

Cyberbullying Scenarios

Educating yourself and others about cyberbullying



Sameer Hinduja, Ph.D. and Justin W. Patchin, Ph.D.

Cyberbullying Research Center

Below are several scenarios you can review to learn more about cyberbullying. Feel free to read and discuss these with parents, educators, or youth. We have suggested a few starter questions, but are sure that you can think of others as well.

Scenario 1

James is frustrated and saddened by the comments his high school peers are making about his sexuality. Furthermore, it appears a group of male students are creating fake e-mail accounts at Yahoo.com and are sending love notes to other male students as if they came from James—who is mortified at the thought of what is happening.

If you were a guidance school counselor or administrator within the school, what would you do if James approached you with the problem? What about if you were James's mom or dad? What can James do to deal with the embarrassment? What would be some incorrect and unacceptable ways that James might try to deal with this problem?

Scenario 2

Two female sixth graders, Katie and Sarah, are exchanging malicious instant messages back and forth because of a misunderstanding involving a boy named Jacob. The statements escalate in viciousness from trivial name-calling to very vicious and inflammatory statements, including death threats.

Should the police be contacted? Are both girls wrong? What should the kids do in this instance? What would you do as a parent if you discovered this problem? What might a school counselor do?

Scenario 3

A mother is walking by her son Jonathan while he is on the computer and notices that he keeps hiding the screen when she walks by. Upon further observation, the mother sees that Jonathan is making fun of someone else via instant messaging.

What should the mother do first? Does the mother need to contact the parents of the other child? Should Jonathan be allowed to use the computer?

Scenario 4

Lindsay has just moved to town from Oregon and enrolls in the local middle school. Very pretty, outgoing, and funny, she quickly wins the attention of a number of the school's football players—much to the chagrin of the school's cheerleaders. Bonnie, the head cheerleader, is concerned about Lindsay stealing away her boyfriend Johnny, who plays quarterback. With the help of her cheerleader friends, Bonnie decides to create a "We Hate Lindsay" Web site, where girls can post reasons why they hate Lindsay and why they think she should move back to Oregon. Soon, the entire school becomes aware of the site's Web address, and many others begin to post hurtful sentiments about Lindsay. Desperately wanting to make friends in a new town, Lindsay is crushed and begins to suffer from depression and a lack of desire to do anything aside from crying in bed.

If you were her mom or dad, what would you do? What might the school do to help Lindsay? If you were her best friend, what might you say or do to help?

Scenario 5

Chester, a tall, skinny teenager who excels in math and science classes, feels embarrassed when he has to change into gym clothes in the boy's locker room at school because he lacks muscularity and size. Other, more athletic and well-built teens notice Chester's shyness and decide to exploit it. With their camera-enabled cellular phones, they covertly take pictures of Chester without his shirt on and in his boxer shorts. These pictures are then circulated among the rest of the student body via cellular phone. Soon enough, boys and girls are pointing, snickering, and laughing at Chester as he walks down the school hallways. He overhears comments such as "There goes Bird-Chested Chester" and "Wussy-Boy" and "Chicken-Legs Chester" and "Stick Boy." These words cut him deeply, and the perception that his classmates have of him begins to affect his math and science grades.

If you were his teacher, what would you do? If you were his parent, what would you do? What can Chester do to deal with the harassment—now and in the future? How can his harassing classmates really understand how much pain they are causing with their words and actions? What would you do if you were a bystander?

Scenario 6

Heather is a fourth grader who is extremely proficient at using the Internet. On Monday, she receives an e-mail from someone named "stalker@hotmail.com." The subject and body of the e-mail state: "I'm watching you. Be afraid." Heather immediately deletes it and thinks nothing of it. On Tuesday, she receives another e-mail from stalker@hotmail.com, and this time, the subject and body of the e-mail state: "I am getting closer, and I see you on the computer right now as you read this." Heather starts to get worried but doesn't want to tell her parents because she is concerned they will take away her Internet privileges. On Wednesday, she awakens to a new e-mail from stalker@hotmail.com that states: "Be very afraid. Today may be your last." Definitely frightened and concerned now, she makes up her mind to tell her parents about the e-mails when she returns from school that day. She is unable to concentrate in any of her classes because of intense fear as to what the e-mail meant when it said: "Today may be your last." She rushes home after school, bent on bringing it up to her mom and dad as soon as she sees them. To her dismay, she finds a note on the table stating that her mom went grocery shopping and that her dad will be home late. Her palms begin to sweat and her heart begins to race. She goes to her bedroom, throws her backpack on her bed, and checks her e-mail. Twenty-five new e-mails pop up. Each one is from the same sender: stalker@hotmail.com. They all say the same thing: "I am in your house. I am on a wireless Internet connection. You don't know where I am, but I know where you are!" Heather grabs her house key, rushes out of the front door, locks it, runs to her friend's house, and tells her friend's mom about her situation.

What would you do if you were her friend's mom? What can Heather do to ensure her safety now and in the future? To whom else should she turn for help?

