



Cyberbullying:
Understanding and Addressing
Online Cruelty



This resource provides educators with the tools to increase awareness about the problem of cyberbullying among their students. Each lesson introduces age appropriate information and skills that encourage youth to think critically about digital communication, develop empathy for others, respond constructively to cyberbullying and online aggression and interact safely in digital spaces. These resources will be an important part of your school's broader efforts to foster an increased culture of digital safety and respect for differences among youth.

Research on Cyberbullying

Bullying and cyberbullying are concerns for our schools. For teenagers, and to some extent tweens, life is imbued with technology. According to the [Pew Research Center](#), 95% of youth (teens ages 13–17) in the U.S. have access to a smartphone and 46% say they are online “almost constantly” while another 48% say they go online several times a day. Pew Research also found that 42% of teens feel anxious when they don't have their cellphones and, in these instances feel lonely (25%) or upset (24%). For the current generation of teens, gaming, video chatting, instant and text messaging and social networking are a vital means of self-expression and a central part of their social lives.

Online communication and technology are neutral entities and can be used positively and negatively. However, there are some youth who are misusing the digital spaces they navigate to bully and harass others, and even to incite violence against them. The [Cyberbullying Research Center's 2023 study](#) revealed that 54.5% of students ages 13–17 reported that they had experienced cyberbullying (hurtful comments, threats, rumors, pictures, or videos posted or circulated online) in their lifetimes. Research from the [Cyberbullying Research Center and Cartoon Network](#) revealed that nearly two thirds of tweens (ages 9–12) had seen bullying at school, and half had experienced it firsthand. About 15% of tweens said they had been bullied at school many times. In addition, one in five tweens had been cyberbullied, had cyberbullied others, or had seen cyberbullying. Cyberbullying impacts people in this age group by affecting their feelings about themselves, friendships, physical health and schoolwork as well as in other ways. Further, online cruelty may be a precursor to more destructive behavior, including involvement in hate groups, bias-related violence and digital self-harm.

The impact of bullying has been well documented—studies have shown that difficulty making friends, loneliness, low self-esteem, depression, poor academic achievement, truancy and other risk factors are all associated with being bullied. Young people who engage in bullying also show vulnerability to these risk factors. In addition, the targets of cyberbullying may be subject to additional distress due to the pervasive and invasive nature of modern communication technology: cyberbullying messages can be circulated far and wide in an instant and are usually irrevocable; cyberbullying is ubiquitous—there is no refuge and victimization can be relentless; and cyberbullying is often anonymous and can rapidly swell as countless and unknown others join in on “the fun.”

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Resources

Cyberbullying Resources

ADL Cyber-Safety Action Guide

[Identity-Based Bullying](#)

[Gossip, Rumors and Identity](#)

[Centering Youth Voices:
Addressing Identity-Based
Bullying](#)

[6 Ways to Be an Ally](#)

Correlation of Lessons to Common Core Standards

Content Area/Standard	Elementary School Lesson	Middle School Lesson	High School Lesson
Reading			
R.2: Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.		X	
R.3: Analyze how and why individuals, events, or ideas develop and interact over the course of a text.	X		
R.7: Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.			X
Writing			
W.4: Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.	X		
Listening and Speaking			
SL.1: Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.	X	X	X
SL.2: Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.		X	X
SL.3: Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric.			X
SL.4: Present information, findings, and supporting evidence such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.	X	X	
Language			
L.4: Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases by using context clues, analyzing meaningful word parts, and consulting general and specialized reference materials, as appropriate.	X		
L.6: Acquire and use accurately a range of general academic and domain-specific words and phrases sufficient for reading, writing, speaking, and listening at the college and career readiness level; demonstrate independence in gathering vocabulary knowledge when encountering an unknown term important to comprehension or expression.		X	X

Elementary School Lesson

Building a Foundation for Safe and Respectful Online Communication

Rationale

The purpose of this lesson is to encourage safe and respectful digital communication among young children, and to provide students with basic skills for responding productively to online bullying and social aggression. Students use literature, fictional scenarios and creative expression to explore the ways in which digital communication can amplify hurtful words and to practice responses to hurtful online messages. Students also focus on ways that they can use digital spaces to make others feel good and implement online kindness projects in class.

