Cyberbullying, Sexting, and Predators, Oh My!
Addressing Youth Risk in the Digital Age
in a Positive and Restorative Manner

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Young people have embraced the Internet and cell phones as a tool for socializing. They send messages and text, create a social networking profile, post personal news, and interact. Much of this activity is fun and beneficial. The majority of young people make positive choices and are not at risk or being harmed.[1]

Unfortunately, some young people may get into risky or hurtful situations. Research studies have demonstrated that the young people at greater risk when using digital technologies are frequently those who are at greater risk in general. This is risk behavior that is now manifesting in a new environment.

Digital Risk

The following are the various manifestations of digital risk.

Digital Aggression (Cyberbullying)

Use of digital technologies to intentionally engage in hurtful acts directed towards another.

- Forms of cyberbullying include:
  - *Flaming.* Online fights.
  - *Harassment.* Direct hurtful messages.
  - *Denigration.* Harmful material posted or sent to others.
  - *Outing.* Sending or posting private damaging digital material.
  - *Trickery.* Tricking someone into providing damaging digital material that is then disseminated.
  - *Exclusion.* Excluding someone from an online group.
  - *Cyberstalking.* Acts that generates fear.

- Key insight from the research in digital aggression:[2]
  - Digital aggression is a significant concern affecting a minority of young people, with different degrees of severity. Reported incident rates in academic research range from 6% to 72%--depends on how the questions are asked and study designed. In surveys that ask, generally around 50% of respondents indicate they were not overly distressed. These situations are closely intertwined with face-to-face hurtful interactions--continuation, retaliation, or mutual conflict involving known individuals.
  - Those involved as aggressors or targets frequently have other risk factors.[3] Lack of impulse control appears to be a significant concern.
  - It is recognized that face-to-face bullying is socially-motivated. Public digital aggression appears to be highly socially motivated--designed to attract attention and participation by others online.
  - Most young people do not report digital aggression to adults.[4] They are far more likely to tell a friend. Lack of reporting appears to be related to their own ability to resolve the problem or desire to do so, fear of overreaction, and the lack of trust that adults can effectively help them.
  - Young people who demonstrate greater resilience and experience less distress are those with actively and positively involved parents who demonstrate a higher level of self-control.[5]

- Helpful new research insight related to face-to-face bullying:
  - There appear to be two kinds of youth who engage in hurtful behavior.[6] Socially marginalized youth who appear to be fighting against a community that has excluded them. Socially connected youth who use aggression to control others and achieve social status.
  - A positive norms approach to reduce the level of bullying has demonstrated effectiveness.[7] This approach involves conducting a local survey of students about their perspectives on bullying, and then providing the results back to the students on posters. The data demonstrates the majority disapproved of such behavior. Schools were able to reduce the level of bullying by 17% to 35%.

- Research on face-to-face bullying, has raised significant concerns about the effectiveness of school intervention.
  - The Youth Voice Project found only 42% of students who were bullied at moderate to very severe level reported this to the school.[8] After reporting, things got better only 34% of the time. Things got worse 29% of the time.
  - Another study reported that a significant majority of students (around 60%) believe school staff make things worse when they intervene in bullying situations, whereas very few school staff (under 7%) thought this.[9]

Digital Threats or Distress

Posting information that is a direct threat or "leakage" indicating emotionally distress and the potential for violence against self or others.

- Two important issues: [10]
  - Sometimes the threat is not real or has been resolved. Adults must avoid overreacting.
  - Young people are most likely to see this material. They must know how to recognize serious situations and the importance of reporting. This can be facilitated with an online reporting tool.
- There is a relationship between bullying and suicide, but there are generally many factors involved in a decision to suicide.[11] Young people who are engaged in aggression, both as aggressors and targets, appear to be at higher risk of suicide.
  - Messages to students that bullying/ cyberbullying is causing suicide could lead to contagion because more youth may think that if they are being bullied, suicide is an option they should consider.
  - Such messages also can create significant problems if or when a student does suicide, because many students and others will be pointing the finger of "blame."
- Digital aggression can lead to school violence.
  - One recent news report suggested two-thirds of school violence incidents were initiated by digital aggression.[12]

Digital Abuse

Abusive and controlling use of digital technologies in the context of abusive personal relationships.

Abusive use of technologies includes:[13]

  - Excessive controlling texting.
  - Sexual harassment, including requests for revealing images.

  - Intrusion into private communications including demanding access and limiting communications with others.

Digital Exploitation

Exploitive use of digital technologies in the context of close personal/sexual relationships.

- Many teens use digital technologies to form personal relationships and may engage in non-abusive, consensual sexually-related interactions.
- Concerns in this area include:
  - Relationships ground in fantasy that can lead to unrealistic expectations or become abusive.
  - Coercive pressure to provide nude images (sexting).
  - Distributing nude images that were provided privately.
  - Grooming leading to sexual interactions--by an adult or older teen, stranger or acquaintance.
  - Sex trafficking--soliciting and selling.
- Key insight from the research related to digital exploitation:
  - Digital exploitation most often fits the model of statutory rape.[14] The publicity about online strangers who engage in deception or track young people based on personal contact information is inaccurate. Arrests for online predation accounted for 1% of all arrests for sexual abuse of minors in 2006.[15]
  - Online grooming strategies likely include overly friendly messages, overly eager efforts to form a relationship, discussions about sex, and requests for a nude images, extortive use of nude images received to procure more images or sexual activities.[16]
  - The reported rate at which teens have been receiving unwanted sexual communications online has been steadily declining from 19% in 2000, 13% in 2005, to 9% in 2010.[17] Increased interactions on social networking sites with known friends is likely a factor in the decrease.
- Recent academic research into sexting also reveals a varied incident range, depending on how the questions are asked and the age of the respondents.
  - Reported incident rates in two recent studies ranged from 2.5% in a study that queried 10- to 17-year-olds about sending of a nude image to 15% of high school students reporting that they had sent either a sexually explicit text or photo.[18]