Scenario 7

Stan is an eighth grader who is physically abused by his alcoholic uncle when he visits him on weekends. Additionally, Stan is being pushed around by some of his peers in middle school because he wears black all the time and is basically a loner. Recently, Stan has realized that on the Internet—in chat rooms and via instant messaging—he can freely become a person who seems much more attractive and fun and lighthearted than he is in real life. By taking on a different persona, he is finding social interaction with others much easier and more rewarding. Nonetheless, he still harbors much anger and bitterness within due to how his uncle and some of his classmates treat him. He decides to get back at his uncle and some of his classmates by posting personal information about them—along with some true stories about his negative experiences with them—on a very popular teen-oriented message board. This information includes their cell phone numbers, their home phone numbers, and their home addresses. Because Stan has made

many friends on this teen-oriented message board, they rally around him in support and decide to exact some vigilante justice on their own to help Stan get revenge. A large number of his online friends use the phone numbers and addresses to make repeated prank calls, to order hundreds of pizzas to the victims' doors, and to sign them up for many, many pornographic magazines and Sears catalogs. Stan is extremely pleased at the harassment that his uncle and mean classmates are now experiencing.

What would you do if you were a parent or school administrator and the police alerted you, themselves contacted by Sean's Internet service provider after an online complaint was filed by Stan's uncle about these incidents? How might Stan learn that such vengeful behavior is inappropriate? How might Stan get help for the abuse he suffers and the way he feels?

Scenario 8

Karen is a very devout teenager who leads a prayer meeting every morning by the high school flag pole. Many boys and girls are simply drawn to Karen as a friend because of her sweet nature and hopeful innocence. Other girls in her school, however, feel threatened by Karen's piety and commitment to holy living, and they begin to drum up ideas to expose her as a fraud. Specifically, they begin to spread rumors via the High School's social network on MySpace.com that Karen is sleeping around with the boy's track team. Karen is alerted to the online rumors by a close friend and is heartbroken. She tells her teachers and pastor, who then contact the school administration.

What would you do if you were the principal in this situation? What would you do if you were Karen? What would you do if you were Karen's close friend and really wanted to help? How could those who spread the rumors understand how hurtful their actions were?

Scenario 9

Casey loves playing video games on his computer, especially those that allow you to link up to and compete with other players across the world through the Internet. He recently met one teenager in Russia named Boris while playing video games online, and they became fast friends because both enjoyed and excelled at one particular game. Together, they became almost unbeatable whenever they competed as a team against other teams online. At some point, though, Casey told Boris he had found a better gaming partner and didn't want to play with Boris anymore. Boris was outraged that he was being "dumped" as a gaming partner for someone else, and he began to tell other people on the gaming network that Casey "sucked" at all video games and that no one should ever be his partner unless they wanted to lose really badly. Soon after these statements started circulating, Casey's new gaming partner dumped him, and everyone else on the network treated him like a pariah. Since

the video game he loved so much could only be played with a partner, Casey was no longer able to play and felt totally rejected on the Internet (which had heretofore been a safe haven for him). When coupled with recollections of other instances of rejection in his life, this experience began to make Casey feel completely hopeless. He then started to express suicidal intentions to his sister.

If you were his sister, what would you say and do? Can this example really be characterized as cyberbullying?

Scenario 10

Trevor is 16 and into drag racing. He and his friends often go down to the local drag strip and race other 16- and 17-year-olds in their souped-up cars. Because drag racing is a testosterone-heavy event, egos get involved quickly. Speed is often equated to masculinity and strength, and physical fights sometimes break out when winners gloat too much over losers of drag races. Local police have had to report to the drag strip often in recent weeks and have threatened to shut down the strip completely if any more fights occur. Therefore, the aggression has been transferred from the real world to cyberspace, and winners are gloating over, and making fun of, losers online through e-mails and public forum posts at the local drag racing Web site. Trevor is undefeated in his racing exploits, and this has given him a

very inflated self-conception. His success has gotten to his head, and has been getting his kicks by berating and humiliating online those who lose against him. Some guys he has defeated are sick of how he's acting and are organizing a group to go over to his house, trash and mangle his hot rod with shovels and sledgehammers, and beat him up. Trevor gets tipped off about this plan the day before it is supposed to happen.

What should he do? Whom should he tell, and what should they do?

Sameer Hinduja, Ph.D. is an Associate Professor at Florida Atlantic University and Justin W. Patchin, Ph.D. is an Associate Professor at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. Together, they lecture across the United States on the causes and consequences of cyberbullying and offer comprehensive workshops for parents, teachers, counselors, mental health professionals, law enforcement, youth and others concerned with addressing and preventing online aggression.

The Cyberbullying Research Center is dedicated to providing up-to-date information about the nature, extent, causes, and consequences of cyberbullying among adolescents. For more information, visit <http://www.cyberbullying.us>. © 2009 Cyberbullying Research Center - Sameer Hinduja and Justin W. Patchin