PARENTAL AWARENESS OF CYBER BULLYING

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A Thesis

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Technological advances have shifted bullying from traditional face-to-face bullying to harassment through the use of electronics (cyber bullying). With cyber bullying, the main source of connection between a bully and their victim has moved to electronic devices that are generally used off of school grounds. Parents need to be aware of cyber bullying and have tools to help if it becomes an issue for their child. This study aimed to find if parents are aware of the cyber bullying issue and what resources they are aware of to help with the issue. A survey instrument designed for this current study by the researcher based on an instrument used by Strom and Strom (2005) was distributed to parents of 8th graders in two middle schools in Northern California. Sixty-two parents returned the survey via mail. The majority of parents had not accessed cyber safety information (51.6%). The majority of parents reported using rules for online activity to control their child’s Internet time (62.9%). Fathers were significantly more likely to see cyber bullying as less damaging than face-to-face bullying than mothers.
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgments</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Tables</td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statement of the Problem</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significance of the Study</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methods</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definition of Terms</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization of the Study</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical Framework</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional Bullying</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cyber Bullying</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional and Cyber Bullying</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental Role and Intervention in Cyber Bullying</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Present Study</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. METHODS</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Questions</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF TABLES

1. Table 1: The Different Ways Parents have Obtained Cyber Safety Information.. 27
2. Table 2: Parents have Accessed the Following Sites……………………………………27
3. Table 3: Monitoring Techniques Parents use to Protect their Child Online………28
4. Table 4: Parents Understanding of Cyber Bullying is Based on: .................29
5. Table 5: If my Child Reports Cyber Bullying to me, I would tell them to:........30
Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Purpose of the Study

The present study aims to examine parents’ awareness of cyber bullying and access to existing resources. Since this is the first study to specifically address parental awareness of cyber bullying, the study is exploratory in nature. Parents of 8th grade students were sent surveys about their awareness of cyber bullying, accessing of cyber bullying resources, and monitoring of adolescents Internet use. Parents’ attitudes about cyber bullying were also examined. From these exploratory data, recommendations for parent education and resources around cyber bullying are made.

Statement of the Problem

Bullying is a form of aggressive behavior that has been on the rise in school settings. More recently bullying has become an issue that reaches beyond the school grounds as technological advances have offered a new arena in which bullying occurs (Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2007). This type of behavior has come to be known as “cyber bullying.” According to Keith and Martin (2005) cyber bullying can be done using emails, cell phones, instant messaging and online slam pages. An example of cyber
bullying can be seen through the use of a bully’s cell phone. If a bully took an
unflattering picture of a victim he/she could send it out to multiple people in order to
embarrass the victim. Because this kind of bullying occurs most frequently in the home
rather than in school, parents may be the adults most able to intervene. Studies have
shown that informed and aware parents have the ability to “minimize the likelihood of
cyber bullying” (Strom & Strom, 2005, p.25). However, parents may not be aware of the
problem or have the technological know-how to access the tools available to help their
children deal with and prevent cyber bullying.

Significance of the Study

Traditional bullying has been the subject of a wide variety of studies in the
research literature. Now that bullying is moving beyond the environment of the school
and moving into the home via technology (Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2007), new studies of
this form of bullying are needed. Such cyber bullying can be a painful event for many
students. There are links between depression and students who are cyber bullied (Ybarra,
2004).

Since parents are the most likely adults to be available in the home, research on
cyber bullying must include a focus on parents’ understanding of cyber bullying, as well
as their access to resources to combat it. A quick source of control for parents is to
eliminate the access to technology for their adolescents. However, Strom and Strom
(2005) make it clear that banning technology only leads to a feeling of being “socially isolated” (p. 22). Therefore, additional strategies for parents are needed.

A review of the literature indicates that there are some sources that can provide information to help parents deal with this new shift in bullying. An example of a useful source provided by Strom and Strom (2005), described a website, www.cybercrimes.net, which can help guide parents in reporting cyber abuse and locating “agencies to contact for help in dealing with cyber mistreatment” (p.22). In order for cyber-bullying information to be useful it must actually be accessed and implemented. Thus, it is important to gain a general idea of what parents know about cyber bullying, how they view the dangers in this new form of bullying, whether they are aware of information sources available to them, and whether and how they access those resources.

The current study is the first to examine parents’ knowledge about cyber bullying and the resources available to combat it. This information is vital to developing campaigns to provide parents with information on resources. This research also has the potential to further extend our understanding of the relatively new phenomenon of cyber bullying which is affecting social and emotional development in children and adolescents. Ultimately the goal of this research is to make students safer in cyber-space by raising parental awareness and identifying resources (or the need for resources) to help parents educate and protect their children.
Methods

The participants in the current study were parents of 8th grade students drawn from two middle schools in Northern California. Anonymous surveys designed for this study by the researcher were based on a measure used by Strom and Strom (2005). Surveys were mailed home to participants and returned by 62 parents of 8th graders. The survey was designed to assess parental awareness of cyber bullying and parental access to resources available. The survey measures included seven demographic questions and 12 items on resource information and cyber bullying knowledge. An example of one multiple choice question from the survey was, “In my opinion, cyber bullying is:”, followed by five options: “worse than face-to-face bullying”, “about the same as face-to-face bullying”, “less damaging than face-to-face bullying”, and “other”. The survey measure also included two open-ended questions. An example of an open-ended question is, “If my child was cyber bullied I would”. The survey is attached (Appendix A). Parents returned the survey in self-addressed envelopes directly to the researcher.

