Proactive Cyberbullying and Sexting Prevention in Australia and the USA

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Middle and high school students interact via powerful social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat. Social media platforms are sometimes misused, resulting in cyberbullying and sexting that could adversely affect many in the school community. School counsellors, school psychologists, and educators are uniquely positioned to proactively address cyberbullying and sexting in schools with targeted educational and preventative programming. Attention to four facets is recommended: school climate initiatives, policy development and implementation, training in empathy and decision making in the context of online disinhibition, and challenges to use technology positively. Resources for cyberbullying and sexting prevention in Australia and the United States are highlighted.

■ **Keywords:** cyberbullying, sexting, prevention, school counsellors and school psychologists, positive digital citizenship

Facebook was launched in 2004 (Facebook, n.d.), forever changing the landscape of social interaction and paving the way for a host of increasingly sophisticated social media platforms. Current students in schools, the Centennials, born from 1997 onwards (The Futures Company, 2016), grew up with tablets and smartphones as their 'toys', and most have never experienced a world without social media. Online social interactions have the potential for harm when users of information and communications technology (ICT) engage in cyberbullying and sexting. This article examines cyberbullying and sexting in the United States and Australia, and presents prevention and education initiatives and resources from both countries that may be utilised to promote positive digital citizenship by school counsellors, school psychologists, and educators.

Cyberbullying and Sexting: Definitions and Prevalence Rates

Instances of cyberbullying and sexting are frequently reported in the media and have been present in research and educational practice since the start of the 21st century. 'Cyberbullying involves the use of information and communications

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technology (ICT) to intimidate, harass, victimize, or bully an individual or a group of individuals' (Bhat, 2008, p. 53). It involves 'wilful and repeated harm inflicted through the use of computers, cell phones, and other electronic devices' (Hinduja & Patchin, 2015a, p. 11). The *Enhancing Online Safety for Children Act 2015* (Australian Government Federal Register of Legislation, 2015) defines cyberbullying material as material in any form that 'is likely to be intended to have an effect on a particular Australian child', and 'would be likely to have the effect … of seriously threatening, seriously intimidating, seriously harassing or seriously humiliating the Australian child' (5.1.b.ii., p. 7)

Reviewing their research in the United States from 2007 to 2015, spanning nine studies, Patchin and Hinduja (2015) reported a lifetime cyberbullying victimisation rate of 26.3% (range 18.8–34.6%), and a lifetime cyberbullying offending rate of 16.3% (range 11.5–19.4%) among students in middle and high schools. The 2015 High School Youth Risk Behaviour Survey (YRBS) in the United States reported a total prevalence rate of 15.5% for electronic bullying, with a prevalence rate of 21.7% for females and 9.7% for males (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, n.d.). Katz et al. (2014), in a report commissioned by the Australian Department of Communications, provided an estimated prevalence of cyberbullying for Australian youth between the ages of 8–17 of 20% over a 12-month period. Further, they reported that cyberbullying was most prevalent in the 10–15 years age range, which is consistent with international prevalence patterns.

Sexting is defined as 'the sending or receiving of sexually-explicit or sexually suggestive nude or semi-nude images or video via one's cell phone' (Hinduja & Patchin, 2012, p. 80), and also 'the digital recording of nude or sexually suggestive or explicit images and their distribution by mobile phone messaging or through social networking platforms' (Lee, Crofts, McGovern, & Milivojevic, 2015, p. 1). Two types of sexting have been differentiated: sexting conducted between consensual partners in a romantic relationship, and sexting outside of a relationship. Sexting is seen as a normal expression of intimacy and sexuality within a romantic and mutually consensual relationship (Walrave et al., 2015). However, it becomes problematic when it is non-consensual or coercive. Ringrose, Harvey, Gill, and Livingstone, (2013) studied sexting with youth in the United Kingdom and reported gender inequities and double standards. These authors noted that 'teen girls are called upon to produce particular forms of "sexy" self-display, yet face legal repercussions, moral condemnation and "slut shaming" when they do so' (Ringrose et al., 2013, p. 305). However, young males may gain status as a result of having access to such images (Ringrose et al., 2013).

In a study with over 2,000 participants between the ages of 13 to 19 and older in New South Wales, Australia, Lee et al. (2015) reported that two-thirds of the sample had received a sexual image or video (sext), and almost half reported sending a sext of themselves. Lee et al. reported that most sexts were exchanged consensually in relationships and that participants in the 13–15 years age range were most likely to receive sexts. The sending of sexts between consensual partners has the potential to become problematic when it is shared via ICT without consent, leading to negative repercussions.

