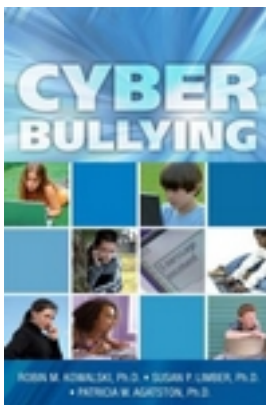


RURD? The Nuances of Cyber Bullying

A review of



Cyber Bullying: Bullying in the Digital Age

by Robin M. Kowalski, Susan P. Limber, and Patricia W. Agatston

Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2008. 218 pp. ISBN

978-1-4051-5991-3 (hardcover); ISBN 978-1-4051-5992-0

(paperback). \$79.95, hardcover; \$27.95, paperback



Reviewed by

[Susan M. Swearer](#)

At the time of writing this review, Lori Drew, the suburban St. Louis mother who allegedly helped create a fictitious person's MySpace account, was indicted on Thursday, May 15, 2008. She convinced her 13-year-old neighbor, Megan Meier, that Megan was chatting with a boy who was interested in her. In October 2006 Megan hung herself after receiving cruel and hurtful messages allegedly from Lori Drew, posing as "Josh." The impact of technology and access to technology has propelled bullying into cyberspace, with often disastrous consequences. The book *Cyber Bullying: Bullying in a Digital Age* is a must-read for anyone who has access to technology, and it is particularly relevant for any parent and educator who works with youth.

RURD (translation: Are you ready)? Are you ready for delving into the world of bullying in the digital age? We have previously conceptualized bullying from a social–ecological perspective (Espelage & Swearer, 2003; Swearer & Doll, 2001; Swearer & Espelage, 2004; Swearer et al., 2006). This perspective necessitates the understanding that bullying affects many contexts: individual, family, peer group, school, community, and society. The digital age has added a new context: cyberspace. In cyberspace, bullying can literally exist on a constant basis.

In May 2007, I facilitated a cyber bullying panel made up of youth ages 9–18 at the Stop Bullying Now summit in Denver, Colorado. What struck me most about the question-and-answer session was that the majority of parents in the audience were shocked by the students' experiences with technology. One advanced-placement biology honors student reported that he sends 3,000 text messages per day (during the school day). Of course, his school does not allow cell phones in the building; however, these students can text on their phones in their pockets, without adults seeing the texting.

All students on the panel reported that their parents pay for their cell phones and their monthly plans, all of which have unlimited text messaging capabilities. Thus, these students reported that they spend the majority of their school day sending text messages, which clearly illustrates that they are not paying attention in school. Students also reported high levels of cyber bullying via text messaging. One student reported that a text message went out to most of the students in her school posting a rumor that was untrue about another student. This student was devastated and humiliated. Parents and adults need to arm themselves with information about technology in order to understand the far-reaching nature of cyber bullying. Parents also need to talk openly with their children about the use of technology.

Bullying among school-aged youth is a common phenomenon, with three out of four students reporting being bullied at some point during their school careers (Hoover, Oliver, & Hazler, 1992). Bullying is commonly defined as intentional aggressive and mean behavior between individuals when there is an imbalance of power, such that the person being bullied has a difficult time defending him- or herself (Olweus, 1993). A recent definition of cyber bullying states that this mode of bullying is also an intentional, mean, and overt act of aggression toward another person online (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004). Thus, cyber bullying includes the same mechanisms as general bullying behaviors; however, the bullying is done via a ubiquitous mechanism—technology.

The foreword of this book, written by John Halligan, is a heart-wrenching reminder of the devastating effects of cyber bullying. Like Megan Meier, John's son Ryan also committed suicide as a result of cyber bullying. Parents often struggle with how much freedom and autonomy to give their adolescent children.

The chapter “What Parents Can Do” provides an excellent roadmap for parents who are trying to figure out how to navigate the digital world with their children. Social networking sites such as MySpace and Facebook are popular forms of communication. Most

students have an e-mail address, and most parents do not monitor their children's use of e-mail and text messaging. Parents typically worry that their children will be “left out” if they don't participate in these networking sites or if they don't have cell phones or computers. Parents are often confused about how much access they should let their children have to computers or cell phones. When students are sending 3,000 texts per day, it is a daunting task to think about how to limit this level of access to cyberspace. Cyberspace is literally “open” all the time, with access 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Bullying is a ubiquitous problem among youth and even adults (i.e., workplace bullying). The proliferation of cell phone and computer usage has propelled bullying into cyberspace, where it can occur continuously. Cyber bullying is a difficult set of behaviors to define. Kowalski, Limber, and Agatston write that “at its core cyber bullying involves bullying through the use of technology such as the Internet and cellular phones” (p. 46). Cyber bullying also includes several forms of communication including instant messaging (a.k.a. “IMing”), e-mail, text messaging, social networking sites, chat rooms, blogs, websites, bash boards, and Internet gaming. With the plethora of electronic communication modalities and 24/7 access to technology, bullying has been propelled into an arena where students and adults are ill equipped to deal with the far-reaching nature of these cruel and negative behaviors.

Parents must be actively involved in their children's electronic communication. If we think about the financial reality behind cyber bullying, the fact is, no child who does not have an independent source of income can purchase a computer or cell phone, or pay for Internet access. Therefore, adults are primarily fiscally responsible for their children's electronic communication. It stands to reason that if adults are the individuals who are paying for children to access technology, then adults must be responsible for monitoring their children's usage of technology. *Cyber Bullying* provides eye-opening and helpful suggestions for helping parents and educators monitor and track students' use of technology.

The importance of adults monitoring the use of technology by children and adolescents cannot be understated. It is vital that parents monitor their children's e-mail usage, MySpace accounts, and cell phone usage. With the proliferation of the use of laptop computers and cell phones, the reality is that many students will have constant access to technology, away from the watchful eyes of parents and teachers. Parents should set up access to their children's accounts so they can be monitored. *Cyber Bullying* provides a very useful roadmap for educators and parents about this phenomenon. While the chapters on what parents and educators can do are very helpful and are written in user-friendly language, the reader has to “sift” through the information to obtain a roadmap for intervention. A good activity for a group of parents and teachers reading *Cyber Bullying* would be to come up with a checklist or outline of the excellent suggestions in the book for parents and teachers.

Cyber Bullying is a vital resource for any adult working with children. The authors define cyber bullying, discuss the research on cyber bullying, provide extremely useful suggestions and guidelines for how to deal with and prevent cyber bullying, and, finally,

include a chapter on laws and policies that address bullying and cyber bullying. As the case of Lori Drew illustrates, cyber bullying has legal ramifications, and individuals who engage in cyber bullying can be prosecuted. We live in a digital age, and all individuals need to take responsibility for using technology responsibly. So, RURD to take the challenge to prevent cyber bullying?

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