Article Critique:

Electronic Bullying Among Middle School Students

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ED-D 406

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November 8, 2012

*Introduction*

In 2007, Robin M. Kowalski (Ph.D.) and Susan P. Limber (Ph.D.) published an article in the *Journal of Adolescent Health* through the Department of Psychology at Clemson University. The focus of this article and study was placed on determining the prevalence of electronic bullying in middle school aged children. The study looked to shed light over an issue that was becoming more and more prevalent amongst youth in the United States. Kowalski and Limber used information taken from The Pew Internet & American Life Project which indicated that 97% of adolescents 12-18 years of age use the internet. More than half of those adolescents stated that they spend time online every day. Digging even deeper, it was shown that 45% of participants have their own cell phone and roughly 33% use text messaging regularly. With such high prevalence of usage among adolescents, the question that was raised by Kowalski and Limber was how many children experience electronic bullying as either a victim or perpetrator? With that goal in mind, they formulated their questionnaire using such questions as: “How often have you been bullied electronically in the past couple of months?” and “How often have you electronically bullied someone in the past couple of months?”

The study was aimed at proving the anonymity associated with cyber bulling would increase its prevalence. It also was interested in determining the ratio of males and females in both the victim and perpetrator roles. In my opinion, this study offered some quality results. The researchers conducted a study that included over 3700 students, spanning two U.S regions. By using the Olweus Bully/Victim model for their questionnaire, they broadened their result indicators by a wide margin. However, while this study does not make any shocking discoveries, it does give credence to an issue that will become more prevalent as technology becomes more and more ingrained into the lives of adolescents.

*Summary and Research Methodology/Results*

This particular study was comprised of a comprehensive questionnaire packet which included a 39-item Olweus Bully/Victim model and a 23-item questionnaire that was aimed at discovering the participants experience with electronic bullying. Electronic bullying was defined in the questionnaire as: “…bullying through e-mail, instant messaging, in a chat room, on a website, or through a text message sent to a cell phone.” Also included were items examining how the electronic bullying occurred (i.e., “Has anyone made fun of you or teased you in a hurtful way through e-mail, instant messaging, in a chat room, on a website, or through a text message sent to your cell phone?”), and the electronic venue through which the electronic bullying occurred.

In total, 3,767 middle school students, 1,915 girls and 1,852 boys, in grades 6, 7, and 8 who attended six elementary and middle schools in the southeastern and northwestern United States, completed a questionnaire. Each school was selected because they had been planning to begin a bullying prevention program. Passive consent was obtained from all participating student’s parents, and all students in class on the day of the survey were invited to participate. The parents were given a written notice from the school that their children had the option of participating in the survey and were given the option of discussing it with the school if they had any concerns or did not wish their child to participate. “Treatment of human subjects was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board at Clemson University” (Kowalski & Limber, 2007). The participants were divided into 4 groups: those who had experienced bullying the last 2 months, those who had electronically bullied, those who had been both a victim and a perpetrator, and those unaffected. *See Table 1 for results.*

*Table 1* (Kowalski, R.M. & Limber, S.P. *Journal of Adolescent Health 41,* 2007)

Frequency of electronic bullying (at least once), by gender and grade

Girls Boys Total G/B

6th 7th 8th Total 6th 7th 8th Total

Victims 41 (8.5%) 114 (16.7%) 127 (18.2%) 282 (15.1%) 38 (7.9%) 53 (7.7%) 34 (5.4%) 125 (7.0%) 407 (11.1%)

Bullies 8 (1.7%) 33 (4.8%) 27 (3.9%) 68 (3.6%) 19 (4.0%) 26 (3.8%) 38 (6.1%) 83 (4.6%) 151 (4.1%)

Bully/victims 20 (4.1%) 64 (9.4%) 93 (13.3%) 177 (9.5%) 12 (2.5%) 34 (4.9%) 25 (4.0%) 71 (4.0%) 248 (6.8%)

N/A 414 (85.7%) 473 (69.2%) 452 (64.7%) 1339 (71.8%) 412 (85.7%) 574 (83.6%) 530 (84.5%) 1516 (84.5%) 2855 (78.0%)

\**N/A = Students who indicated to not being affected by electronic bullying.*

The study found that the victims reported that instant messaging was the most common form of cyber bullying, followed by chat rooms, email and finally instant messaging. The results of the bullies showed the same pattern of abuse. “Among individuals *not* involved with traditional bullying as either victims or perpetrators, 6.4% were victims of electronic bullying” (Kowalski & Limber, 2007). By adding the comparisons of more traditional forms of bullying against their own study’s results, they added credibility and put the whole study into perspective.

*Discussion*

I believe that the results found in this study proved to be enlightening. The decisions by the researchers to keep the questions somewhat open by including the phrases such as, “the past couple of months”, may have helped discover a wider range of bullying by making the time frame somewhat ambiguous; this may have helped the students not get bogged down with specific time periods to indicate their action on either side of the electronic confrontations. Alternatively, these results display a disparity among the percentage of those with their own cell phones and those with access to the internet. This could be a result of a more strict supervision over internet content and usage by parents, and subsequently, a more personal connection to the cell phone and freedom to act outside of standard, more acceptable behaviour. Unfortunately, the results of this study are not surprising. The vast numbers of adolescents who have access to, and frequently use, electronic devices makes the likelihood of abusive behaviour much higher. The means in which this study was conducted show excellent preparation and delivery of a survey to a difficult portion of the population.

*Conclusion*

As stated before, this survey produces a well-rounded look at electronic bullying amongst middle school aged adolescents in the southeastern and northwestern United States. By distributing 3767 questionnaires to different regions of the country, Kowalski and Limber ensured a wide enough demographic to create a picture of the prevalence of electronic bullying. This information, coupled with more recent statistics on more traditional styles of bullying could be used to create a further understanding of a growing concern among children and parents alike.

As the study indicates, the next step in this line of research would be to try and determine the rate in which electronic bullying is reported, to whom it is reported and what is the results of those reports. By incorporating an arena of anonymity, this study has hopefully facilitated truthful and accurate results, but as research on the subject develops, more information on larger scales is necessary.

Additionally, these results could be used by classroom teachers in two ways: to educate the parents of students to be more vigilant with regards to text messaging and other electronic outlets for bullying or to implore those same parents to speak to their children about the damage that such actions can lead to. The results could also be used by future researches as a comparison to other nation’s cyber bullying patterns or for different regions within the U.S.

References

Fink, A. (2008) *How to Conduct Surveys: A Step-by-Step Guide.* California: Sage Publishing.

Kowalski, R.M., & Limber, S.P., (2007). Electronic Bullying Among Middle School Children. *Journal of Adolescent Health,* 41, 22-30.