In the United States, retrospective research with 175 undergraduate students revealed that over half had sent sexts when they were minors, and 28% had sent

photographic sexts (Strohmaier, Murphy, & DeMatteo, 2014). Strohmaier et al. (2014) reported that the majority of participants were not aware of the legal consequences of sexting as a minor. Sexting by minors is a felony or a misdemeanour in many states in the United States, while it is considered child pornography in others. In some instances, minors exchanging sexts have been labelled as sex offenders (Hinduja & Patchin, 2015b). Hinduja and Patchin (2015b) report that 20 states in the United States have sexting laws, while 26 states have enacted revenge porn laws to address situations where sexts exchanged consensually during a relationship are distributed by one of the partners after a relationship ends.

The misuse or ill-advised use of social media resulting in harm to targets via cyberbullying and sexting is continuing, despite the initiatives of school counsellors, psychologists, and educators to address these forms of online victimisation. Thus far, their response has tended to be reactive, usually after an egregious case of victimisation. For many adults, it is challenging to fathom how inextricably embedded social media is in the lives of school students. This article presents prevention strategies for cyberbullying and sexting, and shifts the focus toward teaching students to use social media in positive ways. School counsellors, school psychologists, and educators can be proactive leaders in these efforts.

School Counsellors, School Psychologists, and Educators as Prevention Specialists

School counsellors in the United States are 'certified/licensed educators with a minimum of a master's degree in school counseling, making them uniquely qualified to address all students' academic, career and social/emotional development needs by designing, implementing, evaluating and enhancing a comprehensive school counseling program that promotes and enhances student success' (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], n.d., para 1). In Australia, school counselling is performed by school counsellors and school psychologists, with both professionals having similar but not identical training (Campbell & Colmar, 2014). The term 'guidance officer' is used in some states (e.g., Queensland) to describe teachers who are trained to provide prevention and intervention services to address personal, social, and educational needs of students (Queensland Government Department of Education and Training, 2017). The Australian Psychologists and Counsellors in Schools (APACS, 2017) is the national professional organisation for school psychologists, school counsellors, and guidance officers.

The professional focus of school counselling in Australia and the United States is similar — to address the needs of students in schools with targeted programming and intervention. In the United States, school counsellors in consultation with principals tend to be the professionals charged with leading bullying prevention in schools. However, in Australia, anti-bullying prevention programs are often initiated by principals and led by teachers. For example, the Victoria State Government Department of Education and Training (2014) stipulates that included in the duty of care responsibilities of principals and teachers is the mandate to implement strategies to prevent bullying (para 1).

In recent years, governments, educational organisations, and technology providers are promoting education as the key to help youth navigate the world

of technology safely and ethically. In Australia, the Office of the Children's eSafety Commissioner was instituted by the Australian government as an independent statutory office following the passage of the *Enhancing Online Safety for Children Act 2015* (Australian Government Federal Register of Legislation, 2015). Two primary goals of this office are to 'provide online safety education for Australian children and young people, and a complaints service for young Australians who experience serious cyberbullying . . .' (Australian Government Office of the Children's eSafety Commissioner, n.d., b, para 1).

Legislation on cyberbullying and sexting has been enacted at the state rather than at the federal level in the United States. However, former President Barack Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama addressed the issue of bullying in 2011 by supporting a White House Summit on Bullying Prevention for the first time in the history of the nation (Lee, 2011). In the words of President Obama, the primary goal of the conference was to 'dispel the myth that bullying is just a harmless rite of passage or an inevitable part of growing up' (Lee, 2011, para 1).

The Pew Internet Research Center reported that in the United States, the top three forms of social networking used by teens 13–17 years of age were: Facebook (71%), Instagram (52%), and Snapchat (41%), and 71% of teens reported using more than one social networking site (Lenhart, 2015). Ninety-two percent of teens reported being online daily, and 24% reported being online 'almost constantly' (Lenhart). With youth utilising social media in such large numbers, it is incumbent upon school counsellors, school psychologists, and educators to teach the safe and ethical use of these platforms.

According to the ASCA (2012), school counsellors are educators charged with addressing the needs of all students with interventions that are 'comprehensive in scope, preventive in design, and developmental in nature'. Within school communities, school counsellors are best positioned to lead proactive prevention efforts (Hinduja & Patchin, 2012; Sabella, 2012). Professional school counsellors operating under a comprehensive school counselling model utilise a range of modalities, including large group guidance, small group counselling, parent and staff training, and community liaison (ASCA, 2012). In addition, school counsellors could partner with teachers in areas such as Health, English, Computer Education, and Social Studies to offer curriculum that educates students about the safe and ethical use of technology. They could also partner with mental health agencies within the community who may provide training and workshops. This allows for greater options for prevention initiatives, along with appropriate intervention after incidents of cyberbullying and sexting.