Definition of Terms

*Bullying* is defined as a behavior that is aggressive and repeated towards an individual. Kowalski and Limber (2007) note that in traditional bullying there is an imbalance of power such that it is difficult for the person being bullied to stop the interaction.
Cyber bullying has recently been defined by Hinduja and Patchin (2009) as any “willful and repeated harm inflicted through the use of computers, cell phones, and other electronic devices” (p. 5). Some forms of cyber bullying include text messaging, picture messaging, postings on web pages including social networking sites (e.g. Twitter, Facebook, MySpace), passing of electronic slam books, instant messaging, and email. Some examples of cyber bullying can include threats, rumors, and sending, taking, or distributing pictures, using these electronic devices.

Parental awareness of cyber bullying is meant to indicate the amount of exposure that a parent has had with information about cyber bullying. Parents have their child’s school, websites, media, and other parents from which to gain information about cyber bullying. Some other resources for cyber bullying include the police, technological support systems and online cyber bullying help sites.

Limitations

Generalizing the results in this study for the given population is made difficult by the 45% return rate on the survey. Another limitation is that parents are asked to respond to certain questions about their child’s use of technological devices. This is a limitation because parents may not know the full extent to which their child is involved with technology or cyber bullying.
Organization of the Study

Chapter 2 of this thesis will include a review of the literature that helps to broaden the understanding of traditional bullying and cyber bullying. Chapter 3 will review the complete methods used in this study. Chapter 4 presents the results from the survey. Chapter 5 provides a discussion of the results, as well as implication and limitations of the study.
Chapter 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Bullying has long been a feature of children’s experiences at school. In the past bullying was seen as a normal part of childhood, almost as a rite of passage (Dake, Price, & Telljohann, 2003). This was a time when many children were either victims of or participated in bullying and most felt there was nothing they could do about it. Espelage and Swearer (2003) explain that incidents with violence of a more serious nature linked with bullying at school, such as school shootings, have led researchers to more closely examine this behavior in the past ten years.

Technology has shifted the location of bullying between young adolescent peers from the confines of school grounds into the home. The idea of bullying through cell phones and the Internet is a growing problem but the nature and complexity are not readily understood by many parents or educators because it was not an experience of their generation. Cyber bullying, the use of electronic medium to engage in bullying behavior, is not a new phenomenon, just a different way of conducting bullying. Still, parental understanding of cyber bullying as well as traditional bullying is needed so they can support their children if they are victimized. The purpose of the current study was to examine parental awareness of cyber bullying and the resources available.

Bullying is defined as a behavior that is aggressive and repeated towards an individual. Kowalski and Limber (2007) note that in traditional bullying there is an
imbalance of power such that it is difficult for the person being bullied to stop the interaction. Cyber bullying has recently been defined by Hinduja and Patchin (2009) as any “willful and repeated harm inflicted through the use of computers, cell phones, and other electronic devices” (p. 5). Some forms of cyber bullying include text messaging, picture messaging, postings on web pages including social networking sites (i.e. Twitter, Facebook, MySpace), passing of electronic slam books, instant messaging, and email. Through the use of these devices some examples of cyber bullying include threats, rumors, and sending, taking, or distributing photographs.

The age of technology has made a variety of communication resources available for children and adults alike. Unfortunately, this shift in technology has also provided new venues in which bullying can occur. Technological and communication devices such as computers and cell phones have opened a new door to what has come to be known as cyber bullying.

What follows is a review of theories related to child development in early adolescence, when bullying is most prevalent are presented to assist in explaining how cyber bullying has grown out of traditional bullying. Finally, there is a review of relevant literature on traditional bullying and cyber bullying with an emphasis on key similarities and differences as well as a review of the research on parents’ awareness, knowledge, and role in preventing bullying.
Theoretical Framework

To understand better some aspects of bullying, the following section will review some theoretical perspectives on the developing child. The Ecological-systems approach will be outlined and the different systems will be described in relation to bullying. Then Erik Erikson’s theory on psychosocial development will be discussed with emphasis placed on the stage corresponding to adolescent development.

Ecological-Systems Approach

Bronfenbrenner’s ecological-systems approach looks at the individual in the context of immediate interaction with someone else, as a dynamic relationship between general cultural belief systems (Miller, 2002). There are four main systems at work in Bronfenbrenner’s ecological-systems approach. Micro, meso, exo, and macro systems all address influences starting at the base level of a child’s life, in the home, then progressing to factors affecting the child outside of the home.

According to this theory, ecological studies bring the full picture forward of the developing child within the context they develop in everyday (Bronfenbrenner, 1975). The developing child is influenced by his/her immediate surrounding environments, adult interactions, societal influences and other connected systems. The ecological approach proposes that the interactions between systems influence the developing child (Bronfenbrenner, 1975). The study of these systems, according to Bronfenbrenner (1975), should not be limited to the systems that a child is directly involved in.
A child’s life has many different microsystems. Microsystems in a child’s life are connected through mesosystems. Such a mesosystem comes together when a child is the victim of cyber bullying. The child’s home (one microsystem) and the child’s peer group (another microsystem) are interacting and creating a mesosystem. The reaction of a parent trying to protect a cyber bullied child can create another mesosystem if that parent decides to contact the school. According to Ybarra, Diener-West, and Leaf (2007) schools are having difficulty finding the right course of action when parents contact complaining their child is the victim of cyber bullying. This is due to the fact that most often this harassment occurs in a child’s home microsystem, not on school grounds.

Andreou, Didaskalou, and Vlachou (2008) found that the bully working on an individual level is actually acting out solely but is the result of group encouragement and reinforcement. Therefore, intervention for traditional bullying should aim at the individuals peer group, microsystem.

A mesosystem created to curb the incidence of bullying involves schools and the local community. Working together to develop prevention and intervention programs. Before the current technological advances, school was the place where peers had the most direct access to each other.

