eSciRes

Commentary

Social Media, Online Cruelty and Cyberbullying: Update on the Youth Perspective

Agatston P*

Prevention/Intervention Center, Georgia, USA

Commentary

Thirty two high school students and thirty nine middle school students in Georgia schools participated in focus group interviews regarding their perspectives on social media, online cruelty and cyberbullying among their peers. The students were participants in the Sources of Strength Youth Leadership Program at four schools and the focus groups took place as part of the planning process for their prevention efforts regarding bullying prevention. While there were a few differences between the older and younger aged groups, primarily in the area of the parent/educator role in cyberbullying prevention, many common themes emerged.

Simply asking youth what they thought was the best thing about social media brought up its ubiquitous use as a way to build, connect, and maintain friendships through making plans, sharing experiences, and easily staying in touch. In their own words...

- You can hang out without having to be in person.
- You can share compliments and be supportive.
- You can share photos and experiences.
- You can build friendships by exchanging social media accounts after meeting in person.
- You can share your story with the world.
- You can reach someone if you don't have his/her phone number.

Several of the middle school students mentioned the ability to gain recognition and popularity through social media as a positive outcome. This theme was not mentioned among the high school participants.

Youth also were aware of the downside of social media and expounded on this when asked what the worst thing about social media was in their view. While the possibility of stalking or predators was mentioned among a couple of the youngest participants in the focus groups, far and away the most common negative outcome expressed was the use of social media to engage in online cruelty, to create "drama", and to engage in cyberbullying.

- People say mean things
- Hating on other people
- Ugly lists
- Exposed or Hate pages on Instagram
- "Throwing shade" or "indirecting" on Snapchat (talking about someone without saying the person's name but viewers know who is being discussed)
- Sharing screen shots to cause drama
- Gossip in group chat which causes drama
- Cliques and exclusion
- People feel pressure to be funny so they post cruel videos or use Fake Instagram accounts to make fun of others

The second most common theme was that of social media viewed as too time consuming and the pressure to be available and responsive.

- You feel obligated to respond, whether through comments/messages or keeping a "streak" going on Snapchat.
- Everything happens so fast and it's hard not to react.
- It's so time consuming, it takes you away from family time.

While participants shared that online drama or cyberbullying can erupt suddenly, the vast majority of both middle and high school participants' view the online bullying and drama occurring in reaction to things that happen in on-going relationships and between peer groups. The high school students were more likely to view most bullying and peer cruelty as happening online, but indicated it is triggered in reaction to events at school and is an extension of social relationships. The middle school students reported more in person bullying than online bullying, however they also agreed that online bullying typically happens in reactions to things said at school or in peer relationships.

The participants in both middle and high school groups shared that there is often an in person aspect to online bullying and conflict. Participants shared that while it occasionally leads to fights; it more frequently results in or is the result of gossip or exclusion at school. So the sense is of a very fluid aspect to bullying online and offline. Some of the middle school students had a difficult time differentiating between bullying and cyberbullying because of the overlapping aspects of both. It seems likely that we will eventually do away with a differentiation between bullying and cyberbullying and recognize that online bullying is a more of a location than a method of bullying, since social media is the virtual hangout of youth today.

Participants were asked whether parents and educators had a role to play in preventing cyberbullying. While participants viewed parents as having somewhat of a role (particularly when youth are younger) in monitoring social media, older teens felt like the primary role is to have conversations with their kids rather than actively intervening and mediating. There was disagreement over whether parents should monitor social media accounts but among the middle school student approximately half of the participants indicated that their parents follow them on social media accounts and/or do spot checks on their phones. The youth whose parents followed them seemed to think it helped them to think more about what they were sharing and posting online. However there was also a concern among middle school participants that parents can get overly involved without knowing the entire context of

online incidents and make the situation worse. Some of their comments are below

- Parents need to stay out of it. They make it worse.
- It's ok to listen supportively but they shouldn't get involved.
- They shouldn't come up to the school because sometimes they don't know the whole story and they jump to conclusions.
- Just listen and be there and then their child can let out their frustrations.
- Parents should monitor accounts. Both of my parents are aware and my mom has Instagram and checks my phone every month. My mom tells me tips too.
- They can follow you and do spot checks.

High school comments:

- There are work arounds even if they monitor.
- My mom follows me and my family members and I think it does reduce the nastiness.
- You think more about what you are sharing.
- I don't think parents should do more than just have conversations with their kids. Monitoring is okay when you are younger by following on Instagram, but conversation is the main way. Keep the communications lines open.

High school students saw much less of a role for educators in preventing cyberbullying. They tended to focus on the intervention piece in their responses, indicating that teachers don't know what to do about it and that youth are much more likely to speak with their friends rather than teachers if they are having a problem online.

Some of the middle school students thought talking to teachers could help if students have a relationship with them and also recommended talking to a counsellor. But they were divided on this as some felt that the teachers don't intervene well.

- If you know a teacher talk to them.
- You can tell the counsellor.
- There should be an app or administrators to see if bullying occurs. But it's hard to tell because you need a lot of the behind the scene details.
- Teachers don't take it seriously.
- They either take it too seriously or not seriously enough.
- They could be there to listen but should just talk with us, not give consequences.

Both middle and high school students agreed that youth have a role to play in preventing cyberbullying. The majority of the participants felt that it was important to support their friends by listening and giving support privately to them. They advised against confronting aggressors online as that typically makes the situation worse and could be used against them. However they did think talking face to face with a person making a mean comment could be helpful. They also were aware of online reporting tools to help report or block a user.

- It's more mature to talk things out.
- Block them, don't confront them.
- Support the person, listen and talk with them.
- You can help a friend face to face easier than inside social media which may just fan the flame.
- Even screen shots and messages can be used against you. So it's better to support the person in person.
- Everything is so contextual that it's hard to report so it's best to just talk in person.

When reviewing their comments about what is helpful in resolving online bullying and conflict, it becomes clear that what they see as most helpful involves social emotional literacy (SEL) skills rather than technological solutions. The fluidity of their relationships, the fact that most online bullying is in reaction to or related to in person relationships suggest that our solutions for both prevention and response should be person centered and SEL-based. Even when they recommended steps for the adults in their lives they focused on communication and conversations as much as monitoring. These steps require communication skills for the adults as well as the youth.

It is noteworthy that these students are youth leaders interested in prevention, so they are not a true representative research sample. However it is worth considering their youth perspective, i.e. that our solutions to the problem of cyberbullying need to be housed in a person-centered realm, with social emotional learning as the cornerstone for the school community, and guidance for parents on developmentally appropriate monitoring with an emphasis on communication and emotional support over technology.

*Corresponding author: Patti Agatston, PhD, Prevention/Intervention Center, 617 Owl Creek Drive, Powder Springs, Georgia, 30127, USA, Tel: 770-655-9744; Email: pagatston@gmail.com

Citation: Agatston P (2017) Social Media, Online Cruelty and Cyberbullying: Update on the Youth Perspective. *J Health Sci Educ* 1(2): 111.