Proactive Prevention and Education Programming

Proactive and targeted preventative and educational programming by school counsellors, school psychologists, and educators could help students avoid some of the pitfalls associated with the misuse of ICT, and help develop positive digital citizenship. A digital citizen is 'a person with the skills and knowledge to effectively use digital technologies to participate in society, communicate with others and create and consume digital content' (Australian Government Office of the Children's eSafety Commissioner, n.d., a, para 2). The three principles of positive

digital citizenship include: (a) engage positively, (b) know your online world, and (c) choose consciously (Australian Government Office of the Children's eSafety Commissioner, n.d., a, para 6). The site provides downloadable lesson plans with video content on YouTube to teach digital citizenship for primary and secondary school students that could be valuable additions to prevention programming in schools.

Based on a review of existing programs and literature, the author recommends attention to four facets in cyberbullying and sexting prevention work: (a) school climate initiatives, (b) policy development and implementation, (c) training on empathy and decision making in the context of online disinhibition (Suler, 2004), and (d) promoting the positive uses of technology. Training should address actions to be taken by students in each of the four roles (Bhat, Chang, & Ragan, 2013) present in cyberbullying and some sexting incidents:

- initiating cyberbully or sexter — that is, a student who may share words or photographs via technology to shame, hurt, humiliate, or embarrass a target or victim;
- secondary cyberbully — that is, a person who exacerbates cyberbullying and sexting by sharing messages or photographs sent to him or her by an initiating cyberbully or sexter;
- bystander or observer — that is, those who are not directly involved but are aware that victimisation via technology is taking place;
- target or victim of cyberbullying or sexting — that is, the person who is directly hurt or adversely affected by the cyberbullying or spread of explicit messages or photographs (Bhat et al., 2013).

The Australian film *Tagged*, available with lesson plans, is an excellent resource to address cyberbullying roles and associated behaviours (Australian Government Office of the Children's eSafety Commissioner, n.d., d). Students should understand the importance of reaching out to adults for help in cyberbullying and sexting cases, and adults in turn should know how to proceed. School staff, parents, and students are likely to benefit from the detailed instructions provided on how to report cyberbullying or sexting to the safety centres of various social media services (Australian Government Office of the Children's eSafety Commissioner, n.d., e).

School Climate Initiatives

According to the National School Climate Center (NSCC) in New York, school climate refers to 'the quality and character of school life as it relates to norms and values, interpersonal relations and social interactions, and organizational processes and structures' (NSCC, 2017, para 1). Positive school climates have been linked in research studies to markers of student success such as higher achievement, lower dropout rates, and lower incidences of violence (NSCC, para 2). Support for school climate initiatives must come from the highest level within the district (Hinduja & Patchin, 2012). It is vital to have a strong message sent to all constituents about the importance of school climate from superintendents, principals, and administrators. School counsellors and school psychologists can build support for

school climate initiatives by sharing research on school success outcomes related to positive school climates with relevant stakeholders within the school and the community.

Voight, Austin, and Hanson (2013) conducted a key study demonstrating the importance of school climate. Using data from approximately 1,700 middle and high schools provided in the California Healthy Kids Survey, Voight et al. (2013) identified 40 schools that were performing better academically than expected based on their demographic characteristics. The authors named these schools 'Breaking the Odds Schools' (BTOs), reporting that school climate in these schools was significantly higher (average of 82nd percentile) compared to all other schools (average of 49th percentile). With this robust support for the importance of school climate, Voight et al. concluded that factors such as 'high expectations for students, caring relationships between teachers and students, and feeling safe at school are more associated with success than teacher or administrator experience or student support staff ratios' (p. 27).

In schools with positive school climates, the incidence of interpersonal aggression, including cyberbullying and victimisation via sexting, is likely to be lower than in schools with negative school climates. Ferráns and Selman (2014) identified three types of school climates: negligent, authoritarian, and cohesive. In schools that have a cohesive climate, students are more likely to be upstanders or those who intervene when they see bullying or teasing that is hurtful. Such schools are less likely to have norms of 'mind your own business' or 'no snitching' (p. 184), but rather have a sense of connection and caring among members.

In the state of Victoria, the Department of Education and Training program *Bully Stoppers* (2017) is a whole-school initiative to enhance school climate by supporting 'students, parents, teachers and principals in working together to make sure schools are safe and supportive places, where everyone is empowered to help reduce the incidence of bullying . . . ' (para 2). Programs such as *Bully Stoppers* are founded on the belief that an integrated strategy that includes prevention and response is needed. Specific strategies suggested in *Bully Stoppers* (Victoria State Government Department of Education and Training, 2013) include:

- promoting respectful relationships;
- creating a culture of inclusion and rewarding students who demonstrate respect;
- careful monitoring for safety in all school spaces inside and outside the classroom;
- training staff in bullying prevention so that they model respect and inclusion.