[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 about the damaging power of digital spaces to spread hurtful words.
- Students will learn and practice strategies for responding safely and positively to online bullying and social aggression.
- Students will explore ways to use digital spaces to promote kindness and self-esteem.

Age Range

Grades 2–5

Time

Approximately 2–3 hours or 3–4 class periods

Requirements

Handouts and Resources:

- [Emojis](#) (one for teacher use)
- [How to Handle Hurtful Messages Version 1 or 2](#) (Optional; one for each student)
- [Online Bullying and Social Aggression Scenarios](#) (Optional; one scenario for each small group)
- [How Would You Respond?](#) (Optional; one for each small group)
- Internet Safety Pledge (see [NetSmartz](#), for example) (one for each student)

Other Material:

- [Yettele's Feathers](#) by Joan Rothenberg (or another story from ["Feathers" Stories: Resources for Educators](#))
- Chart paper and markers, paper, pencils, assorted art supplies for drawing pictures (optional)
- WiFi, computer and internet (optional)

Advanced Preparation

- Reproduce handouts as directed above.
- Obtain a copy of [Yettele's Feathers](#) or a similar story (see Part I #1).
- Copy the symbols from the handout, [Emojis](#), on to a large sheet of chart paper. Alternatively, copy the handout onto an overhead transparency or project the images on a smartboard (see Part II #1).

Key Words

Bullying
Email
Emoji
Gossip
Instant messaging
internet
Journal
Remorse
Reputation
Text message
Threat

- (Optional) Copy the information from the handout, [How to Handle Hurtful Messages](#), onto a sheet of chart paper or distribute to each student (see Part II #4). There are two versions of this handout; version 1 has simplified and less text. Use the one that is most age appropriate for your students.
- (Optional) Cut [Online Bullying and Social Aggression Scenarios](#) into strips, one for each small group (see Part II #5).
- (Optional) Write the poem from *Feathers* by Heather Forest on a sheet of chart paper (see Part III #4).

Techniques and Skills

analyzing literature, brainstorming, case study, cooperative group work, forming opinions, identifying feelings, large and small group discussion, reading skills, social action, using the internet, writing skills

Procedures

Part I: The Nature of Digital Communication (60 minutes)

1. Read aloud to students [Yettele's Feathers](#) by Joan Rothenberg, using the questions below to discuss the story. As an alternative, read the book [Trouble Talk](#) by Trudy Ludwig. Read the book aloud and discuss the book's meaning and themes including "trouble talk," gossip, spreading rumors and mean behavior.
 - Why did Yettele spend so much time "minding other people's business"?
 - How did Yettele get the wrong idea when she saw Yussel Farfel help himself to the apple? What happened when Yettele spread her version of the story?
 - Have you ever jumped to conclusions about someone's behavior without knowing the whole story? What happened as a result?
 - Was it enough for Yettele to say, "I didn't mean to cause trouble" and "I'm very sorry and I take it all back"? Why is it difficult to "take back" harmful words once they have been spread?
 - Did you agree with Yettele when she said that her stories are "only words, not rocks and stones" and that they can cause "no more harm than a feather"? Do you think gossip and mean words are more like rocks or feathers? Why?
 - How did the Rabbi help Yettele to understand the effect of her stories on other people?
 - How did Yettele learn to turn her fondness for talking into something positive?
 - Can you think of ways that you might use your words to make other people feel good?

NOTE: If you are unable to find a copy of [Yettele's Feathers](#), read aloud or tell another version of the story using one of the sources listed in the handout, ["Feathers" Stories: Resources for Educators](#).

