



From the Schoolyard to Your Yard: Cyber-bullying Brings Victimization Home

by Jamie Lee Peterson, MA

Body weight is now one of the most common reasons youth are bullied, however, victimization of overweight youth continues to be overlooked in media, research and policy discussions.

According to a recent survey, **41 percent** of high school students perceived body weight as the primary reason for teasing and bullying (followed by 38 percent for sexual orientation). In fact, more than three quarters of the students surveyed reported seeing overweight students being made fun of, called names, teased in a mean way or teased during physical activity at school.

The consequences of weight-based teasing and bullying are numerous and can be severe. Overweight youth who are teased and bullied are vulnerable to social, psychological, emotional and physical health impairments. Examples include:

- Increased risk of depression and anxiety
- Negative body image
- Suicidal thoughts
- Avoiding gym class
- Skipping school
- Academic impairment
- Unhealthy weight control
- Binge-eating behaviors
- Reduced physical activity
- Increased body mass index (BMI)

While this research has improved our understanding of weight-related victimization, much less is known about weight-related cyber-bullying, which has emerged in recent years and leads to devastating outcomes for youth.

Cyber-Bullying: Virtual Victimization

Cyber-bullying may be defined as the deliberate, attempted injury or discomfort of another person through electronic means. For adolescents, estimates of cyber victims range from 4-72 percent.

Cyber-bullying assumes a number of different forms including threats, insults, gossip, rumors, impersonation, hacking into other people's accounts or spreading someone else's private or personal information without consent. Peers are not the only perpetrators. In fact, youth report being bullied by adults and siblings, and 48 to 79 percent have been bullied by strangers or individuals they have never met in person.

Its anonymity sets cyber-bullying apart from more "traditional" victimization, but cyber-bullying is especially harmful because it reaches beyond the schoolyard and can potentially happen at any time. The majority (85 percent) of cyber-bullying occurs at home, but these experiences may also affect children at school. Perhaps especially concerning, parents are largely unaware of their children's roles as cyber-bullies or victims.

Youth who are cyber-bullied may be especially vulnerable to consequences that differ from more "traditional" forms of bullying. These include weapon-carrying at school, low caregiver-adolescent connectedness, headaches, sleeping difficulties, sexual solicitation, social anxiety and suicidal thoughts and behaviors. However, it is unclear if these problems instigate or result from the cyber-bullying.

Cyber-bullying and Body Weight

As of yet, little research has examined cyber-bullying specifically toward children affected by obesity. What is known is that higher BMI is associated with involvement in more "traditional" forms of bullying, which is related to a higher likelihood of cyber-bullying. Given the high rates of youth who report witnessing and experiencing weight-based teasing, it is likely that many children affected by obesity are victims of cyber-bullying.

Devastating stories of two girls who hung themselves have recently circulated in the media. Megan, a 13-year-

THE FACTS:

There are many opportunities for overweight youth to be cyber-bullied. Teens use the Internet and send/receive text messages significantly more than any other age group, with 93 percent using the Internet and 73 percent using social networking Web sites – most often Facebook and MySpace.

Three-fourths of teens own a cell phone, and on average, teens send/receive 2,539-4,050 texts per month. This is concerning given that the Internet and cell phones are the primary places where cyber-bullying occurs.

Strategies for Parents

Monitoring - Cyber bullies and victims spend more time on computers and report less monitoring than youth who are not involved in cyber-bullying. Regulate the time and access your child has to the Internet. Set boundaries on usage and the types of Web sites or services your child is allowed to visit.

Familiarizing - Parents should try to understand cyber media and Internet safety. Share this information with your child to help them understand potential dangers.

Accountability - Ask your child about Web sites, activities and communications he/she accesses. Set-up your own pages to understand these sites and keep your child accountable.

Communication - It is estimated nine out of 10 children do not tell their parents or an adult when something mean or hurtful happens to them online. Some youth are afraid that they will lose their Internet or phone privileges, or that the bullying will get worse. To keep the dialogue open, make sure that your child knows that you are there to help.

Education - Work with schools to provide education about privacy and safety on the Web, or media literacy programs to teach youth how to be more intelligent, critical consumers of Web-based services and information.