In Bronfenbrenner’s exosystem the child is involved indirectly. An example of an exosystem in a child’s life is the current state of the economy. A victim of cyber bullying might not find a comforting ear at home from a laid off parent. An exosystem for many adolescents involves the interaction of technology and youth as a whole. In addition, the providers for different technologies and police have rules about harassment and are a
resource for parents when cyber bullying occurs, but parents need to be aware of that. The macrosystem has an effect on the exo, meso, and microsystems. It is the belief structure guiding different societies. The macrosystem guides the patterns of social interchange (Miller, 2002). A belief by some parents that bullying is a rite of passage might affect the way in which they react to finding their child is either cyber bullying or being cyber bullied. American Society has a strong reliance on technology with many dependant on technology in every day life. This relationship with technology is mirrored in adolescents’ interactions as well. Not all socio-economic levels have the same access to the growing connection with technology. Those with greater means have greater access to technological advances.

Theory of Psychosocial Development

Erik Erikson’s theory of psychosocial development outlines eight developmental stages. According to this theory, each stage of development that an individual works through is a search for their ego identity (Erikson, 1988). The search for this identity is mainly unconscious and only partially conscious (Erikson, 1988). The entire identity process is psychological and reflects the social processes occurring at different stages (Erikson, 1988). These eight stages are trust versus mistrust (birth to one year), autonomy versus shame and doubt (2 to 3 years), Initiative versus guilt (4 to 5 years), industry versus inferiority (6 years to puberty), identity versus identity diffusion (adolescence), intimacy and solidarity versus isolation (young adulthood), generativity versus
stagnation and self-absorption (middle adulthood) and integrity versus despair (late adulthood).

Erikson’s fifth stage of development is centered on the adolescent. The stage is called identity vs. identify diffusion. Within this stage of development the adolescent is building an integrated identity (Miller, 2002). Technology plays a part in the identity of today’s adolescents especially where peer relations are concerned. According to Li (2007) a higher access to technology can increase the interaction between peers and make group efforts easier. Peer interactions affect the way adolescents view themselves. Adolescents want to be part of the rising technological connections their peers are making. Removing an adolescent from all the technologies that can be used to cyber bully them also removes them from positive technological interactions and social networking amongst their peers.

The increasing adolescent interactions with peers during this time becomes increasingly important to developing identity and sense of self. While an individual is searching for his/her new role, peers are one of the main influential factors in this search. The peers and cliques with which students surrounds themselves provides them with the opportunities to try new roles (Miller, 2002). In the student’s search for new roles and integrated identity, he or she may consistently finds he or she is a bully or victim and sometimes, both. Kowalski and Limber (2007) found that 97% of adolescents use the Internet. To be a part of peer interactions adolescents must engage with technological devices.
Traditional Bullying

*Frequency and Effects of Bullying on Victims*

One important line of research has addressed the effects of bullying on its victims. Juvonen and Graham (2001) discussed the characteristics of peer harassment and the effects of such behavior on victims. They described victims as targets, and examined the reasons why victims are targets. Being a victim of bullying may affect children in different ways, depending on their stage of development (Juvonen & Graham, 2001). Juvonen and Graham (2001) explain that aggression moves from physical acts of violence against a victim to now include more verbal acts in the adolescent age. This is due to the increase in verbal abilities.

When an adolescent bullies or is bullied the effects can be dramatic and life altering. Being bullied can result in heightened anxiety, depressive symptoms, and a lower sense of self-worth (Espelage & Swearer, 2004; Olweus, 1993). For those reasons alone it is crucial that bullying be addressed in a serious manner.

Bullying does not occur at the same frequency throughout elementary, middle and high school. Dake, Price, and Telljohann (2003) explain that in the US bullying is at its highest frequency during the elementary years. There is a steady decline in occurrence after the elementary years. During the middle school years it was found that between 9% and 11% were bullied more than occasionally (Dake, Price, & Telljohann, 2003).
Cyber Bullying

Because it is a relatively new phenomenon, research on cyber bullying has only appeared within the last few years. Cyber bullying is a serious issue because it can have negative effects on victims. Raskauskas and Stoltz (2007) explained that cyber bullying may even have worse effects on children than traditional bullying because there is no where to escape to when electronic access is so pervasive. Cyber bullies may have unlimited access to their victim which can lead to emotional stress and psychological issues (Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2007). Emotional distress can occur for the victims of cyber bullying, especially in younger adolescents (Ybarra, Mitchell, Wolak, & Finkelhor, 2006). Victims of cyber bullying can become extremely upset and that can lead to increased stress (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004).

Williams and Guerra (2007) point out that bullying as a whole seems to hit its highest level during early adolescence. The steady decline that is seen in traditional bullying may look quite different when looking at cyber bullying. It is likely that middle school children have greater access to technology than elementary school children which could establish an increase in cyber bullying as children move from elementary to middle school. The peak for cyber bullying is in the eighth grade (Williams & Guerra, 2007). Bullying is thought to peak at this time because adolescents are changing quickly in social and biological aspects (Li, 2007). The present study focuses on eighth grade students because it is believed to be the height of cyber bullying but little is know about what parents of eighth graders know about cyber bullying. This is not to say that
bullying is not an issue for many high school students, but that the prevalence of bullying and cyber bullying have been shown to be highest in middle school (Espelage & Swearer, 2003).

Varjas, Henrich, and Meyers (2009) found that, whereas in traditional bullying male adolescents were the more likely aggressors, female students were more likely to be the aggressor in cyber bullying. Close and Crick (2006) explained that males have a higher likelihood of physical aggression in traditional bullying than females do. Cyber bullying can be less threatening for the aggressor than traditional bullying. In cyber bullying the bully does not have to see the person’s face or reaction (Li, 2007). Since girls are more likely to engage in relational aggression, like ignoring and excluding (Simmons, 2002), they might find cyber bullying an easy way to bully with out face-to-face contact.