- Pressure to provide is often a factor, as is impulsive, hurtful distribution after a break-up.[16] Girls and boys appear to be equally involved in creating images, but images of girls are more likely to go "viral."

- At the high school level engagement in sexting is correlated with other risky sexual behavior.[19]

- Laws against the creation, possession, and distribution of child pornography were not enacted to address this situation. Many states and prosecutors are taking a more moderate approach.[20] Eighteen year olds are at high risk of an egregious criminal response. They can have sex with a "minor," but if they sext they face registration as a sex offender.

Unsafe Digital Communities

Unsafe digital communities involve communities that support self-harm, such as anorexia or self-cutting, or engage in criminal activity or support hatred or violence, such as gangs and hate groups.

- These groups have common features: [21]

  - Provide emotional support for marginalized youth.

  - Include older teens and young adults who act as "mentors."

  - Adopt symbols to foster group identity.

  - Use online rituals to prove allegiance to group norms.

  - Exclude those who do not abide by norms.

  - Rationalize self-harm or harmful behavior.

- Not all online groups that attract vulnerable teens are dangerous. Marginalized youth may also find healthy environments where they share more unique aspects or interests with others.

Digital Environment

Features of this digital environment can have a challenging or positive impact in terms of prevention and intervention. These features include:

- *Permanence of Digital Material.* Can lead to greater harm because material is permanently available for others to see. Provides "early warnings" and supports more effective investigation and accountability.

- *Anonymity.* Makes it easier to avoid detection. Allows young people to anonymously seek help.

- *Wider Dissemination of Hurtful Material.* Can cause greater harm because more people see the material. Knowledge that many can see inappropriate actions may inhibit negative acts.

- *Networked Community with Many Participants.* Can increase hurtful involvement by others. Groups can be mobilized to stop the harm.

- *Wider Social Engagement.* Can bring young people into contact with people who they do not know face-to-face who may not be safe. Allows socially marginalized youth to find supportive digital communities.

- *Change in Power Balance.* May lead to retaliatory aggression by those with less power, because it feels safer. Allows those with less social power to better challenge those who abuse power.

The Times they are A-Changin'

Older "evidence-based" bullying and other risk prevention practices often focus on increasing adult involvement and control.[22] How do these practices translate to the digital age?

- School officials create policies. School officials are not creating the rules for the web sites or technology services, although most of these rules are in accord with common values.

- School staff increases supervision and school staff detect bullying. Adults are generally not present in teen digital online communities, nor do they have easy access to text messages, so supervision is impossible.

- Teachers teach students not to engage in bullying or risk behavior. Teens will ROFL (roll on the floor laughing) if teachers try to directly teach "Internet safety" because they know most adults do not fully understand their digital world.

- Students are told to report concerns to adults. "Tell an adult" often translates to "admit you are a wimp." Teens want to resolve their own relationship problems. Teens most often tell friends about digital concerns, not adults. Teens will not seek adult assistance if doing so could make things much worse, which the research evidence demonstrates happens.

- Some bullying prevention programs warn schools against using conflict resolution or peer mediation. If adults are not present in these digital communities, students need these skills.

- Principals discipline students. Punitive interventions that generate anger can lead to digital retaliation that can be accomplished anonymously or by enlisting the support of online friends over whom a school has no authority.

Importance of Peer-Base Strategies

Because young people are in a position to detect concerns of others and most often tell their friends about problems, not adults, it is necessary to focus on efforts to increase positive peer interventions.

- Integrate the role of peers in prevention and intervention initiatives:
  - Universal Education. Focuses on positive peer norms and effective strategies.
  - Secondary Prevention. Empower peers to help resolve negative situations by reaching out to support the target or the peer who is at risk or publicly or privately telling the person being hurtful to stop.
  - Tertiary Intervention. Made possible because peer witnesses know to report serious or unresolved situations to a responsible adult.

Evidence-Grounded Interventions

The lack of evidence-based best practices to address digital-based concerns means that districts must assume greater responsibility to ensure the likelihood of success of their programs.

- Ground prevention and intervention efforts in available research insight.
- Borrow practices that have demonstrated effectiveness in other risk prevention.
- Conduct a local needs assessment to determine students' norms, practices, negative incidents, and risk and protective factors.
- Use this needs assessment to generate objectives.
- Evaluate effectiveness through periodic data collection focusing on attitudes and behavior.

Legal Issues

There are a number of legal standards that must inform the development of policies and the investigation and intervention process.

