Middle School Lesson

Dealing with the Social Pressures that Promote Online Cruelty

Rationale

The purpose of this lesson is to increase awareness among middle school students about the problem of cyberbullying and provide them with strategies to deal effectively with the social pressure that encourages them to participate in online cruelty. After hearing the true story of a target of cyberbullying, students explore the nature and extent of the problem in their own lives. Through a public service announcement and case studies, students consider why cruelty is so common in an online forum and use this insight to build empathy, explore personal motivations and devise positive alternatives for online communication.

[**NOTE:** This lesson focuses only on the ways in which children communicate with peers online. It is not intended to be a comprehensive approach to digital safety, which should address topics such as predatory behavior, privacy and the safeguarding of identity. For resources on these broader issues, consult the organizations listed in Cyberbullying Resources.]

Objectives

- Students will increase their awareness of the problem of cyberbullying.
- Students will consider what motivates young people to participate in online cruelty.
- Students will increase their empathy for others.
- Students will develop strategies for resisting peer pressure and communicating in positive ways online.

Age Range

Grades 5–9

Time

Approximately 90 minutes or two class periods

Requirements

Handouts and Resources:
- *Welcome to the Web Site that Makes Fun of Dave* (one for teacher use)
- *Understanding and Addressing Online Cruelty* (one for teacher reference)
- *Cyberbullying Scenarios* (one scenario for each small group)
- *Navigating a Digital World: Tips for Youth* (one for each student)

Other Material:
- Talent Show and Kitchen public service announcements (video clips)
- Chart paper, markers and other colorful writing implements
- WiFi, internet, computer, screen or LCD projector, speakers

Advanced Preparation

- Reproduce handouts as directed above.
- Prepare computer/LCD projector for viewing of cyberbullying PSAs (see Part I #3).
- Write the following at the top of a sheet of chart paper: "If you wouldn't say it in person, why say it online?" (see Part I #4).

Key Words
Brainstorming
Case study
Cooperative group work
Critical thinking
Forming opinions
Large and small group
Discussion
Media literacy

➲   Cut the *Cyberbullying Scenarios* into strips, one for each small group (see Part II #1).
➲   Write the following in the center of a sheet of chart paper: "Class Code of Ethics for Digital Communication" (see Part II #4).

Techniques and Skills

brainstorming, case study, cooperative group work, critical thinking, forming opinions, large and small group discussion, media literacy

Procedures

Part I: Exploring the Nature and Extent of Cyberbullying (35–45 minutes)

1.   Tell students that you are going to share an incident that happened to a real teenager named David in the recent past. Ask them to close their eyes as they listen, and to imagine that they are a student at David's school. Read aloud from the handout, *Welcome to the Web Site that Makes Fun of Dave*, then discuss the following:

     •   How did it make you feel to hear about this incident?
     •   What do you think motivated the students who created the Web site?
     •   What about those who added comments or e-mails and those who chose not to tell anyone about what was taking place?
     •   What would you have done if you received a link to the Web site or a message inviting you to visit and join in?

2.   Ask students to consider if cyberbullying, or online cruelty, is a common occurrence in their lives. Direct them to form a human continuum, standing to one side of the room if they feel it is extremely common, the other side if it is rare, or somewhere in-between that reflects their experience. Ask for volunteers at different points in the continuum to explain why they chose their position. Solicit specific examples from them, making sure that they respect the confidentiality of others and avoid stories that will offend or embarrass their peers. Have students return to their seats.

3.   Play one or both of the following public service announcements, which were created by the National Crime Prevention Council for its cyberbullying prevention campaign.

     •   Talent Show (video clip, 50 seconds)
     •   Kitchen (video clip, 50 seconds)

4.   Post a sheet of chart paper with the following question at the top, which appears at the end of each PSA: "If you wouldn't say it in person, why say it online?" Challenge students to articulate why cruelty is so common in an online environment and list their responses. (Consult the reference sheet, *Understanding and Addressing Online Cruelty*, and add some of these examples to the chart if students don't address them.)