Cyber bullying is often anonymous, which results in victims having no one to point to when trying to solve a cyber issue (Li, 2007). With 9 in 10 adolescents and children having access to Internet use (Ybarra, Mitchell, Wolak, & Finkelhor, 2006) trying to find a bully on the web can be difficult and in some cases impossible. There are systems in place for handling these situations but parents need to be aware that they can turn to technology providers, police and online support sites.

With cyber bullying there is an ability to continually harass a victim. Technological devices are able to hold information and can continually be reloaded, sent or posted (Hinduja & Patchin, 2007). In traditional bullying there can be moments of victimization but with cyber bullying those moments can come at any time and can
spread to as many people as the bully wants. There is a connection to being a victim of cyber bullying and having delinquent and troublesome behavior (Hinduja & Patchin, 2007). Cyber bullying may not present an immediate threat of physical violence to the victim but there are a lot of consequences still being explored in research. Adolescents seek approval from their peers and continual harassment can be damaging during a time of social development.

Traditional and Cyber Bullying

Cyber bullying and traditional bullying have some connected areas but are very different in the means by which bullying is approached. Ybarra, Diener-west, and Leaf (2007) explain that the same effects of traditional bullying are likely occurring in victims of cyber bullying. The traditional bullying that generally occurs on school grounds can now be extended into the home through the use of technology. Wolak, Mitchell and Finkelhor (2007) imply that online harassers do not have their size and voice to intimidate. However, if some of the bullying occurring on school grounds carries over into the home, then the victim is exposed to the worst of both worlds. Raskauskas and Stoltz (2007) found that there is overlap between both traditional and cyber bullying. Imagine a child being photographed with a cell phone while changing after gym class. That photo may be uploaded online and spread for cyber bullying embarrassment and that same photo may be used to taunt a child in person after being spread. Ybarra, Diener-West and Leaf (2007) do not find that same overlap on traditional and cyber bullying, this
may be due to the fact that Raskauskas and Stoltz examined a wide range of cyber
bullying behaviors and Ybarra and colleagues only asked whether students had been
harassed online.

Kowalski and Limber (2007) explained that a cyber bully cannot see the victim’s
reaction and therefore might be more extreme in their bullying than if they were face-to-
face with their victim. Exposing pictures, secrets, or other hurtful tidbits may seem easier
to a cyber bully that does not have to view any of the immediate reactions of their
victims.

**Gender Differences in Bullying**

Girls and boys are gender typed to behave in certain ways. Simmons (2002) notes
that female bullying is more difficult to notice for adults outside of the peer groups
because females are likely to bully using relational aggression. Relational aggression is
defined as acts that cause harm and destruction to friendships or feelings of group
inclusion (Simmons, 2002). This form of aggression is often missed at school because it
involves very quiet ways for female aggressors to act cruel and hurt others. One example
of relational aggression is the silent treatment. Usually the victim of female aggression is
within the same clique as the aggressor.

Olweus (1993) has provided a detailed description of the different aspects of
traditional bullying. Gender and age comparisons were made within the context of
traditional bullying. Olweus (1993) found that the amount of students that are bullied
decreases with age. This is not to say that bullying is not still an issue for many high
school students, but that the prevalence of bullying tends to be higher in middle school (Espelage & Swearer, 2003; Olweus, 1993).

Parental views for a developing child have not always been examined separately by the parent’s gender. Research has shown that maternal and paternal parenting styles can be very different (McKinney & Renk, 2008). Fathers are more likely to use an authoritarian parenting style that is characterized as being high in control and often lacks in warmth (McKinney & Renk, 2008). Fathers are often less involved with adolescents than mothers. This pull back in involvement actually aids in keeping conflict between fathers and their adolescent lower than the conflict between mothers and adolescents (Forehand & Nousiainen, 1993).

Parental Role and Intervention in Cyber Bullying

Parents’ Role in Bullying

As shown above in Bronfenbrenner’s model, parents can play an important role in bullying. They can monitor their youths and be a resource for reporting and intervention. However since traditional bullying tends to occur primarily on school grounds the role of parents can often be overlooked or downplayed. Now with the shift in bullying to home contexts via technology, the need to educate parents in understanding and preventing cyber bullying needs to receive more consideration in the development of intervention and prevention programs. Keith and Martin (2005) explain that parents may not have as great an understanding of the technology available as their children.
Parents’ Role in Intervening in Cyber Bullying

Strom and Strom (2005) provided an overview of the extent to which cyber bullying can reach children. A common parental response to issues with children and electronics is to take away the source of the issue. Strom and Strom (2005) make it clear that this only leads to a feeling of being socially isolated because of the importance of technology to adolescent peer interactions. Strom and Strom (2005) presented a cyber bullying poll that is used in everyday classrooms to help determine the nature of cyber bullying for a particular school. The poll created by Strom and Strom (2005) was used to help determine student’s opinions on the rising cyber bullying situation. The authors clearly outline the need for parents’ involvement in helping to reduce cyber bullying, however little is known of what parents currently know and what resources they access.

While Raskauskas and Stoltz (2007) drew connections between traditional and electronic bullying, there were also clear distinctions made. The authors presented an Internet experience questionnaire to 84 adolescents between the ages 13 and 18 years old. The questionnaire asked students to rate experiences with Internet and traditional bullying in 28 different self-report questions. Raskauskas and Stoltz (2007) found that the adolescents of today are the “first generation to have grown up in a society in which the Internet is an integral part of daily life” (p. 564). This finding opens up the concern that parents of these adolescents might not be aware of the many different dangers in the cyber bullying context. Raskauskas and Stoltz (2007) indicate a need for further research.
for parents to help reduce electronic forms of bullying. Since there is a wide variety of information out there what is stopping the connection of parents to information?