- *Student Off-Campus Speech.* Federal courts have consistently held that school officials can formally respond to student off-campus speech that has, or reasonably could, cause a substantial disruption on campus.[23] Case law supports the conclusion that this includes situations that have or could lead to violence, overall interference with the delivery of instruction, or significant interference with the ability of any other student to fully participate in school activities.
  - But if student speech has targeted staff, the school will need to demonstrate that a significant interference with the delivery of instruction or school operations has occurred or is reasonably foreseeable.[24] Courts have generally looked at the degree to which the education of the students was negatively affected, not the offensiveness of the speech or the negative impact on the authority of school staff.

- Some states are now including statutory provisions in bullying prevention statute that includes authority and responsibility of school officials to respond to off-campus student speech that has or could create a hostile environment for any other student.[25] It is very important to have a provision in district policy that specifically addresses off-campus speech to survive a challenge ground in lack of due process due to lack of notice.[26]

- *District Responsibility.* Schools have a responsibility under civil rights laws to prevent student-on-student harassment that is so severe that it deprives a student of the right to receive an education.[27]
  - While there is no case law, if a school has actual knowledge that a student is being denied a right to an education by another student's off-campus speech combined with hurtful interactions at school, failure to intervene could be considered deliberately indifference.

- Search and Seizure & Miranda Rights. Students have a significant expectation of privacy in the digital records on their personal devices and a right against self-incrimination.
  - Reasonable suspicion is generally sufficient for school official search.[28] But school officials can only search records related to the suspicion, not all records on the device.[29]
  - When law enforcement becomes involved, the standard shifts to probable cause.[30]
  - Students and their parents should likely be advised of their right to refuse consent to search without a search warrant because consent must be knowing and voluntary.
  - If a student is a focal suspect in a criminal act and law enforcement is involved, that student must be promptly informed of his or her constitutional right to remain silent and have an attorney.[31]

Comprehensive School Approach

Comprehensive Multidisciplinary Planning

- Engage in comprehensive planning involving school administrators, counselor/psychologists, health teachers, educational technology specialists, school nurses, and school resource officers.
- The comprehensive approach should address:
  - Universal prevention through policies and education for all students, staff, and parents.
  - Secondary prevention that focuses on developing student capacity for effective

responses to digital risk situations, positive peer intervention, and adult detection of concerns.

- Tertiary intervention that is ensures effective reporting and investigation and is focused on restorative interventions.

• Web based resources.

- *Health and Well-being Resources.* Establish a web site that provides student with links to national, state, and local services that provide information, support, and crisis response to all youth health and well-being concerns.

- *Web Reporting of Serious Concerns.* Set up a web-based reporting vehicle for students to anonymously or confidentially report concerns.

Essential Foundation

• The essential foundation for a comprehensive approach to address digital risk, especially digital aggression between students is:

- Implementation of an effective, positive, school-wide approach to manage school and classroom behavior. This includes programs such as Positive Behavior and Intervention Support or Safe and Civil Schools.[32]

- Ongoing social-emotional intelligence instruction and support activities. This includes programs such as Second Step, from Committee for Children.[33]

Needs Assessment

• Conduct a student survey or focus groups to identify issues related to digital risk, including positive norms and practices, negative incidents, effective responses, and to provide insight into underlying risk and protective factors. *Embrace Civility in the Digital Age has a survey for this.*

Policy & Protocols Review

• Review and revise all policies and protocols related to situations that involving digital risk. These policies and protocols will govern the actions of school officials and law enforcement when investigating and intervening.

- *Filter Bypass.* Every member of the safe school team must have the ability to immediately bypass the filter to investigate a report.

- *Bullying and Harassment Policy.* Include language in the district policy that ensures students and parents have notice the school will intervene in situations where off-campus speech has or could cause a substantial disruption at school or interfere with the rights of students to be secure. Additionally, include provisions that require a full investigation,

encourage restorative interventions, and ensure post-incident evaluation.

- *Threat Assessment and Suicide Prevention Protocols.* Revise these to address the fact that threatening material is posted online.

- *Cell Phone and Imaging Devices.* Develop reasonable policies to restrict harmful and inappropriate use on campus--that protects student's privacy rights.

- *Extracurricular Activities.* Add substantial disruption language to extracurricular activities policy to address conflicts between students involved in activity and with students from other schools.

- *Law Enforcement and Mental Health Involvement.* Develop a protocol with local law enforcement and community mental health professionals for investigation and intervention of the more significant concerns. Protect students' constitutional rights. Promote community-based restoration.

Professional Development

• Implement a "tiered" approach to accomplish the necessary professional development.

- Key district educators require a high level of expertise in the area of these concerns, including an understanding of the legal issues.

- All safe school personnel require insight into approaches to effectively detect, investigate, and intervene.

- Teachers who are instructing students about digital safety require insight into the concerns necessary to effectively teach safe and responsible digital behavior.

- All other staff require a general understanding of digital risk within the context of the professional development they receive related to bullying prevention and youth risk.

Parent and Community Outreach

• Facilitate parent outreach through newsletters, parent workshops, and "just-in-time" resources at school. Reinforce the importance of encouraging their child to be a helpful ally.

• Provide outreach to community mental health professionals, community organizations, and the media.

Student Education, Positive Peer Interventions, Investigations and Restorative Interventions

• See below.

Evaluation

- Use a "continuous improvement" approach for evaluation based on local data.
  - It is especially important to evaluate the effectiveness of school intervention efforts in specific situations.

Teaching Digital Safety

Inaccurate, fear-based messaging and simplistic rules against normative online behavior is not an effective approach.