Part II: Identifying Strategies for Positive Online Communication (45 minutes)

1.   Divide the class into small groups of 3–4 students. Assign each group one of the situations from *Cyberbullying Scenarios* or provide other scenarios that relate to your students' particular experience. Instruct each group to do the following, allowing about 15 minutes to complete the tasks:

     a.   Identify the reasons or motivations for the cyberbullying, drawing from the chart created in step #4 above.

     b.   Discuss the impact of the cyberbullying on all of the students involved and the potential consequences of the negative behavior.

     c.   Discuss alternatives to the negative behavior described, and rewrite the scenario to incorporate more positive conduct. (For example, the scenario describing a student who participated in cyberbullying to fit in with the popular crowd might be rewritten to depict the same student reporting the cyberbullying and looking for friendship in other circles.)

2.   Reconvene the class and have each group share its work. Reinforce positive strategies for dealing with the pressures that induce young people to participate in cyberbullying, drawing from the reference sheet, *Understanding and Addressing Online Cruelty*, where appropriate.

3. Conclude the lesson by suggesting that the most important way to deal with the impulse to participate in online cruelty is to reflect on the kind of person we want to be and the personal values that guide our behavior toward others. Ask students to think of one statement that reflects their values regarding conduct toward others online. Share one or more of the following examples if necessary and allow a few minutes for students to silently reflect and come up with their statements.

   Examples:

   • Always use respectful language.
   • Protect your own and others' safety.
   • Value all people and never put down others.
   • Respect privacy and avoid gossip/rumors.
   • Include others in online communities.
   • A person with feelings is on the other end of every click.

4. While students are thinking, post a sheet of chart paper and write the following in the center: "Class Code of Ethics for Digital Communication." As students are ready, invite them to write their statements "graffiti style" on the chart paper (have a variety of markers, paint pens, etc. on hand). Ask for some volunteers to read their statements aloud. Hang the chart in a visible area as an ongoing reminder of the expectations set forth during this lesson.

5. Distribute the handout, *Navigating a Digital World: Tips for Youth*, and review the information with students to reinforce safe and responsible online use. Send the handout home for students to share and discuss with family members.

Understanding and Addressing Online Cruelty

REASONS[1] for online social aggression	STRATEGIES for reducing online social aggression
1. I can't see you (invisibility lessens empathy).	• Visualize the person on the receiving end of the message and imagine how they will feel. • Balance time spent in digital spaces with activities that involve face-to-face interaction.
2. You don't know me (anonymity encourages people to say things they normally wouldn't).	• Picture yourself saying this to someone in person. *Could you? How would it feel?*
3. See you later (communication that does not involve immediate, real-time feedback may reduce inhibitions).	• Think about the response your message may provoke at a later time from the recipient, other peers and adults.
4. It's just a game (digital spaces may seem like worlds separate and apart, with different rules and norms).	• Consider the real-life outcomes and consequences that your actions could have. • Never engage in fantasy play without others' agreement and willing participation.
5. It's not me (responsibility for cruel behavior may be placed on a digital persona or identity rather than on oneself).	• Ask yourself if the person on the receiving end will experience your comments as part of a fantasy or role-play.
6. Look at me (personal attacks are an easy way to get noticed; negative attention may be better than no attention).	• Reflect on how you really want others to view you. • Consider behaviors that will lead to positive attention and friendships.
7. Don't mess with me (retaliation on social media is less threatening than dealing with conflict in person).	• Consider whether revenge will actually solve your problems or make you feel better. • Talk to a trusted adult about ways to manage conflict.
8. I'm one of you (participating in online cruelty may seem like a way to gain social acceptance or be part of a group; standing up to it may seem like it will bring exclusion).	• Ask yourself if you really want friends who are cruel to others. • Find positive ways to make friends or connect with people. • Talk to an adult about ways to avoid hostility on social media and support those who are targeted.
9. You're not like me (technology may be a vehicle for expressing hate or bias that is socially unacceptable at school).	• Imagine how it would feel if you were targeted because of an aspect of your identity. • Seek help from a teacher or counselor who can help you deal with negative feelings.