Strom and Strom (2005) described a website, www.cybercrimes.net, to help guide in reporting cyber abuse and locating agencies to contact for help in dealing with cyber mistreatment, and also provided the sites, http://wiredsafety.org and www.cybercrime.gov. Resources for parents are available but it is not clear whether parents are accessing this assistance. To understand if parents are accessing cyber bullying resources, there first needs to be an understanding about whether parents know the access children have to each other due to all the available technology.

Present Study

The purpose of the present study was to examine whether or not parents are accessing information on cyber bullying, where they get their information, and what information they still need. If parents do not understand technology and the ways in which it can be used to bully or they are unaware of the dangers, they may not understand the need to learn more. If parents are unaware of resources for cyber bullying prevention and intervention, or do not understand the severity of cyber bullying, they may not be prepared to support their child if he/she becomes a victim. Therefore, a secondary purpose of the current research is to examine the relationships between parents’ attitudes, awareness of cyber bullying resources, Internet use, and monitoring techniques. Since this is an area where very little literature currently exists this study will be largely
exploratory and the findings descriptive of parent attitudes, differences in parental views depending on gender of parent and access to resources.
Chapter 3

METHODS

Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to examine parental awareness of cyber bullying. The first goal of the study was to assess whether parents accessing available resources to combat cyber bullying. In addition, the present study addresses parents’ understanding of, and attitudes towards, cyber bullying, examining differences in parental responses based on child and parent gender.

Participants

Participants included 62 parents of students drawn from two middle schools in Northern California. Parents of students in 8th grade (13-14 years old) were invited to participate because this age is within the peak of bullying and cyber bullying behavior so they are most likely to have children who have encountered these behaviors (Espelage & Swearer, 2003; Olweus, 1993; Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2007). Forty-five percent of the parents that were sent surveys sent back a completed survey.
The two largest ethnic groups represented in the sample were Caucasian (40.3%) and Asian (24.2%). Of the parents, 75.8% were female. Of parents surveyed, 40.4% reported they had a two-year degree or higher and 27.4% had completed high school.

Measure

The measure for this study was an anonymous survey designed for the current study based on an instrument used by Strom and Strom (2005). The survey was designed to assess parental awareness of cyber bullying and parental access to resources available. According to Strom and Strom (2005) cyber bullying includes many different forms of electronic access to children, including cell phone text messaging, websites, email, online slam books and chat rooms. Thus, the survey addresses not only the availability of electronics among students but also parents’ understanding of their child’s vulnerability to bullying in the cyber world. The survey is attached (Appendix A).

The survey measure included seven demographic questions and 12 items on cyber bullying knowledge and resource information. Two of the 12 questions on the survey were open ended, including questions such as, “what additional information do you think you, as a parent, need regarding cyber bullying?” The other ten questions were multiple-choice. At the top of the survey parents were instructed to circle all the answers that describe their experience.

The demographic section of the survey included items such as gender identification, age and ethnicity for both student and parent. Cyber bullying items
included ten multiple choice questions, such as, “I have obtained cyber safety information from” followed by five options: “the school my child attends”, “websites on cyber safety”, “other parents have provided me with resources”, “I do not have cyber safety information”, and “other”. For the “other” option space was provided for parents to write in an answer not included on the list. Another question read: “My understanding of Cyber bullying is based on” followed by these five options: “my child is or has been a target of cyber bullying”, “what I’ve heard from other parents talking about cyber bullying”, “my child’s explanation about other children experiencing cyber bullying”, “I do not have a clear understanding about cyber bullying” and “other”.

Procedures/Design

Two middle schools participating in a larger study with the researcher’s thesis sponsor were approached to participate in the current study. Each school was contacted by the researcher first by email and then by phone. Both schools elected to participate and were given stamped envelopes stuffed with the survey and return envelope to send to potential participants.

To protect parent and student identity the researcher requested that the schools print parent labels for 8th grade students and select a simple random sample of 100 parents to whom to mail the survey packet. The researcher gave directions to school staff on how to select a random sample. Once a random sample was selected labels were affixed to envelopes and posted by school staff. Once parents completed the survey they
were asked to return it in the addressed envelope provided via regular mail to the researcher.

The cover letter (Appendix B) that the researcher included with the survey used passive consent such that parents were made aware that returning the survey implied consent to participate. To ensure anonymity, participating parents were also asked not to include their names or the names of their children on the returned survey. Schools were asked to announce the study in their newsletters before the letters went home to try and prepare parents and to increase response rates. Two waves of surveys were sent out in the Spring with a follow up two months later to try to increase the response rate.
Chapter 4

RESULTS

The current study addressed the following research questions: (a) to what extent are parents aware of cyber bullying? (b) are parents accessing cyber safety information? and (c) how do parents’ responses differ depending on gender of child and parent? In this chapter the results of the survey are presented, using descriptive analyses.

Access to Cyber Safety Resources

To assess parents’ access to cyber safety resources, parents were asked to report on the ways they have obtained information and what sites they have accessed. Table 1 shows that the majority of parents (51.6%) do not have cyber safety information. Similarly, the majority of parents (51.6%) also reported that they have not accessed any sites on cyber safety (Table 2).

