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2-23-2015

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Wilfrid Laurier University (2015). Do Cyberbullies Really Want to Hurt Others? Retrieved from: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/clearlanguage>

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Do cyberbullies really want to hurt others?

What is this research about?

This research is about online aggression and cyberbullying. Cyberbullying can be defined as using technology to intentionally inflict harm on someone else. Cyberbullying can occur through various social media applications, including Facebook, email, blogs, and cellphone texting. Attacks can be public or private.

As teenagers are the largest consumers and producers of social media communication and the time when bullying behaviours among young people peak, they are the focus on this research.

The researchers sought to understand the underlying motivations behind cyberbullying behaviours and how the relationships teens have with their parents protect them from online dangers and irresponsible use.

What did the researchers do?

Danielle Law, a faculty member at Laurier's Youth and Children's Studies and Psychology programs and her collaborators administered surveys to over 733 teens between age 10 and 18 years of age. This survey included questions on internet use, cyberbullying, cyber victimization, and motivations for engaging in cyberbullying. Additionally, they interviewed a subset of 15 teenagers to gain a deeper understanding of cyberbullying. The purpose of their work was to examine whether teens were engaging in aggressive behaviours online to intentionally harm others (proactive reasons) or whether their hurtful acts were more retaliatory (reactive reasons).

What you need to know:

Cyberbullying occurs when computer and mobile technologies are used to intentionally harm others. When communicating online there are two basic motivations for online aggression: whether they are posting mean things with intention to harm, or whether they are engaging in these behaviours to defend themselves.

This research found that the majority of teenagers are not intentionally mean; rather, they are navigating a world of miscommunication that lends itself to retaliation that spirals out of control in aggressive ways. When educating teens about cyberbullying it is important to understand their reasons for engaging because how we respond to someone who is deliberate in their attacks is completely different from how we respond to someone who is hurtful because they are defending themselves.

How can you use this research?

- **Educators** can use this research to shape cyberbullying intervention and prevention programs.
- **Teenagers** can use this research to be more informed on what to do if they see or experience cyberbullying.
- **Parents** can use this research to guide how they talk to their kids about cyberbullying.
- **Teachers and administrators** can use this research to help teach students and create policies about responsible internet use.

What did the researchers find?

Overall, this work found that the majority of teenagers do not want to hurt others. While 64% of youth admitted to sending mean messages and/or embarrassing photos about others online and 12% said they engaged in actively creating hostile websites to harm others, most teenagers feel they are doing so to defend themselves from *perceived* attack.

In other words, the researchers found that those who engaged in posting mean messages or embarrassing photos were doing so because they felt they had been wronged in some way and felt it was necessary to retaliate. In doing so, their retaliatory efforts inflicted harm on the initial sender, who then felt it important to retaliate in return – and so the cycle continues. In these cases, both participants are behaving as both a “bully” and a “victim” and they believe their aggressive actions are justified because they are defending themselves. Of critical import are the 12% of aggressors who actively create websites to harm others. This research found that those who participated in this kind of aggression were doing so in order to deliberately and maliciously harm someone else. The distinction behind *why* teenagers engage in aggressive behaviours is important as it has implications for how to teach them to deal with the problem. How we support teenagers who feel they have been harmed and must retaliate is very different from the support we must give to someone who feels it is necessary to be malicious. There is no one size fits all solution.

Keywords:

Aggression, bullying, cyberbullying, electronic aggression, online, Internet.

About the researchers:

Danielle M. Law is an Assistant Professor in Youth and Children's Studies and Psychology at Laurier Brantford. Jennifer D. Shapka and Monique H. Gagné are in the Department of Education and Counselling Psychology and Special Education at the University of British Columbia. José F. Domene is in the Faculty of Education at the University of New Brunswick.

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Article citation:

Law, Danielle M., Shapka, J.D., Domene, J.F. and M.H. Gagné (2012). Are Cyberbullies really bullies? An investigation of reactive and proactive online aggression. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 28, 2, 664-672.
doi: 10.1016/j.chb.2011.11.013.

Cite this work:

Wilfrid Laurier University (2015). Do Cyber bullies Really Want to Hurt Others?
Retrieved from: scholars.wlu.ca/clearlanguage

This summary is part of a project between the **Knowledge Mobilization Unit** and **Scholars Commons** at Wilfrid Laurier University, and the **Knowledge Mobilization Unit at York University**.

Laurier promotes the use of knowledge mobilization to maximize the impact of Laurier research on professional practice, public policy, and community engagement. Written by S. Reibling.

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