2. Point out that in Yettele's time, information was communicated from person to person via word of mouth. Ask students how information is communicated in their world today. Suggest that technology is increasingly one of the main ways in which people today communicate. Conduct a brief "physical survey" to determine the extent to which students utilize technology. Have students form a circle and ask them to step into the middle if they have ever sent or received an email, and then to step back out. Repeat this process using the prompts below. (If there is space or other limitations, have students raise their hands from their seats in response to each prompt).

NOTE: If you think this survey is better done anonymously, read these questions aloud and invite students to think to themselves (or record on a piece of paper) their responses to the questions.

- Step in if you've ever played games with other people online.
- Step in if you've ever chatted or exchanged messages with friends online.
- Step in if you've ever posted a blog.
- Step in if you've ever visited a website that helps you to make new friends.
- Step in if you have your own cell phone.
- Step in if you've ever used your parents' or family members' phone to text, play a game or watch a video.
- Step in if you've ever sent or received a text/picture/video message on your phone.
- Step in if you use the internet or send text messages at least once per week.
- Step in if you use the internet or send text messages every day.

NOTE: While some of the items in this survey may seem advanced for elementary-age children, the reality is that children as young as five and six are exposed to “grown-up” technologies through older siblings and marketing that seeks to market to the next generation of users. These sites introduce young children to online games, virtual shopping, social networking and buddy lists.

3. Ask students to think about how communication via the internet, email, text messaging, etc. is like the “feathers in the wind” from the story about Yettele. Have students (either individually or in small groups) write a story, draw a picture or design a cartoon that illustrates their ideas. When students are done, post their work around the room and ask for a few volunteers to share what they have created. Emphasize that messages sent out over the internet can spread instantaneously to many people and that it is often impossible to take them back once they are out there.

Part II: Responding to Hurtful Messages (45 minutes)

1. Introduce students to the [Emojis](#) prepared prior to the lesson. Describe to students how these symbols are used to convey feelings in digital communications and make sure that students understand what each one means.
2. Remind students that in the books, the main characters words and stories were hurtful to many people. Ask students if they have ever experienced hurtful words or mean behavior while playing a game, using an app, or sending text messages and allow several students to share their experiences, making sure they do not reveal the names of others who may have been involved. After each anecdote, ask how the student responded and how the incident made the student feel. Invite them to indicate their feelings by sticking a small Post-it with their names next to the appropriate emoji introduced earlier.
3. Comment that when we are sad, scared or mad, we sometimes react to hurtful messages in ways that are not helpful. Tell students that they are going to spend some time in class practicing how to respond to some made-up messages so that they will be prepared to do the right thing if such incidents occur in real life.
4. Review with students the information in the handout, [How to Handle Hurtful Messages](#). Depending on the age and ability of your students, this can be done by distributing copies of the handout to each student, writing the information up on chart paper or reviewing the information verbally.

NOTE: There are two versions of this handout; version 1 has simplified and less text. Use the one that is most age appropriate for your students.

5. Have students practice responding to the situations in the handout, [Online Bullying and Social Aggression Scenarios](#). Depending on the age and ability of your students, choose one of the following options:
 - a. **Whole Class Discussion:** Read the first scenario aloud and ask students: *What is going on? How do you think the person feels?* (After students respond with words to describe how the person feels, ask them to also name the emoji that best captures that feeling.) *What do you suggest for a positive response?* Reinforce the strategies reviewed earlier and, if students suggest inappropriate responses, explain why they are not safe or constructive or elicit from other students. Repeat this process for as many scenarios as time allows.
 - b. **Small Group Investigation:** Divide the class into groups of 3–4 students. Cut the handout into strips with one scenario on each and provide each group with one strip. Instruct groups to read their scenario and discuss positive responses, drawing upon the strategies reviewed earlier. Have groups write or draw their response on the handout, *How Would You Respond?* When groups are done, reconvene the class and allow each group to share its work. Make sure to reinforce the strategies reviewed earlier and to discourage unsafe or inappropriate ideas that may surface.