The Protecting Children in the 21st Century Act added a provision to the Children's Internet Protection Act (CIPA) requiring that schools receiving E-Rate and other technology funds provide instruction in Internet safety.[34] On August 11, 2011, the Federal Communications Commission issued regulations on this act. Under these regulations, districts must have an Internet safety policy that meets the following requirement:

This Internet safety policy must also include monitoring the online activities of minors and must provide for educating minors about appropriate online behavior, including interacting with other individuals on social networking websites and in chat rooms and cyberbullying awareness and response.

Key School Action Steps

Implement these key actions steps:

- *Establish a Multidisciplinary Coordinating Committee.* Include educational technology specialists, school librarians, and health teachers--and the school resource officer if this person will be providing instruction.

- *Ensure Professional Development.* All members of this team require an understanding of the issues and effective instructional approaches that is ground in research insight.

Evaluating Curriculum or Presenters

While some schools may develop their own instructional resources, others may choose curriculum or invite presenters to talk with the students. Carefully consider the potential effectiveness of curriculum or presenters:

- Determine the organization or individual's underlying area of professional expertise.

- Request information on the research insight and risk-prevention approach that has been relied on in creating the curriculum or developing the presentation.

- Evaluate the curriculum to determine whether it uses any of the following problematical approaches. Ask presenters for references for past presentations and make inquiries related to these issues.

Don't's & Do's

The following are approaches to avoid and positive alternatives:

- *Avoid* approaches that communicate the misperception that many young people are at risk online or are engaging in unsafe or irresponsible actions. *Choose* approaches that communicate positive messages that the majority of young people make safe and responsible decisions and effectively respond to negative situations.

- *Avoid* approaches that impart inaccurate, fear-based information and messaging. *Choose* approaches that provide insight grounded in research on actual risks and degree of harm associated with those risks.

- *Avoid* approaches that impart simplistic rules against normative online behavior like rules against communicating with any online strangers or posting photos of oneself or of friends online. *Choose* approaches that focus on risk prevention problem solving and skill building.

- *Avoid* approaches that impart "stranger danger" warnings and try to make it appear that anyone they meet online is highly likely to want to harm them. *Choose* approaches that focus on strategies young people can use to safely interact online with people who are known in person or not.

- *Avoid* approaches that rely primarily on adults directly instructing secondary students. *Create* situations where the majority of the instruction engages students in talking with their peers or uses older students to instruct younger students.

- *Avoid* having students sign "Internet safety pledges." *Encourage* students to develop their own statements of personal standards.

- *Avoid* recommending that parents of teens strongly rely on filtering or monitoring technologies. *Recommend* that parents engage in active and positive interactions, use protective technologies for children, and constructively use monitoring technologies for tweens and at-risk teens.

Law Officers as Instructors

Law officers can provide important insight for students about when digital behavior crosses the line to become a criminal act. This is important from both the perspective of student victimization, as well as engaging in criminal behavior. Criminal concerns include: child pornography, sexual

exploitation or trafficking, criminal aggression, cyberstalking, online threats, and online gangs.

Law officers will be most effective if they reinforce students' positive norms and focus their attention on the importance of recognizing and reporting serious concerns to a responsible adult.

Cyber Savvy Strategy

Nancy Willard's new book, *Cyber Savvy: Embracing Digital Safety and Civility*, provides comprehensive insight for educators to provide instruction. Her focus is on ensuring young people become Cyber Savvy. Cyber Savvy youth:

- *Keep Themselves Safe.* They understand the risks- and they know how to avoid getting into risky situations, to detect whether they are at risk, and to effectively respond.

- *Present a Positive Image.* They present themselves online as someone who make positive choices.

- *Respect Others.* They respect the rights, privacy, and property of others and treat others with civility.

- *Take Responsibility for the Well-being of Others.* They help others and report serious concerns to a responsible adult.

Instructional Foundation

The foundation of the Cyber Savvy approach is a positive norms approach that uses local surveying (formal or informal) to determine student norms, strategies, and incidents.

- Cyber Savvy survey assesses norms and strategies. Insight is used in instruction and messaging.

- Digital Risk assesses negative incidents in areas of aggression, abuse, and exploitation. Insight is used for needs assessment and evaluation.

Instructional Components

The Cyber Savvy approach incorporates these three key components into instruction:

- *Reinforce Positive Norms.* Universal education must promote the positive norms and effective practices held by the majority of the students. This can be accomplished through student-led constructive instruction, use of older students to teach younger students, and messaging ground in the insight into positive norms and practices derived through local surveys.

- *Strengthen Effective Skills.* Constructive instruction can also help students gain skills through sharing of effective practices and strategies. Effective skills include problem-solving and decision-making. Students must also

recognize possible negative influences related to the use of technologies, as well as the influences for making positive choices.

- *Encourage Helpful Allies.* As helpful allies, young people can provide support to a peer who is at risk or being harmed, challenge irresponsible or hurtful behavior, and report unresolved or serious concerns. Increase skills in responding and emphasize the positive perspective of helpful allies.

Being Cyber Savvy

Cyber Savvy: Embracing Digital Safety and Civility present the following key areas of necessary insight and steps to being Cyber Savvy:

Avoid the Impulse. Remember, what you do reflects on you.

- If you engage in an impulsive negative act that results in posting or sending material in digital format, this material can become widely disseminated and possibly permanently available. This could harm your reputation, friendships, and opportunities; place you at risk; or cause harm to others.

