



WHITEPAPER

Cyberbullying and Social Media

A White Paper for School Leaders and Teachers:
What is the best approach to addressing cyberbullying in today's
rapidly changing social media landscape?

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Introduction

This White Paper looks at the different approaches to addressing cyberbullying on social media, and analyses the pros and cons of each approach.

Cyberbullying through social media platforms is a huge issue for the education sector. By High School virtually every student has access to a smartphone, with real-time recording and uploading capabilities. A silly, embarrassing or humiliating moment in time can be captured and shared throughout a school cohort in a matter of minutes. Equally, an individual can be almost continually harassed in a variety of ways across multiple social media sites. With 45% of teens reporting they are online “almost constantly” it can be difficult to escape the school bully. And when taunts now include “well, why don’t you kill yourself then”, this can escalate the stakes.

The rise of BYOD and 1:1 programs provide opportunities for educators to utilise social media platforms for student engagement, with connection to valuable teaching resources. Social media can be a powerful way to promote a message, test a concept, or share stories with a like-minded community. However, school leaders are understandably concerned about students being exposed to the less positive aspects of social media. Student wellbeing is a major concern in many schools, with cyberbullying having a negative impact on student engagement in school life.

Managing this dichotomy is not easy, and schools are in the unenviable position of having to balance student privacy with duty of care. With increasing teacher resource tied up in dealing with social media fallout, including cyber bullying, schools need to consider the whole environment.



What form does ‘cyberbullying’ take on social media?

The US National Crime Prevention Council defines ‘Cyberbullying’ as: “Using the Internet, cell phones, video game systems, or other technology to send or post text or images intended to hurt or embarrass another person.”

When applied to social media it can include such activities as:

- Posting negative comments on pictures, or abusive posts on a user’s wall.
- Using pictures or videos to make fun of another user, posting pictures of victims without their consent.
- Using social media to stalk.
- Hacking an account or fraudulently making posts as though another wrote them, pretending to be other people online.
- Spreading lies and rumors about victims.
- Tricking people into revealing personal information or send sexualised content.
- Sending or forwarding mean text messages.

Many of the acts of bullying on social media are similar to what they would be in a physical situation, but online there is no escape and bullying can be almost constant. Not only does it go on after school has finished, it then carries through into the next day and the cycle continues. The reach and amplification of social media means content can “go viral” and spread very quickly, with devastating consequences for the victim. With mobile technology so freely available it is an ongoing issue and one that is relentless.

Studies have shown that victims of cyberbullying are at a greater risk than non-victims of both self-harm and suicidal behaviors. With schools having a duty of care for their students, cyberbullying cannot be brushed under the carpet.

Every school must have a strategy for dealing with cyberbullying. This can take different forms, including:

1. A complete ban on social media.
2. Monitoring of all interactions on social media.
3. Unmonitored use of social media, with channels to seek help and an emphasis on educating students as to what is and is not appropriate use of these platforms.

These three approaches are compared in more detail below.

A Ban on Social Media

Many schools ban the use of smartphones at school. This can be logistically challenging, with the school office or individual teachers physically locking away devices, or confiscating them when viewed on school grounds. Some parents also like to be able to contact their child, and there may be resistance to enforcing a complete ban.

Some schools attempt to ban all social media sites, blocking them entirely on school networks. With more students able to bypass school internet filtering by downloading a VPN app to their device, or by using their own data, this can have limited effectiveness. The schools that take this approach cite these advantages:

Pros

- **Reduces distraction:** avoids students going off-task whilst completing an activity on social media.
- **Prevents improper use:** from posting inappropriate images to uploading videos of teachers, other students or school fights.
- **Encourages human interaction:** avoids students relying increasingly on social media to interact with each other and their teachers.
- **Keeps children safe:** protects students from online predators and scams.
- **Use of safe alternatives:** schools can use private forums to allow students to collaborate, post questions and share work with teachers, parents, the community or outside experts negating the need for social media.
- **Resourcing:** staff hours are not wasted dealing with social media and cyberbullying issues.
- **Bandwidth:** reduces pressure on bandwidth and avoids jeopardising 'genuine' online learning opportunities.

Cons

- Under a social media ban by the school, the cyberbullying will be taking place in an environment where the school has no control or visibility.
- Students could potentially be less likely to come forward to report cyberbullying due to fear of breaking school rules having accessed social media themselves.
- Students will be unable to take part in many education activities that are social media-based.
- Teachers will not be able to take advantage of critical incidents and poor choices to discuss and model digital citizenship. It is a risk for children to learn to drive but it is something that they need to do; some educators believe this to be the case with social media.
- On distraction, teachers counter that it is their responsibility, not that of IT Staff or administrators, to keep students on-task and that online behaviour should be as much their realm as regular classroom behaviour. All teachers and students should not be 'punished' by a blanket policy which assumes wrong doing.

Round Up

In theory, a ban on smartphones at school or a blanket ban on social media looks like it removes any associated issues altogether. However, enforcement is challenging. With more students able to bypass school internet filtering by downloading a VPN app to their device, or by using their own data, a complete ban policy can have limited effectiveness.