---

[1] Reasons 2–4 are from John Suler, "The Online Disinhibition Effect," *CyberPsychology & Behavior* 7(2004): 321–326; reasons 1, 5 and 6 are from Nancy Willard, Educator's Guide to Cyberbullying and Cyberthreats, (Center for Safe and Responsible Use of the Internet, 2007).

Welcome to the Web Site that Makes Fun of Dave[2]

After being teased, taunted and punched for years, some peers set up an abusive Web site about David that made his life unbearable. The site—titled "Welcome to the Web site that makes fun of Dave"—was active for months before David found out about it; none of his friends or classmates bothered to warn him about it.

The students who created the Web site included pages of hateful comments directed at David and his family. Soon other students at school joined in, posting rude remarks that embarrassed David and smeared his reputation. Some students used a link to David's e-mail address to send messages like this one: "You're gay, don't ever talk again, no one likes you, you're immature and dirty, go wash your face."

The abuse went on for seven long months before the Web host agreed to take down the site. By that time David felt so defeated that he decided to leave school and complete his studies at home.

"Rather than just some people, say 30 in a cafeteria," commented David, "hearing them all yell insults at you, it's up there for 6 billion people to see. Anyone with a computer can see it. And you can't get away from it. It doesn't go away when you come home from school. It made me feel even more trapped."

---

[2] This is a real story and something similar can happen on social media sites.

Cyberbullying Scenarios

1. You are sitting around with a group of friends at a Friday night sleepover when Emily asks, "Who don't we like? Who can we mess with?" Someone suggests Sarah, a girl with a physical disability that causes her to walk with a limp. For some time, Sarah has been trying to become part of your group, but has been excluded because some girls think she is "weird." Emily sets up a fictitious account on a social media site and sends Sarah a direct message that says, "Nice moves in gym class yesterday. Walk much?" You laugh along with the other girls and participate in more mean messages.

2. You have an account on a gaming site, where you like to play with your online friends. One day your parents discover an e-mail from the site administrator indicating that the account will be terminated due to the posting of the following message: *"I hate Hitler because he didn't finish the job—he should have killed all the Jews."* At first you swear that you had nothing to do with the message, but later admit that you were encouraged to post it by another student, who has been calling you mean names and threatening to hurt you. You tell your parents that you figured it wouldn't hurt anyone to post the message and it might get the person who bullied you to finally leave you alone.

3. You are furious with your best friend after hearing that he is flirting with a girl he knows you have liked since the sixth grade. You find an old photo of your friend from before he transferred to your school and before he lost fifty pounds. You text the picture to the girl with a message saying, "Just thought you should know what your boyfriend really looks like."

4. A group of anonymous students have created a social media site about one of their classmates named Larry. Although Larry does not identify as gay, the page includes postings about Larry being gay that include made-up stories, jokes and cartoons involving Larry and other students at the school. It includes a place where visitors can post comments and an email link for people to send their messages directly to Larry. You receive an e-mail with a link to the site. Though you don't post any new comments to the site, you forward the e-mail with the link to your friends.

5. You have a disagreement with one of your teammates at a game and the coach ends up benching you for the remainder of the game. Afterwards, you are so steamed that you send an angry text to your teammate, blaming her for everything. She texts back, trying to explain her side of things, but this angers you further and you end up sending a series of nasty text messages, calling her mean names and even threatening to "put her in her place" if she messes with you at the next game.

6. Hanif is one of only a few Muslim students at your school. On a day when the morning news includes the report of a terrorist attack on a subway in another country, a group surrounds Hanif after school, calling him a "terrorist" and questioning his loyalty to the U.S. You are part of a group of onlookers, who watch as the group starts pushing and slapping Hanif. At the suggestion of your friend, you video the attack on your cell phone and later spread it around the school from an unofficial school Twitter account.