- Engage in effective problem solving and positive decision making before posting or sending anything. Be a helpful ally if you see someone is at risk or is being harmed.

Read With Your Eyes Open. Assess the credibility of information.

- Anyone can post or send anything online, and there is no guarantee that what has been posted or sent is accurate. Individuals, organizations, and companies may use sophisticated techniques to seek to influence your attitudes and behavior.

- Carefully assess the credibility of all information accessed on websites or received in messages and the trustworthiness of people you interact with.

Keep Your Life in Balance. Avoid addictive use of digital technologies.

- While use of digital technologies can be fun and allow you to connect with your friends, excessive use of digital technologies can be unhealthy.

- Ensure your use of digital technologies does not interfere with other activities that will make your life happy and successful.

Think Before You Post. Protect your reputation and respect others.

- Other people will judge your character and decision making based on the material you post and send. This can effect your reputation, friendships, and opportunities positively or negatively. You can hurt others if you post or send material that reveals their personal information.

- Be careful whenever posting or sending material in digital format. Respect the rights and privacy of others.

Connect Safely. Interact safely with others online.

- You will interact with many different people online. Most are safe and trustworthy, but some may not be. It

is easier for people to be deceitful and manipulative online.

- Be careful when you interact with people online. Only let people you know, or those whom your good friends know, have access to your personal profile. If you want to meet in person with someone you have gotten to know online, make a safe meeting plan and bring along friends.

Keep Yourself Secure. Implement security and avoid scams.

- Digital technologies can be corrupted with malware, which often is used to commit identity theft. Criminals use the Internet to commit a variety of scams.
- Ensure your computer security is maintained and your activities do not increase your risk. Watch out for scams—offers that are too good to be true or threaten loss if you do not share personal information.

Abide by the Terms. Act in accord with policies, terms, and laws.

- Your online activities are governed by laws, use policies of the organization that provides your access, and the terms of use of the websites or services. These laws, policies, and terms ensure that user's activities do not cause harm to others or to the technical system.
- Follow the common standards to protect the rights of everyone.

Stay Out of the Garbage. Avoid objectionable and illegal material.

- People distribute materials online that are harmful to others, including pornographic material. You could accidentally access this material. Accessing or distributing child pornography is a serious crime.
- Use safe surfing techniques to avoid accidentally accessing this material. Know how to effectively respond if such material is accidentally accessed. Don't access or distribute child pornography.

Don't Sell Yourself. Disclose and consume wisely.

- The financial model of the Internet involves providing access to free content and services in exchange for market profiling and advertising. Sites and apps track your postings and activities to create a market profile that guides the advertisements you will see. Social networking sites encourage friends to send advertisements to their friends. You can find helpful information about companies and their produces or services online.
- Make a personal decision about how much personal information you want to share with sites and apps. Use the Internet to research companies, products, and services prior to making purchases.

Protect Your Face and Friends. Be savvy and civil when networking.

- Social networking sites are fun places to post information and connect with friends but present risks that involve posting inappropriate material or engaging in unsafe interactions with others. These sites encourage users to share personal information and have many friends so they and their advertisers can obtain market profile information and use friendship connections to encourage purchasing. The terms of

use prohibit hurtful actions.
- Protect your privacy by limiting access to your profile to those you have friended. Protect your reputation and respect others when you post. Friend only people whom you or a trusted friend know in person. Report abuse.

Embrace Civility. Prevent hurtful digital communications.

- The vast majority of people do not like to see others post hurtful material, send hurtful messages, disclose private material, or cause other harm through digital communications.
- Exercise care when posting or sending material so you do not place yourself at risk of attack. If someone is hurting you, wait until you have calmed down to respond. Save the evidence. Then calmly tell the person to stop, ignore or block the communications, or file an abuse report—or all three. If the person does not stop, ask for help. Recognize that no one deserves to be attacked online. If you hurt others, this will damage your reputation and friendships. If you see someone being harmed, provide support to that person and speak up against the harm. If the situation is serious or continues, report to a responsible adult.

Cyberdate Safely. Avoid exploitation and abusive relationships.

- Watch out for fantasy relationships.
  - Recognize that forming close personal relationships primarily through digital technologies can lead to unrealistic understandings and expectations.
  - Proceed with caution when forming a relationship digitally.
- Avoid exploitation.
  - People you communicate with online may try to exploit you sexually by asking for nude photos or seek- ing sexual encounters. They may be online strangers or people you know—adults or other teens. Sexual relations between adults and teens are illegal. Common grooming techniques involve sending overly friendly messages and being overly eager to establish a close relationship. If you send a nude photo to anyone, that person could, at any time, distribute the photo to everyone, and your reputation will be trashed or the person could use that photo to blackmail you.
  - If someone appears to be trying to manipulate you to engage in sexual activities or requests a nude photo, discontinue contact and report this to an adult.
- Do not allow a partner to abuse you.
  - An abusive partner may try to use digital technologies to control you by constantly texting and controlling your digital communications with others.
  - Do not allow a partner to seek to control you in this manner.