Part III: Using the Digital Spaces for Positive Purposes (time will vary)

1. Reinforce with students that although some people use technology to hurt others, most people use it for positive purposes. Suggest that the internet and other forms of digital communication can be wonderful tools for making people feel connected and cared for. Introduce students to one of the programs below and discuss how it might be implemented in their class or school using technology to enhance the effects:
 - a. **Random Acts of Kindness:** Inspires people to practice kindness and to “pass it on” to others; includes kindness ideas for kids, online and in school.

- b. [Pay it Forward Day](#): Encourages all people, from all walks of life to give to someone else and make a positive difference; includes ideas for teachers on how their schools can get involved in paying it forward.
2. Ask students for ideas about ways that they might implement one of the programs above, using the technology to make people feel good. List their ideas on a sheet of chart paper and come up with a plan to execute one or more of the ideas. Some examples are:
- Send an email, text or message to a far-away friend or relative letting them know that you are thinking of them.
 - Send an email, text or message to someone who is sick or needs cheering up.
 - Create a website or Web posting to raise money, goods or awareness about a special charity or for people in need of help.
 - Create a blog that celebrates students' special talents and interests.
 - Create a class "Kindness Site" and share it with other students, parents, teachers, etc.
 - Create a class "Paying it Forward" newsletter and post/distribute it online.
3. Encourage students to be good digital citizens by always being safe, responsible and respectful in their online communications. Send home a Safety and Positive Behavior Pledge for families to go over and sign together (see [NetSmartz](#), for example).
4. Conclude the lesson by posting and reading together the following poem from the story, *Feathers*, as an ongoing reminder to students:

Feathers

Words, like feathers fly
 In the wind, in the wind.
 Reaching far and wide,
 In the wind, in the wind.
 Careless words, tossed about,
 Cannot again be swallowed up.
 Tongues like swords can cut the
 heart.
 Words fly out.
 The rumors start...

Cruel words like feathers fly.
 Cruel words reach far and wide.
 They leave the mouth a bitter rind.
 May all your words,
 my friends, be kind.

Reprinted with permission from Heather Forest, *Feathers* (Atlanta, GA: August House Publishers, Inc., 2005).

Feathers Stories: Resources for Educators

There are many versions of the “Feathers” story, which uses the imagery of feathers scattered by the wind as a metaphor for the dangers of gossip and the irretrievable nature of mean and disrespectful words that have been dispersed in the community. The original story has been attributed to the Hasidic Rabbi, Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev, but can be found in the folklore of various faith traditions as well as in literature on peace education and conflict resolution. Below is one version of the story as well as additional sources that are all appropriate for young children.

The Chicken Story — A Tale of Regret

Once there was a foolish woman in a small village, who spread some gossip about another woman in the village. Before long the foolish woman began to feel remorse about what she had done, so she went to the wise man of the village to ask him what she could do to make things right. The wise man listened carefully to her story, thought for a moment, and then told her to go to the market and buy a chicken. On the way home from the market she was to pluck that chicken letting the feathers fall along the path. The next day she was to come back and see the wise man again.

The foolish woman did as the wise man suggested. She bought a chicken and plucked it on the way home. When she came to him the next day, she told him that she had done what he asked her to do. The wise man said to her, “Now, I want you to go home today by the same road you took yesterday and pick up every single feather you dropped along the path.” The woman was distraught and protested that there was absolutely no way she could find and pick up all those feathers. The wind would have surely blown them everywhere!































The wise man quietly responded, “You are correct...and you see, just as you can never retrieve all those feathers, there is no way you can ever restore the reputation of the woman whom you harmed with your words.”