As shown on Tables 1 and 2 the majority of parents may not be accessing cyber safety information, but parents do report that they have been using some techniques to protect their children online. Table 3 reports the monitoring techniques that parents report using to protect their children online. The majority of parents (62.9%) reported that they have established rules for their children about what sites they may visit when online.
### Table 1

**The Different ways Parents (n=62) have Obtained Cyber Safety Information:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source of cyber safety information</th>
<th>Percentage of parents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The school my child attends</td>
<td>11.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Websites on cyber safety</td>
<td>9.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other parents provided resources</td>
<td>9.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I do not have cyber safety information</td>
<td>51.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 2

**Parents have Accessed the Following Sites:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cites for cyber safety</th>
<th>Percentage of parents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Getnetwise.com</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stopcyberbullying.org</td>
<td>11.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wiredsafety.org</td>
<td>6.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have not accessed any sites</td>
<td>51.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3

*Monitoring Techniques Parents (n=62) use to Protect their Child Online:*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Monitoring techniques</th>
<th>Percentages of parents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Filtering and/or blocking software</td>
<td>22.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct supervision of Internet time</td>
<td>11.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time limits for unsupervised Internet time</td>
<td>46.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rules that have been established with my child about what cites they may visit</td>
<td>62.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Parental Awareness of Cyber Bullying

Parents were also asked where they gained their knowledge of cyber bullying, if any. This question was intended to understand better how cyber bullying information is distributed to parents. Table 4 reports that the largest group of parents (37.1%) indicated that they do not have a clear understanding about cyber bullying. Parents also reported that their information comes from television, news media, and newspapers, since these responses were listed multiple times in the “other” option of this question.
Table 4

Parents’ Understanding of Cyber Bullying is Based on:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source of understanding</th>
<th>Percentage of parents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Child is or has been a target of cyber bullying</td>
<td>8.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What I have heard from other parents</td>
<td>14.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My child’s explanation about other children experiencing cyber bullying</td>
<td>17.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I do not have a clear understanding about cyber bullying</td>
<td>37.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

With respect to parental intervention in cyber bullying, parents were asked what they would do if their child reported cyber bullying to them. The majority (51.6%) reported they would tell the child to tell the teacher or principal (Table 5). Parents were also asked to write in their responses to the open-ended question, “If my child was cyber bullied I would”. Of all the responses to that question (n=50), the two most frequently reported answers were, “report to the school or principal that my child had been cyber bullied” (32%) and “talk to the perpetrator or their parents” (26%).
Parents were asked on the survey to circle all the technological connections that their child have access to from a list of four options provided. The highest reported was 62.9% of children had an email account, followed by 58.1% having a Myspace page, and finally 50% have text message abilities on their cell phones. Parents were also asked to report their Internet time usage and their child’s Internet time use. The two highest reported answers for parent use of the Internet was 46.8% use the Internet 1-2 hours a day with 33.9% using the Internet 0-1 hours a day. In terms of their children’s Internet use, 41.9% of parents reported on their children’s Internet use as 0-1 hours a day and 36.1% 1-2 hours a day.

Parents were asked to rate their opinion on cyber bullying and were given the following five options: “worse than face-to-face bullying”, “about the same as face-to-
face bullying”, “less damaging than face-to-face bullying”, “a part of growing up now and results in little harm”, and “other”. These options were assigned scores from 1 (worse than face-to-face) to 4 (little harm). Parents scored between 1 and 4 on the item (M=2.09, SD=1.09). Parents were also asked to rate how much cyber bullying is an issue for their own child. They were given the following four options: “not a problem at all”, “a minor problem”, “a common problem”, and “worse than any other problem”. These options were assigned scores from 1 (not a problem) to 4 (worse than any other problem). Parents scored between 1 and 4 on the item (M=1.68, SD=.825). The following section addresses gender comparisons for the above questions.

Gender Comparisons

Responses to the survey were compared by both parent and child gender to examine for gender differences. As previously reported, 75.8% of the parents surveyed were female and their response was compared with the 24.2% of the parents who were male. Similarly, in the demographic questions from the survey it was found that 35.5% of parents had a male child and 64.5% had a female child, and these were also compared. There were no significant gender difference by gender of child for parents’ ratings of how harmful cyber bullying is or other responses. However, gender differences were found by parent gender and are discussed below.

Parents were asked whether they thought that cyber bullying was worse, the same, or less damaging than face-to-face bullying and/or if it was just a part of growing
up that caused little harm. The responses were scaled and the lower the score the more
damaging the parent believed cyber bullying to be. An independent samples t-test
comparing male and female parent responses showed a significant difference in response
according to parent gender, $t(55)= 2.04, p<.05\). Male parents ($M=2.62, SD=1.33$) were
more likely to see cyber bullying as less damaging than face-to-face than female parents
($M=1.93, SD=.97$). No other gender differences were found.
Chapter 5

DISCUSSION

In the current study, a majority of parents report that have not accessed cyber safety information (51.6%). Parents reported using other techniques to monitor their child’s online activity. The most popular technique reported (62.9%) by parents was to have rules in place for what websites their children were permitted to visit.

This study adds to our understanding of parental awareness of cyber bullying and parental access of resources in regards to cyber bullying. Cyber bullying is a new, current issue and is often occurring in the home but little research has previously been done on parents’ understanding and knowledge of cyber bullying. It is important to determine not only if parents are accessing available resources on cyber bullying but also if parents have a clear understanding about what cyber bullying consists of because it often occurs in the home under the parent’s care. The results of the current study suggest that parents have very little knowledge of cyber-bullying and techniques they can use to combat it.

Parents’ Monitoring of Technology and Access of Resources

Consistent with previous research, the results of the current study indicated that the majority of parents surveyed (51.6%) had not accessed any cyber safety information. Parents often do not view technology the same way that adolescents do. Strom and Strom
(2005) pointed out that adults often use technology for practical reasons as opposed to adolescents who consider technology an integral part of their personal and social lives. If parents do not view technology as social tools like their adolescents do, they may not understand the social threats online and may not seek out tools to help their child manage the cyber world. Many parents do not understand the peer connections happening for adolescents and the importance of technological devices in these connections.