Be a Friend ~ Lend a Hand: Positive Peer Intervention

Aggression Dynamics

A significant amount of bullying is socially motivated, that is, motivated by a desire to achieve status, power, and control.[35]

- Common characteristics of aggressors:[36]
  - They are dependent on peers for realization of their social status goals.
  - They chose the time and place to maximize exposure. Digital aggression draws significant attention.
  - Select targets who lack social status, are "different" and "less desirable."
  - Are often perceived as very popular, cool, and powerful, but are not well liked.
- Insight into witnesses and defenders:[37]
  - The vast majority of students think that bullying is wrong, feel bad for the student targeted, and wish they could do something to help.
  - Students hold those who do defend in very high esteem.
  - Defenders are often very effective in stopping the bullying acts.
  - Having defenders reduces the negative impact on the target.

Steps to be an Effective Defender

To be an effective defender requires taking note of a negative situation and interpreting it accurately, feeling a personal responsibility to respond, and having the skills, resources, and sufficient "power" to effectively respond.[38]

- Three primary ways that witnesses can positively intervene include:
  - Report concerns to an adult who can help. To do this, students need to know the circumstances when they should report--when someone could get hurt, their safety would be at risk, or intervention efforts have been ineffective. The also need to know how to report.
  - Reach out to be kind to the person targeted. There are many ways students can reach out.
  - Say "stop." Saying "stop" publicly, requires a significant degree of confidence. Students can, however, work as a team with other students, just say "stop" and leave so as not to give more attention to the one being aggressive. Students can also privately ask discuss the situation with the one being aggressive to encourage reflection and

reconciliation. Students should be advised to keep themselves safe and not to retaliate.

Barriers to Positive Intervention

The following factor have been found to present barriers to positive peer intervention.

Bystander Effect

People are less likely to intervene when situations arise in the presence of others.[39] There appear to be three mechanism related to this:

- Diffusion of responsibility--will assume that someone else is responsible for responding.
- Audience inhibition--concerns about the potential for public failure and the resulting embarrassment.
- Social Influence--take social cues from those nearby in assessing how serious the incident is and whether a response is warranted.

Mechanisms for Moral Disengagement

Four common mechanisms people use to rationalize hurtful behavior also appear to be mechanisms that witnesses use when they witness harm but do not intervene. These include:[40]

- Reconstruing Conduct (Spin It). "It was just a joke."
- Displacing or Diffusing Responsibility (Point to Responsibility of Others). "Someone else should be responsible for stopping this."
- Disregarding or Misrepresenting Injurious Consequences (Deny the Harm). "It wasn't that bad."
- Dehumanizing or Blaming the Victim (Put Down). "He or she deserved it."

Social Status

Having a higher social status level appears to be a very important factor. This is obviously related to the perceived social status of the aggressor.[41] If a student is lower on the "social ladder" this can present a barrier:

- Potential for retaliation by higher social status aggressor.
- Affiliation with the lower social status target could lead to humiliation.

School Rules, Staff Behavior, & Effectiveness

School rules, staff behavior, and effectiveness of investigations can be a barrier to intervention.[42]

- *Staff Modeling.* If staff members see, but do not respond to, peer aggression, students are will interpret this as a situation where response is not warranted.

- *Diffusion of Responsibility*. If the school communicates the message that problems between students should be resolved by staff, students are less likely to perceive that they have any personal responsibility.
- *Conflict Between Following School Rules/ Expectations and Positively Intervening.* School expectations that students should not "tattle" and should mind their own business can reduce interventions
- *Effectiveness of School Intervention.* If school officials often make matters worse when they intervene, students will not report concerns.

Factors That Support Positive Peer Intervention

The factors that appear to support positive peer intervention appear to include both personal factors and the socio-ecological environment.

<u>Personal Factors</u>

Personal factors include:

- Motivation.
  - Commitment to the value of personal responsibility for the well-being of others.
  - Tolerance or acceptance of differences of others.
- Social Status. It is not likely possible to change students' positions on the "social ladder." Strategies to address this factor include:
  - Empower the high status students with skills to ensure they know how to effectively intervene.
  - Increase the ranks of defenders by lowering the social status barrier using a positive norms approach, see below.
  - Undermine the social status of those who engage in aggression using a positive norms approach.

<u>Social Self-Efficacy</u>

Social self-efficacy includes both skills and confidence that you have such skills.[43]

- Ensure students know those strategies that are likely to be effective and that reduce the risks of failure and embarrassment.

<u>Socio-Environmental Factors</u>

- Parent Values. Reinforce the importance of these values to their children in the context of a school program to reduce bullying and peer aggression.
- Society Values and the Media.
  - Media messages about "cool."

- More recent media messages reinforcing positive intervention.
- School Climate.
  - Kindness and respect regardless of perceived differences.
  - Social cues communicated by staff responsiveness
  - Diffusion of responsibility. Students are equally important players.
  - If conflict between school rules/expectations and positive intervention--choose positive intervention.
  - Effective school intervention is necessary if we expect students to report serious situations

<u>Perceived Peer Norms</u>

Students' perspective of the predominant norms held by their peers appears to be the critically important factor.[44]

When student norms are opposed to peer aggression and support positive peer intervention, the percentage of students who are willing to engage in positive intervention increases.

- Use strategies that will reinforce positive norms held by the majority of the students.

Evidence-Grounded Strategies

The following approaches have been found to be effective in addressing the kinds of barriers and factors related to positive peer intervention.

<u>Social Norms Influence</u>

The Youth Health and Safety Project has made effective use of local surveys to reduce bullying behavior.[45] Project collects school-based data about students' perspectives on bullying. This data is used to create posters that demonstrated the school's norms related to bullying.