7. After rehearsal for the school play, Jill remains in the auditorium by herself to practice dance moves, forgetting that the video camera is still on. The next day you and a friend discover the video of Jill, which contains some silly and embarrassing footage. As a gag, you decide to create a fake social media account for Jill that contains some of the footage, and you invite the whole school to be her "friend." The video of Jill dancing becomes a school-wide joke, and people start to add visual and sound effects that make Jill look even funnier. Before long, the video begins to spread and Jill receives hundreds of harassing messages.

Cyberbullying Resources

Print and Online Publications

Common Sense Media. *K-12 Digital Citizenship.* www.commonsense.org/education/digital-citizenship.

Hinduja, Sameer and Justin Patchin. *Bullying Beyond the Schoolyard: Preventing and Responding to Cyberbullying.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 2008.

Kowalski, R.M., S.P. Limber, and P.W. Agatston. *Cyber Bullying: Bullying in the Digital Age*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, John & Sons, 2008.

Media Smarts. *Classroom Resources to Counter Cyber Bullying.* http://mediasmarts.ca/lessonplan/classroom-resources-counter-cyberbullying-portal-page.

OnGuard Online. *Net Cetera: Chatting With Kids About Being Online.* www.onguardonline.gov/pdf/tec04.pdf.

Shariff, Shaheen. *Confronting Cyber-Bullying: What Schools Need to Know to Control Misconduct and Avoid Legal Consequences.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

Willard, Nancy. "CyberbullyNOT: Stopping Online Social Aggression." *Cyberbullying and Cyberthreats: Responding to the Challenge of Online Social Aggression, Threats, and Distress.* Champaign, IL: Research Press, 2007. www.embracecivility.org/wp-content/uploadsnew/2012/10/appL.pdf.

Willard, Nancy. "Educator's Guide to Cyberbullying and Cyberthreats." Eugene: Center for Safe and Responsible Internet Use, 2007. http://www.embracecivility.org/wp-content/uploadsnew/Educators-Guide-Cyber-Safety.pdf.

Willard, Nancy. "Parent Guide to Cyberbullying and Cyberthreats." *Cyberbullying and Cyberthreats: Responding to the Challenge of Online Social Aggression, Threats, and Distress.* Champaign, IL: Research Press, 2007. www.embracecivility.org/wp-content/uploadsnew/2012/10/appK.pdf.

Children's Books

Allman, Toney. *Mean Behind the Screen: What You Need to Know About Cyberbullying.* Mankato, MN: Compass Point Books, 2009.

Casper, Matt and Ted Dorsey. *Abash and the Cyber-Bully.* Hong Kong: Evergrow, 2008.

Friedman, Lauri S. 2010. *Cyberbullying.* Introducing Issues with Opposing Viewpoints series. Farmington Hills, MI: Greenhaven Press.

Jacobs, Thomas A. *Teen Cyberbullying Investigated.* Minneapolis: Free Spirit Publishing, 2010.

Jakubiak David J. *A Smart Kid's Guide to Online Bullying.* New York: PowerKids Press, 2009.

Leavitt, Jacalyn and Sally Linford. *Faux Paw Meets the First Lady: Keeping Children Safe Online.* Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated, 2006.

Maceachern, Robyn. *Cyberbullying: Deal with It and Ctrl Alt Delete It.* Halifax, NS: Lorimer, James & Company, 2009.

Polacco, Patricia. *Bully.* New York, NY: G.P. Putnam's Sons Books for Young Readers, 2012.

Videos and DVD Resources

Cyberbullying – Cruel Intentions. Howell, MI: ABC News, 2006.
Diane Sawyer reports on how cell phones, digital cameras and personal Web sites combine in new ways that seems to encourage and amplify the meanness of teenage behavior; www.abcnewsstore.com. (For clips and description, see Gray, Keturah (September 12, 2006). "How Mean Can Teens Be?," http://abcnews.go.com/Primetime/story?id=2421562&pa ge=1).

Kitchen. 50 sec. Arlington, VA: National Crime Prevention Council, 2006.
> This public service announcement is part of the "Cyberbullying: Don't Write It. Don't Forward It" cyberbullying prevention campaign. It appeals to students to avoid saying anything online that they wouldn't say in person; www.youtube.com/watch?v=NbtajOvAU10.