Monitoring Social Media

Some schools and districts have taken the approach of monitoring social media for certain at-risk keywords. The school then conducts routine monitoring for purposes of prevention or early intervention in potential issues where students could be at risk to themselves or to others. Many schools have gone down this route following incidents of harm including student suicide following cyberbullying on social media. There are some privacy concerns around this type of monitoring, but for some schools duty of care outweighs a student's right to privacy if school internet policies are not being adhered to.

Pros

- **Safety:** offers a layer of protection to student and staff if threats are made, allowing for prevention and intervention.
- **Cyberbullying:** allows victims to better prove cases of cyberbullying, rather than the onus being on themselves to collate evidence.
- **Wellbeing:** can identify students who are considering self-harm and allow a school to take measures to find them help and support.
- Some schools say that it is no different to searching a school bag or locker. The monitoring software searches public posts so the information is out there anyway.

Cons

- **Resourcing:** social media monitoring requires school resources; schools might use these services to avoid paying for digital citizenship and preventative programmes to stop cyberbullying before it happens.
- **Ethics:** it is somewhat of a grey area around a school's authority to access its students' social-media accounts.
- **Privacy issues:** students and parents may question what the school is going to do with the information. Once a school has received a notification that there might be something that needs investigating, who decides if it is serious enough to warrant action and how will they proceed?
- **Freedom of speech:** many isolated students find acceptance and support through online communities such as LGBT students. They may be less likely to access such support where they know that their social media activity is being monitored.
- **Role of parents:** many parents feel that this type of monitoring is their responsibility.
- **Students will 'go underground':** this may mean using anonymous accounts, having other devices or setting everything to private. This will make it even harder for schools and parents to keep up.
- **Interpretation:** children may exaggerate, make an ill-informed but innocent contribution online or may be venting rather than seriously threatening to blow up the school, for example.

Educate students about how to use social media and respond to cyberbullying

Many schools are adopting an educational approach to countering cyberbullying with increasing calls globally for this to become part of the curriculum. The programs vary and cover wider issues than cyberbullying. Ultimately, they all aim to build emotional resilience in students and to help them develop the know-how to navigate technology and social media in a way that is safe and positive

Pros

- **Wider reach than monitoring software:** by encouraging and empowering students to come forward with concerns, schools have many more people on the lookout for trouble.
- **Tackles more than cyberbullying:** digital citizenship programs develop empowerment and emotional resilience skills that can counter face-to-face bullying and the many trials and tribulations that students will meet in the course of life.
- **Preparation for real life:** students operate in a largely non-filtered, open access school environment akin to what they will meet in the ‘real world.’”

Cons

- Lack of evidence-based guidance on digital citizenship programs.
- **Investment:** it will require staff time and resource in establishing a meaningful digital citizenship program.
- **Legal requirement:** many countries do have a legal requirement that some websites are filtered (CIPA in the USA calls for child pornography, obscene images and visual depictions that are harmful to minors to be blocked) Schools must still invest in filtering software in addition to the digital citizenship program.



Summary

Cyberbullying is a new incarnation of social and behavioural issues that have existed from the dawn of civilisation. Society has always addressed these issues through a shared consensus around expected and acceptable behavioural standards in social situations. Throughout history the solution has always been to educate members of society to behave in a civil manner by upholding these standards and addressing individual behaviour through reward (social acceptance) and feedback (education through conversation).

This shift of bullying to the online world requires the same educational approach, by setting and agreeing standards, modelling expected behaviour and calling those who transgress to account. From this perspective the challenge is still an educational one, not a technological one.

Digital Citizenship programs are increasingly seen as a major part of the solution for victims of cyberbullying. However, a network management system should be used in conjunction with the Digital Citizenship approach. The system should block the worst of the internet, empower teachers to easily decide what is and is not appropriate for their own classes, and give the school visibility over what students are doing online including on social media to create opportunities for evidence-based discussion of inappropriate behaviour.

Rather than use the network management system to monitor social media, the school should rely on the development of an open culture through its digital citizenship program. This will encourage students themselves to come forward about issues occurring in the students' own worlds on social media, rather than using a Big Brother approach that may force them further under the radar.

Thinking a monitoring system is the solution does not address the underlying issue. When monitored, cyberbullies will just invent new and creative ways to operate under the radar. Schools are best to proceed as they always have, teaching students what acceptable behaviour is and calling those who transgress to account whilst supporting victims and their families with compassion.

About us

Linewize is a Family Zone company, with a shared vision of keeping students safe online on any device, any time.

Learn more

Visit us www.linewize.com, email us at info@linewize.com, or call us +64 (0) 3 668 1218

Sources:

45% of teens online "almost constantly":

http://www.pewinternet.org/2018/05/31/teens-social-media-technology-2018/pi_2018-05-31_teenstech_0-05/

Cyberbullying FAQs for teens:

<https://www.ncpc.org/resources/cyberbullying/cyberbullying-faq-for-teens/>

Self-Harm, Suicidal Behaviours, and Cyberbullying in Children and Young People: Systematic Review:

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/29674305>

Addicted to Social Media?

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/intl/blog/in-excess/201805/addicted-social-media>



ABOUT US

Family Zone is passionate about making student internet management easy. We help school teachers ensure that student internet use is constructive and education focussed. Our tools work with existing networks to create an online environment that respects student agency whilst highlighting inappropriate use.

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