<u>Skill Development</u>

University of New Hampshire's *Know Your Power* program encourages bystanders to intervene in situations involving dating violence.[46] Posters that demonstrate problem situations and effective intervention strategies using text "bubbles" that demonstrate suggested statements and skills.

The Positive Behavior Interventions and Support's bullying prevention program, Expect Respect, suggests the use of a "stop" hand symbol to indicate to a peer that his or her behavior has crossed the line and to avoid providing attention.[47]

The International Institute for Restorative Practices has developed a list of questions that are suggested for use when interacting with someone

who has engaged in hurtful behavior that can generate reflection and lead to reconciliation.[48]

Be a Friend ~ Lend a Hand

New program from Embrace Civility in the Digital Age that has been designed to increase positive peer intervention in bullying situations.

- Use school-based survey to obtain insight for instruction/messaging and for needs assessment/evaluation.
    - Assess school climate.
    - Assess student norms against hurtful behavior and in favor of positive intervention.
    - Determine how students reach out to help others and perceptions of barriers.
    - Incident data for needs assessment and evaluation.
- Implement a student-led program to provide instruction to students using survey data and other guidance that focuses on norms and effective strategies.
    - This includes a slides presentation, student handbook, and posters.

Effective Investigation and Restorative Intervention

Effective Investigation

School officials, as well as law enforcement if involved, must take the time to fully investigate any digital risk situation. School officials can use digital evidence to more fully understand the situation, but this evidence could be deceptive or not disclose the entire situation. It is important to gain an understanding of the entire situation-- including face-to-face interactions, as well as digital. Follow these steps:

- *Preserve Digital Evidence.* Gather and preserve the digital evidence and determine the identity of individuals involved.
    - If someone is anonymous or it appears a fake profile has been created, look for lesser involved students who are identifiable and question them, promising confidentiality.
    - Law officers have greater ability to determine identities through a subpoena, if the matter involves criminal activity.
    - Watch out for fake profiles designed to get the person impersonated into trouble.
- *File an Abuse Report.* Once the materials have been preserved, file an Abuse Report on the site to get hurtful or inappropriate materials removed.

- *Review the Situation--Student Target.* Review the digital material and gain insight from the participants to assess what is happening online, as well as underlying relationship concerns.
    - Determine who is playing what role in this situation, with what apparent motivation.
    - Look closely to determine whether online incident is a continuation of--or in retaliation for--other hurtful interactions between the parties.
    - Determine whether the evidence gathered raises concerns that any student, target or aggressor, may pose a risk of harm to others or self.
- *Review the Situation--Staff Target.*
    - If a staff member has been targeted and the situation demonstrates any evidence of serious concerns, the investigation should be conducted by district-level personnel in a manner similar to a threat assessment. This student may be at higher risk--or may have been subjected to hurtful behavior by the staff member who the student targeted.
    - The student should be entitled to an objective investigation. A staff member who is a target of hurtful material should never have responsibility for an investigation.
- *Investigate in Collaboration.* If it appears that there is an imminent threat of violence, contact law enforcement and initiate a protective response in accord with threat assessment plan. If there appears to be an imminent threat of suicide, follow suicide prevention protective plan. Situations involving sexting or exploitation will require law enforcement and child protective services involvement in accord with protocol that has been developed.
- *Document the Situation.* If the situation involves off-campus speech, to avoid litigation challenges, it is important to document the following:
    - Nexus. The connection between student's off-campus speech and members of the school community. This includes noting all associated on-campus negative activities.
    - *Substantial Disruption.* Why the interference is "substantial," not merely an inconvenience or situation that has caused offense.
    - *Reasonably Foreseeable Disruption.* If disruption has not occurred, solid reasons why disruption can be predicted.
    - *Interference With Other Student to be Safe Receive an Education.* Must be demonstrated based on both that student's subjective

perspective and an objective observer perspective.

Avoid Suspension, Use Restorative Interventions

There are many reasons to avoid a "suspension" response:

- Recent research, as well as litigation, has raised concerns about the effectiveness of school responses to student aggression. Students will not seek adult assistance if doing so could make the situation worse.

- Punitive interventions that generate anger can lead to digital retaliation that can be accomplished anonymously or by enlisting the support of online friends over whom a school has no authority.

- In the past, suspensions might have been effective because this resulted in students being socially excluded from their peers. Students today are never excluded from their peers because they can communicate digitally. Suspensions only result in excluding them from instruction.

It is imperative to shift from a punishment-based approach to restorative interventions.[49]

- Punishment-based approaches ask these questions:
  - Who did it?
  - What "rule" was broken?
  - How should the offender be punished?

- Restorative interventions view transgressions as harm done to people and communities. Restorative approaches ask these questions:
  - What is the harm to all parties involved and to the community?
  - What needs to be done to repair the harm?
  - Who is responsible for this repair?
  - What needs to occur to prevent similar harm in the future?

<u>Discussions with Targets of Aggression</u>

Students who are targeted online are also likely experiencing--or could be causing--difficult relationships at school. Discuss what has happened online and relationship issues at school. If a hostile environment exists at school, make sure this, and the school's protective responses, are well documented.

- Discuss with target what response by the aggressor could help to restore well-being. Recognize the target is at risk of retaliation as a result of reporting to the school. Make sure the intervention plan is an approach the target agrees with.

