laura

Martocci summarizes the threat that social media poses:

> Compounding this is the reach of social media. Streaming into a victim's home at all
>
> hours of the day and night, it assures that *no place is safe*. Individuals cannot retreat to
>
> the haven of their bedroom to get away from the torment at school, because the
>
> torment follows them there. With the advent of the smartphone, it follows them
>
> *everywhere.* (Martocci 149)

This overlap causes some to see cyberbullying as a simple extension of traditional bullying

through digital means. Others point to the dramatic power imbalance between online bully and

victim which gives a slightly nuanced definition of cyberbullying as deliberate, calculated, repetitive attacks or threats of harm using electronic devices (Englander et al. 16). Bullies now have unprecedented access to victims through the internet which means anywhere with a connect to the internet is no longer safe. Victims can read hate messages from the comfort of their own home or bedroom.

Ryan Halligan was in middle school when a group of students spread rumors about his sexuality and relentlessly humiliated him. One young woman knew that "people would say things to Ryan over the internet and at school like "you are such a loser" and just really mean things" but she "didn't stick up for him at the time" because she thought "it was just that middle school bullying- it happens, but, it was real and it really hurt him" (Growing Up Online). Ryan went to his parents and school officials for help which his father willingly provided. Ryan's father passed on the same generational wisdom about standing up to bullies: if someone teases you look them in the eye instead of looking at the ground, be brave, and don't be afraid to fight back if you are attacked. Ryan spent time boxing with his dad which improved his confidence and seemed to make things better. His parents thought Ryan had found a way to deal with his bullies or that the teasing had stopped but nothing had actually improved.

Just a few months later, Ryan committed suicide after significant and prolonged bullying in school and online. In the aftermath of Ryan's death his father attempted to piece together Ryan's online chat history with the help of his son's grieving friends. What surfaced was entirely unexpected. Completely unbeknownst to his parents, Ryan was in communication with another boy who created webpages that featured an unhealthy obsession with death. The boy convinced Ryan to internalize hateful messages while actively encouraging Ryan to participate

in a suicide pact. His mother summarizes how different Ryan's cyberbullying was from her own

knowledge of bullying as a child best:

> "back in my day, if you were getting bullied, it ends at the school yard, you come home,
>
> and you have your safe haven. But not for Ryan. He came home and he did what every
>
> other kid did. He went online and now the taunts got to continue at home as well"
>
> (Growing Up Online)

Ryan's story is a warning illustrating how dangerous it is for adults to underestimate

cyberbullying. Some scholars even say that "the internet has created the greatest generation

gap since rock and roll" which is one reason why contemporary parents have such a hard time

understanding the true dangers of cyberbullying (Growing Up Online). In many ways, the teen

narrative has changed to normalize bullying and its consequences such as depression, self-

harm, and suicide.

Older generations had very different experiences with bullying so conventional wisdom

that once worked well to deter bullying falls short of being effective to help students that

experience total humiliation at the hands of modern cyberbullies. It is equally important for

parents and school administrators to understand how internet connectivity has re-invented

bullying since school bullies are now capable of previously unimaginable levels of destruction.

The first step in solving this problem is for adults to learn about stories such as Brandy Vela or

Ryan Halligan to see where the traditional system of reporting school bullies to adults fails

victims of cyberbullying. Teens and adults need to learn about concrete cyberbullying examples

so they can recognize, and combat, bullying in all forms. School climates need to foster a

campus culture that responds consistently when instances of bullying are reported to support victims and discourage perpetrators through bystander intervention.

Simply learning about tragic cases and adding new punishments for confirmed instances of bullying will not be enough to solve this complex issue. Schools need to promote school-wide anti-bullying programs at all grade-levels. These programs need to teach students about the dangerous potential of cruel jokes and malicious behavior, so students are aware of how their actions affect others. Parents and educators need to do more than respond punitively to reports of bullying and instead look to include personal, targeted interventions to discover why students that feel compelled to bully are lashing out. Effective responses to combating bullying will include a compassionate way to help students who feel bullying is the only way they can express complicated feelings or fight back against situations at home they cannot control. Adults should look to evidence-based solutions such as Dan Olweus' (Bergan) Bullying Prevention Program which is endorsed by the Center of Prevention of Violence at University of Colorado at Boulder and the Center for Disease Control (Sanders and Phye 237).

Additionally, adults would be remiss to not include education about bystander intervention because students need to learn how to help peers that are targeted by bullies. With the proper support from adults, students can hold each other accountable for standing up to bullies, assisting potential victims, and embracing an inclusive community that rejects members who target individuals based on differences. Creating a community that actively seeks to support students may be a crucial step in encouraging victims to seek help from a friend or trusted adult if they find instances of cyberbullying or experience bullying firsthand.

Both schools and online communities must educate students about appropriate behaviors when communicating online in addition to prohibiting bullies from thriving inside digital, or physical communities. Over the last twenty years the internet has become a crucial component of modern society that is constantly in motion. People need to be taught how to communicate online because hateful comments are immensely destructive to the human psyche as proven by scores of tragic stories like Brandy Vela's or Ryan Halligan's.

Cyberbullying is an issue that needs to be urgently addressed in American society because of the dangerous combination of physical and digital bullying that attacks victims on all fronts. Seeing cyberbullying as a nothing more than an extension of bullying into digital platforms ignores the increasing amount of communication that takes place online as well as the importance that teens place on manufacturing their internet presence to be perfect. Cyberbullying will continue to take lives unless immediate action is taken to condemn internet hate and create lasting positive change.

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