Parental Response to Cyber Bullying

According to Erik Erikson’s theory of psychosocial development one of a child’s main references for building their identity during early adolescence is their group of peers (Erikson, 1988). The connection of peers through the use of cell phones is prominent in adolescence. In this study it was shown that 37% of parents would choose to limit their child’s access to technology if that technology was used to bully their child. Such a strategy may stop the immediate cyber bullying from occurring but ultimately it is punishing the victim. Eliminating a victim’s use of technology removes them from one of their main sources of connection to peers. Strom and Strom (2005) found that adolescents view technology as an important aspect of their social lives. With 37% of parents choosing to limit technology a child uses it seems there is little acknowledgement by parents of the importance of technology to adolescent peer groups or identity formation. Limiting technology use seems to be the simple strategy but it is not the technology that
is causing the problem, it is the way it is being used. It is clear from this study that parents need alternate resources to handle their child being cyber bullied.

Parents provided information on what they would do if their child was cyber bullied. For traditional bullying the school has been seen as the main source for the responsibility of dealing with that behavior. This study expected to see the same trend when parents were asked about cyber bullying, and this was supported in that the most frequent parental response was to report cyber bullying to the school or principal. The second most frequently recorded response was to confront the perpetrator or their parent. Of course one of the main issues of cyber bullying is that it often occurs off school grounds, limiting the perception of responsibility of the school and principal and limiting their ability to respond. In addition, in many cases of cyber bullying the perpetrator is often unknown so it is unknown whether there is a connection to school (Kowalski & Limber, 2007). Without being able to clearly identify who is doing the harassing, confronting the perpetrator or their parent becomes an impossible task. Cyber bullying usually does have the added benefit that there is a record of the harassment. As such, according to Strom and Strom (2005), the first contact a parent should make when dealing with cyber bullying is the police or the providers of the technology used to harass. Keeping a record of the harassment will aid in the reporting process. It seems that parental responsibilities and options need to be made clear for parents because schools are not always the best agency to deal with cyber bullying.

Further, gender differences showed that fathers were more likely to see cyber bullying as less damaging than traditional face-to-face bullying than mothers were.
Research demonstrates that females are more likely to be relationally aggressive than males (Kowalski & Limber, 2007). Cyber bullying is closer to face-to-face relational aggression than other forms of bullying because of the use of gossip, rumor spreading, and exclusion. Since this is a less popular form of bullying among males than females (Espelage & Swearer, 2003; Olweus, 1993), fathers may not have an understanding of the harm that relational aggression can do to an adolescent trying to fit in with their peer group. The fact that males are more likely to use direct verbal and physical bullying may make traditional school bullying seem more threatening to a father than bullying in cyber space.

Conclusions and Implications

Bronfenbrenner established four systems that influence the developing child. These systems can be drawn upon as a framework for increasing parent education about cyber bullying. The microsystem, as explained by Miller (2002), is an environment that engages a child on a face-to-face level. In a child’s home microsystem parents have the opportunity to help engage their child on issues related to cyber bullying. Parents have to first educate themselves and to help with that education a mesosystem may be the answer.

Within the exosystem a child can be affected by indirect influences (Miller, 2002). Media exposure is one factor many parents have an influence on. Engaging adolescents while they watch some of their favorite programs might help parents better
understand some of the influences that affect an adolescent’s behavior. If a parent can access television shows such as “Gossip Girls” where the environment depicted is filled with relational aggression, traditional and cyber bullying, a parent may have a rich opportunity to help his/her teen understand the wrong in the behavior shown. The media may also be a tool for educating parents about cyber bullying, like the recent campaign to try to educate children and parents about protecting personal information in cyber space through commercials.

Another exosystem involves the different providers for technology that are used to cyber bully. These providers have rules for the uses of the given technology and can be used as a resource for parents handling a cyber bullying issue. Police are also an outside source that can intervene with laws for misusing technology to harass and bully. These are two primary sources to be used when cyber bullying occurs.

Miller (2002) explains that the macrosystem is a belief structure that influences the culture you live in as a whole. Parents can take time to try to understand how technology and cyber bullying are viewed by society. Parents could try to understand the importance technology can have in their adolescent’s life and understand that taking away or limiting technology is not necessarily the answer to cyber bullying. Parents should be aware that they have been raised with societal rules about gender relationships and behavior with technology that may be different from their child’s and that these rules influence both their and their child’s views when it comes to cyber bullying.

The majority of parents (51.6%) would tell the child to tell their teacher or principal if they were cyber bullied. This has implications for intervention and awareness
building since many schools see cyber bullying as something separate from school. Both parents and school personnel need to be informed about how to respond to cyber bullying.

This study aimed to assess the ways in which parents are accessing cyber bullying information, and where they turn for help if their child was cyber bullied. From the findings it is shown that parents need more education on how to access cyber bullying information. It is important to realize that parents have a lack of knowledge about resources that way future research can develop ways to get resources to the parents. Cyber bullying is often occurring in the home and the need for parents to have a strong grasp on how to prevent or intervene in cyber bullying will help many youths dealing with this rising issue.

Limitations

This study used a survey to try and establish a better understanding of how parents are viewing and dealing with cyber bullying. Efforts were made to increase survey return rates, including a second wave of surveys after the first was poorly responded to. The ending sample size was 62 returned surveys, which is a 45% response rate. This sample size is a limitation of the study when it comes to generalizing results for the given population because the response rate was not high enough to say that these parents were representative of all parents. According to Dey (1997) surveys that are mailed have the lowest response rates in comparison to other survey collection methods.
Response rates may have been higher if there was a mail notification prior to the survey being mailed out (Kaplowitz, Hadlock, & Levine, 2004). It is possible that the parents who responded were those who had a specific interest or were more likely to know nothing about cyber bullying. Future research should attempt to gain a representative sample of parents to identify needs for education and training.

The survey used in this study asked parents to report on their own child’s experiences with technology and cyber bullying. This is a limitation because parents may not be aware of their child’s involvement with technology or cyber bullying. Future research should ask children about their own experiences with cyber bullying as well as their perceptions of parental knowledge and technology control. This may provide additional information on where parents and students differ in their understanding and use of technology.