<u>Discussions with Those Engaged in Aggression</u>

Determining the motivation of the aggressor-- whether the aggressor is socially maligned or socially motivated--will assist in shaping a response.

- Socially maligned aggressors often have emotional challenges that are not being effectively addressed. Some may be the target of hurtful acts at school--by other students or by staff.
  - Ask about and develop a plan to address the social-emotional challenges of the socially maligned aggressor.
  - If the online aggressor is the target of aggression at school, by students or staff, and has not reported this or the situation has not been resolved, this issue that must be addressed.

- Socially motivated aggressors are highly motivated by the responses of their audience-- the other students.
  - Use of social norms data to reinforce how many peers do not approve of this kind of hurtful behavior should be influential.
  - Suggest alternative, positive approaches to demonstrate leadership.

The intent of a restorative intervention is to hold the person who caused harm accountable in a manner that is restorative.

- To be held accountable requires that this student:
  - Acknowledge that he or she caused harm.
  - Understand the harm as experienced by the other student.
  - Recognize that he or she had a choice and chose to behave in a hurtful manner.
  - Take steps to make amends and repair the harm.
  - Enunciate an intent to make changes in future behavior so that the harm will be unlikely to happen again.

- Approaches to influence the aggressor include raising attention to the mechanisms by which people rationalize engaging in hurtful behavior. These include:[50]
  - Reconstruing conduct--spin it. "It was just a joke--a prank."
  - Displacing or diffusing responsibility--blaming others. "Someone else started it." "Everybody does it."

- Disregarding the harm. "It was no big deal."

- Dehumanizing or blaming the target. "He/she deserved it."

- An approach to help the aggressor reflect on his or her actions involves asking questions such as:

  - "How would you feel if someone did something like this to you? The power of the "Golden Rule" is evident by the fact that it is a found in every religion and spiritual philosophy.

  - How does this behavior reflect on the kind of person you are? Reinforce this question by focusing on this student's life goals.

  - "What would your parents, guardians, or other adults you admire think about this?" Reinforce this question by asking the student's parents/guardians to specifically express their thoughts.

  - "What do you think other students think about this kind of behavior?" Reinforce this question with local social norms data.

Provisional Discipline

Many students will be positively motivated to behave in a way that can get a disciplinary consequence removed from their school record. This motivation can be used to encourage compliance with a commitment to make amends and discontinue harmful acts.

- Implement a provisional disciplinary report that students can have removed from their permanent record upon a period of compliance.

Interventions Involving Dating Abuse

School officials may become aware of situations involving dating abuse that also involve using digital technologies for control and manipulation. A challenge in addressing these situations is that young people in such relationships often resist adult involvement and may not have access to ongoing counseling. Online resources can provide a significant advantage in addressing these concerns. There are high quality sites that provide resources on these issues, as well as "hotline" services.[51]

- Provide students with easy access to sites that offer information and support related to dating abuse.

Supporting Students Who are Distressed

Student who have been involved in a digital risk situation may need a plan to effectively deal with the emotional trauma.

- Discuss with these students possible sources of strength such as family support, friends, community support, healthy activities, and

counseling.[52] Help the target plan a "next steps" strategy to tap into these sources.

- Make sure the student also knows to report any continuing challenges. Periodically check in with the student to find out how things are going. Also contact the student's teachers to ask them to be attentive to any concerns.

- In any situation where a student has had a nude image distributed, it is essential to predict sexual harassment and have a plan of action to prevent and intervene. This will require ongoing, intensive support of the student depicted.

- Respond to reports of harassment in a manner that is restorative and that also sends a clear message that such harassment will not be tolerated.

- Help this student enlist the help of supportive friends. Speak with the friends of this student to ask them to report to the school if problems continue or the student is showing signs of continuing distress.

Law Enforcement & Mental Health Involvement

Situations involving sexting and other forms of exploitation will often require the involvement of law enforcement. Some incidents of digital aggression meet the criteria for a criminal offense, as will some situations involving threats. The young people who are involved in these situations may often require more significant mental health intervention than is possible to expect in a school setting.

- Ensure a multidisciplinary collaboration involving law enforcement, community mental health, and the schools to intervene in these more challenging situations.

- A Restorative Justice program that works in conjunction with the juvenile justice system can be very helpful vehicle to address sexting and egregious digital aggression situations. If there is currently not a Restorative Justice program in the community, it is strongly recommended that schools provide leadership to encourage the creation of such a program. Information resources on law enforcement-focused restorative practices are available from the U.S. Department of Justice.[53]

Evaluation of Intervention

It is exceptionally important to conduct a post-incident evaluation of every situation to ensure the effectiveness of the intervention efforts.

- Request feedback from all parties involved. In digital aggression situations, this includes the target, target's parents, aggressor, aggressor's

parents, and other students who witnessed and reported.

- Evaluate individual reports to determine need for continued or corrective efforts.
- Conduct an aggregated analysis to inform school/district prevention and intervention efforts.

Embrace Civility in the Digital Age

Embrace Civility in the Digital Age (a program of Center for Safe and Responsible Internet Use) promotes approaches that will best ensure all young people become cyber savvy and that seek to address youth risk in the digital age in a positive and restorative manner.

Web site: http://embracecivility.org

E-mail: info@embracecivility.org

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