Policy Development and Implementation

Thoughtful and well-developed policies that inform the school community of appropriate and inappropriate uses of ICT and the repercussions for inappropriate use can be an essential tool for prevention of cyberbullying and sexting (Stopbullying.gov, n.d., a). Policies should be widely available to students, staff and parents, and should be discussed and updated regularly. The absence of clear policies results in school communities who are unsure of how to proceed in instances of cyberbullying or sexting. Willard (2012) provides a checklist for policy development, advocating for the inclusion of items such: (a) bullying that takes place online,

whether on or off campus, or during extracurricular activities; (b) bullying and cyberbullying that cause 'substantial disruption', with a definition of this term; (c) a personal digital device search and seizure policy; and (d) clear guidelines on taking pictures or videos at school or of schoolmates (p. 54).

Increasingly, laws in the United States are being enacted at the state level, requiring schools to have anti-bullying and anti-cyberbullying policies in place that incorporate elements such as: (a) clear definitions, (b) procedures to report, (c) procedures to investigate and respond, (d) written records, (e) sanctions and consequences, and (f) referrals for affected students for counselling and other services (Stopbullying.gov, n.d., b). An overview of legislation and policies in Australia is available to guide schools wishing to update or create policies to address cyberbullying and sexting (Australian Government Office of the Children's eSafety Commissioner (n.d., c). To maximise effectiveness, policies must be implemented uniformly and students must know that consequences are consistently enforced.

Empathy and Decision-Making Training in the Context of Online Disinhibition

Many programs available to teach empathy and decision making in schools focus on face-to-face interactions. However, it is crucial to teach these concepts in the context of online disinhibition, which is the propensity to say and do things online that one would hesitate to do in person. Suler (2004, p. 321) postulated two types of online disinhibition — benign online disinhibition that encourages people to express positive and kind thoughts more readily online, and toxic online disinhibition that leads to people to be more cruel or hurtful online that they would be in person. Prevention work could include: (a) a discussion of how online disinhibition might have contributed to cases of cyberbullying or sexting reported in the media, and (b) incorporation of assessments such as the Online Disinhibition Scale (Udris, 2014) into training programs with students. This type of work could help students become more aware of how online disinhibition could influence online behaviours in detrimental or harmful ways.

A closely related factor is decision making in children and adolescents, which is linked to maturation and brain development. Research indicates that the adolescent brain's socioemotional reward system may make it more sensitised to peer-related stimuli rewarding risky behaviours at a time period when the cognitive control system is still maturing (Albert, Chein, & Steinberg, 2013, p. 114). This aspect of brain development helps to explain many online risky behaviours that youth engage in with their peers. Prevention efforts could utilise reports of cyberbullying and sexting in the media to help process alternative decisions that could have been made. Strategies to help students slow down the decision-making process and consider all possible consequences of actions could be beneficial.

Promoting the Positive Uses of Technology

Much of the focus on ICT in schools has been on educating and informing students on what not to do. Shifting the focus to celebrating and encouraging the positive aspects of ICT, including positive uses of social media, would be beneficial. Highlighting the accomplishments of young technology inventors working to combat the harmful uses of ICT could inspire youth to engage in solutions to problems they may face. For example, at the age of 13, Trisha Prabhu, a student

in the United States, was saddened by the suicide of a young target of cyberbullying and sexting. This led to her creating ReThink, a free 'app' that identifies words commonly used to cyberbully and alerts users to think before they proceed with posting a hurtful message (Trisha Prabhu, 2016). Youth in schools may be inspired by Trisha's story and the fame she has garnered since inventing ReThink. School counsellors, psychologists, and educators could utilise ideas, lessons plans, and projects found in resources such as the Random Acts of Kindness Foundation (2016) and Greater Good Science Center (2016) with their core themes of gratitude, altruism, compassion, empathy, and forgiveness, to harness social media to encourage and publicise kind, positive, and community-building actions in students.

Conclusion

Our youth will continue to utilise social media and other forms of ICT in increasingly sophisticated ways. School counsellors, school psychologists, and educators can provide a firm ethical foundation with targeted prevention and media literacy initiatives (Bhat, Chang, & Linscott, 2010). As Wang and Edwards (2016) reported, 'online engagement through social media can be positive and constructive for young people. It appears to provide them with a challenging "space" to practice identity and relationship management strategies' (p. 1). School counsellors, school psychologists, educators, administrators, parents, and peers can all collaborate towards the goal of creating positive digital citizens who use social media and other forms of ICT in prosocial ways.

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