Conclusion

Cyber bullying is a fast growing issue with today’s children. Parents need to understand the availability technology gives to harassers and to those being harassed. Some generations have grown up with the idea that being better then a bully means to just walk away. But when the bullying comes at you at home through emails, web postings, text messages, and online slam books there is no where to walk away to. This study has shown that parents do not have the enough information to help their child manage the
social, cyber world and that increased efforts should be made to make parents aware of resources about cyber bullying.
APPENDICES
APPENDIX A

Parental Knowledge of Cyber Bullying

You are being asked to complete this survey because your child is a student at one of the Sacramento area middle schools being targeted for a study on cyber bullying. This survey will ask you to answer information on your child as well as your knowledge and experience of cyber bullying. Your awareness of and access to resources on cyber bullying will be determined. It is important that the questions be answered by parents whose children have and have not been involved in cyber bullying.

Before we begin, please provide demographic information on your child and yourself in order for us to describe who responded. Remember not to put your name anywhere on this survey.

A. What middle school does your child attend: ____________________________

B. What is your child’s Gender (circle one)   Male   Female

C. What is your child’s Current Grade (circle one)  Sixth   Eighth

D. What is your child’s Ethnicity (circle best answer)  Asian   Black   White   Hispanic   Native American   Other ______________

E. What is your Gender (circle one)   Male   Female

F. What is your Ethnicity (circle best answer)  Asian   Black   White   Hispanic   Native American   Other ______________

G. How many of your children attend this middle school? _____

H. What is your highest completed level in education (choose one)
   a. Less than High School Diploma
   b. High School Diploma
   c. GED
   d. Some College
   e. Two-year Degree/Professional training
   f. Four-year Degree
   g. Post-graduate Degree.
For this survey, Cyber Bullying is defined as harassment of peers through the use of electronics. Some of the electronics used include text messaging, picture messaging, postings on web pages, passing of electronic slam books, and email. Through the use of these devices some examples of cyber bullying can include threats, rumors, and pictures.

Please continue to the next page for the questions on cyber bullying.
For the following statements, circle all the answers that describe your experience. If you need to include things not listed, please describe them under the ‘other’ option.

1) My understanding of cyber bullying is based on:
   a. My child is or has been a target of cyber bullying
   b. What I’ve heard from other parents talking about cyber bullying
   c. My child’s explanation about other children experiencing cyber bullying
   d. I do not have a clear understanding about cyber bullying
   e. Other ________________________________

2) I have obtained cyber safety information from:
   a. The school my child attends
   b. Websites on cyber safety
   c. Other Parents have provided me with resources
   d. I do not have cyber safety information
   e. Other ________________________________

3) My child has access to unsupervised Internet use:
   a. 0-1 hours per day
   b. 1-2 hours per day
   c. 2-3 hours per day
   d. 4 or more hours per day
   e. Other __________________________________

4) If my child was cyber bullied I would ________________________.

5) If my child reports cyber bullying to me, I would tell them to:
   a. Tell my child to tell their teacher or principal
   b. Tell my child to ignore it
   c. Limit their access to the technology used to bully them
   d. Tell my child to change their screen name or block the message
   e. Other ________________________________

6) The monitoring techniques I use to protect my child online include:
   a. Filtering and/or blocking software
   b. Direct supervision of Internet time
   c. Time limits on their Internet unsupervised time
   d. Rules that I have established with my child as to what sites they may visit
   e. Other ________________________________
7) In general, I use the Internet:
   a. 0-1 hours per day
   b. 1-2 hours per day
   c. 2-3 hours per day
   d. 4 or more hours per day
   e. Other ________________________

8) My child has:
   a. A Myspace page
   b. An online Slam Book
   c. An email account
   d. Text message abilities on their cell phone
   e. Other ________________________

9) I have accessed the following sites:
   a. Getnetwise.com
   b. netbullies.com
   c. stopcyberbullying.org
   d. wiredsafety.org
   e. Other ________________________

10) In my opinion, cyber bullying is:
    a. worse than face-to-face bullying
    b. about the same as face-to-face bullying
    c. less damaging than face-to-face bullying
    d. a part of growing up now and results in little harm
    e. Other ________________________

11) Overall, cyber bullying for my child is:
    a. not a problem at all
    b. a minor problem
    c. a common problem
    d. worse than any other problem

12) What additional information do you think you, as a parent, need regarding Cyber bullying?

Thank you for your participation!
APPENDIX B
Survey Cover Letter
California State University,
Sacramento

June, 2008
Dear Parent,

My name is Rebecca Gasior and I am a Graduate student completing a Master’s Degree in Child Development at Sacramento State University. I am sending you this packet because your son or daughter is a student at a middle school participating in a study on bullying. We are interested in examining parents understanding of cyber-bullying and the resources available to combat it. With the spread and increase of technology there has also been an increase in electronic forms of bullying called cyber bullying. Due to the fact that cyber bullying often occurs after school and sometimes even at home, we are interested to know whether parents are aware of cyber bullying and the resources available to help parents to protect their children from cyber bullying. It is important to get as much information from parents as possible to shape our future efforts to increase awareness of cyber bullying resources in the community.

Enclosed is a survey for you to complete. This survey is completely anonymous. Please do not write your name or the name of your child on the survey. By returning the survey in the envelope provided, you are implying that you consent to be a part of this study. You have the right to refuse to participate or to skip any question you do not want to answer. At the end of the study a web link to the study’s findings will be circulated in your school’s newsletter.

Thank you in advance for your participation. If you have any questions about this research please contact me at gasior82@hotmail.com or contact my faculty sponsor Dr. Juliana Raskauskas, Sacramento State University, Department of Child Development, 916-278-7029 or jraskauskas@csus.edu.

Sincerely,
Rebecca Gasior
REFERENCES