Let's Fight it Together. 7 min. London: Childnet International, 2007.
> This film, available via the internet, was produced in the United Kingdom to help sensitize young people to the pain and hurt which can be caused by cyberbullying; www.youtube.com/watch?v=dubA2vhIlrg, www.childnet-int.org.

Sexting in America: When Privates Go Public. 40 min. MTV, 2009.
> This film explores the dangers of sexting and the repercussions for the people who electronically send and receive sexually explicit photos/videos. It depicts the stories of a girl who is harassed after her boyfriend shares explicit photos of her; and a boy who is charged with transmitting child pornography after forwarding nude photos of his girlfriend; www.mtv.com/videos/news/483801/sexting-in-america-when-privates-go-public-part-1.jhtml.

Sticks & Stones. 43 min. Montvale, NJ: Chase Wilson, 2009.
> Funded by the office of the Bergen County Prosecutor with money seized from criminals, this film stars actual high school students from NJ. It tells the story of a teen who is driven to suicide after a compromising picture he thought was private is sent out for everyone to see. The film is accompanied by a comprehensive Teacher's Guide; www.youtube.com/watch?v=61E8RMCry-M.

Talent Show. 50 sec. Arlington, VA: National Crime Prevention Council, 2006.
> This public service announcement is part of the "Cyberbullying: Don't Write It. Don't Forward It" cyberbullying prevention campaign. It appeals to students to avoid saying anything online that they wouldn't say in person; www.youtube.com/watch?v=bdQBurXQOeQ.

Online Resources: Websites on Cyberbullying and Online Safety

Anti-Defamation League
www.adl.org/education/resources/tools-and-strategies/bullying-and-cyberbullying-prevention-strategies

Provides resources, strategies and tips on bullying and cyberbullying prevention.

Embrace Civility in the Digital Age
www.embracecivility.org

Provides effective strategies to assist young people in developing the skills to behave in a safe, responsible and legal manner when using the internet.

Common Sense Media
www.commonsensemedia.org

Provides trustworthy information and tools, as well as an independent forum, so that kids and families can have a choice and a voice about the media they consume.

Cyberbullying.us
www.cyberbullying.us

Explores the causes and consequences of online harassment; includes fact sheets and resource lists.

Cybersmart!
www.cybersmart.org

Provides online professional development and free curricular resources on cyber safety, internet ethics, creativity and critical thinking.

iKeepSafe
www.ikeepsafe.org

The Internet Keep Safe Coalition is a partnership of government, public health, education, law enforcement and industry professionals that provide information and tools for the safe and healthy use of technology and the internet.

i-SAFE
www.isafe.org

A non-profit foundation that incorporates classroom curriculum with community outreach to empower students, teachers, parents, and law enforcement to make the internet a safer place.

National Crime Prevention Council's Cyberbullying Pages
www.ncpc.org/resources/cyberbullying/

Dedicated to keeping children, families and communities safe from crime, NCPC offers research, information, tips and public service announcements on cyberbullying.

NetSmartz
www.netsmartz.org

Run by The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children, this site offers information and resources on Internet Safety for educators, parents/guardians, teens, younger children and law enforcement.

OnGuard Online
www.onguardonline.gov

Provides practical tips from the federal government and the technology industry to help guard against internet fraud, secure computers and protect personal information.

Stop Bullying
www.stopbullying.gov

Provides information from various government agencies on what bullying is, what cyberbullying is, who is at risk, and how you can prevent and respond to bullying.

A Thin Line
www.athinline.org

MTV's campaign to empower youth to respond to and stop the spread of digital abuse; includes a Digital Bill of Rights, informational and video resources and ways to take action.

Wired Safety
www.wiredsafety.org

Dedicated to protecting all internet users from cybercrime and abuse, and teaching responsible internet use. It operates several programs and Web sites, including Stopcyberbulling.org, Wiredcops.org, Teenangels.org, and Tweenangels.com.