Policy - Support policies that protect children online, recognize bullying and cyber-bullying as valid forms of harassment, and identify body weight as a protected social category.

If your child has been a victim of cyber-bullying:

- Comfort your child, do not blame them.
- Record the details of the encounter.
- Form a plan to avoid future occurrences.
- If the problem escalates, safety is threatened, or it does not stop, legal action may be necessary.

old Missouri girl who struggled with her weight, experienced cyber-bullying on MySpace and was called “fat” and “slut” by someone posing as another person. Celina, an 11-year-old Florida girl, experienced cyber-bullying via text messages from classmates who jeered at her weight and race.

Unfortunately, this may not be on the radar of many schools. While most schools have anti-bullying policies (which often include provisions on cyber-bullying), body weight is rarely discussed as a common reason why children are teased. Currently, 47 states have passed school-based anti-bullying laws. Of these, 21 laws list characteristics of students that are vulnerable to bullying such as race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, academic status, mental, physical, developmental or sensory disability, or other aspects of physical appearance. Only two existing laws include body weight as a characteristic vulnerable to bullying. This is unacceptable. Clearly, more awareness and education about weight-based bullying is needed to ensure that these students are adequately protected and can feel safe at school.

Equally important is to ensure that weight-based cyber-bullying is on the radar of parents. Parents can be powerful change-agents in bringing this issue to the attention of schools, and especially to help protect their own children from becoming victims of cyber-bullying. Parents can also communicate the following messages to their children to help prevent cyber-bullying, and to react appropriately if it occurs:

Prevention:

- Never share or post your private/personal information (name, address, phone number).
- Do not share your passwords with anyone, not even friends.
- When you see a picture, Email or message that may be hurtful, embarrassing or cruel, delete it – do not forward it.

Reaction:

- If you are the victim of cyber-bullying, do not retaliate.
- Record the message and details as best as you can.
- Then, delete it, block the bully, sign-off or exit the Web site and tell an adult.

About the Author:

Jamie Lee Peterson, MA, is a research associate at the Rudd Center for Food Policy & Obesity at Yale University. She works on the weight stigma team led by Rebecca Puhl, PhD, and conducts research aimed at reducing weight bias and weight-related victimization.

Resources:

1. *Safety, security, and privacy for:*
 - Facebook: www.facebook.com/help/safety
 - MySpace: www.myspace.com/help/safety
 - IM, chat rooms, e-mail: criminaljustice.state.ny.us/missing/i_safety/im_chatrooms.htm
2. *Operation Safe Surf (for parents, educators, youth):* www.attorneygeneral.gov/kidsparents.aspx?id=2323
3. *MTV Campaign to help youth identify, respond to, and stop digital abuse:* www.athinline.org
4. *Cyber-bullying: What Parents should Know:* www.aboutourkids.org/articles/cyberbullying_what_parents_should_know
5. *Anti-bullying websites/curriculum:* yaleruddcenter.org/what_we_do.aspx?id=195
6. *Weight bias/stigma:* yaleruddcenter.org/what_we_do.aspx?id=10



ABOUT THE OBESITY ACTION COALITION (OAC)

The Obesity Action Coalition (OAC) is a National non-profit organization dedicated to giving a voice to individuals affected by obesity and helping them along their journey toward better health. Our core focuses are to elevate the conversation of weight and its impact on health, improve access to obesity care, provide science-based education on obesity and its treatments, and fight to eliminate weight bias and discrimination.



VIBRANT COMMUNITY



NATIONAL AWARENESS CAMPAIGNS



ANNUAL CONVENTION



ADVOCACY



PUBLIC EDUCATION

LEARN, CONNECT, ENGAGE

The OAC knows that the journey with weight can be challenging but we also know that great things happen when we learn, connect and engage. That is why the OAC Community exists. Our Community is designed to provide quality education, ongoing support programs, an opportunity to connect, and a place to take action on important issues.

Through the OAC Community, you can get access to:

- Weight & Health Education • Community Blogs
 - Community Discussion Forum
 - Ongoing Support • Meaningful Connections
- AND MUCH MORE**



JOIN TODAY: GO TO OBESITYACTION.ORG/JOIN

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