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Additional Sources of “Feathers” Stories

- [Feathers in the Wind](#) (video version), NetSmartz
- *Feathers: A Jewish Tale from Eastern Europe* (picture book version) by Heather Forest, August House Publishers, Inc., 2005, 32pp, ISBN: 0874837553
- *Feathers in the Wind and Other Jewish Tales* (audio version) by Susan Stone, 2001, ASIN: B00005M0U6
- *Spinning Tales, Weaving Hope: Stories, Storytelling, and Activities for Peace, Justice and the Environment*, Vol. 1 (short story version) by Ed Brody et al. (eds.), New Society Publishers, 2002, 296pp, ISBN: 0865714479
- *Wisdom Tales From Around the World* (short story version) by Heather Forest, August House Publishers, Inc., 1996, 156pp, ISBN: 0874834791
- *Yettele’s Feathers* (picture book version) by Joan Rothenberg, Hyperion Books for Children, 1995, 32pp, ISBN: 0786800976

Emojis

-   **Grinning Face**
-   **Smiling Face with Open Mouth and Smiling Eyes**
-   **Face with Tears of Joy**
-   **Angry Face**
-   **Confused Face**
-   **Crying Face**
-   **Kissing Face**
-   **Face Throwing a Kiss**
-   **Sleeping Face**
-   **Smirking Face**
-   **Dizzy Face**
-   **Face with Stuck-out Tongue**
-   **Face with Stuck-out Tongue and Winking Eye**
-   **Face Savoring Delicious Food**
-   **Face Screaming in Fear**

How to Handle Hurtful Messages

(Version 1)

These tips can help you to make good choices when faced with hurtful online messages.

1. Be careful about talking online to people you don't know. Talk with your parents or family members about people you don't know and how to stay safe.
2. If you receive a hurtful, mean or bullying message:
 - Do not answer but save it.
 - Sign off of the device right away.
 - Tell a trusted adult about the message.
3. If you receive a hurtful message from a friend or classmate:
 - Think before answering. Sometimes it is better to share your feelings face-to-face.



- If you answer online or with a text message, be careful with your words. Remember that you can't take them back.
- Keep the message private. Never pass around messages that might hurt others.

How to Handle Hurtful Messages

(Version 2)

Online bullying and hurtful messages can make us feel sad, angry, ashamed, and confused about how to respond. The following tips will help you to make positive choices when faced with online bullying and other hurtful messages.

1. Be careful about responding to messages online from people you don't know. Talk to a parent or trusted adult before responding.
2. If you receive a mean, bullying or threatening message from anyone:
 - Do not respond but save it or print it. If it is a text message, show an adult.
 - After you save the message, sign off of the website, game or messaging area right away.
 - Then tell a trusted adult (such as a parent, family member or teacher) about the message.
 - An adult can help you to block the addresses of people who are not friends and who are sending hurtful messages.
 - A trusted adult will also report online bullying to others if needed, such as the school principal, the aggressor's parents or the police.
3. If you receive an angry or hurtful message from a friend or classmate:



- Think carefully before responding. Decide if it would be better to respond face-to-face rather than use technology.
- If you answer online or through text message, be careful with your words. Remember that you can't take them back.
- If you decide to respond online or through text message, take a few minutes to think about and organize your message before sending. Remember that your message can't be taken back once sent, and that it can be saved or forwarded to others. Don't write anything that you may be sorry for later.
- Remember that the person reading the message can't see or hear you. Use emojis or signs like :- (for sad or :-/ for confused to make your emotions clear.
- Don't write words in all capitals (it's like shouting) or use your words in ways that carry anger.
- Keep the message private and don't forward to others. If you need advice from a friend about how to handle a tough situation, talk in person. Never pass around messages that might hurt or embarrass others.

Online Bullying and Social Aggression Scenarios

1. You find out that some kids in your class are sending around a text message that includes some embarrassing photos of you and nasty comments about your family about being from Mexico and speaking English with an accent. It also includes your email address and encourages visitors to send mean messages to you. How do you respond?
2. You have been receiving hurtful emails for the past few weeks from an address you don't recognize. At first they just include insults about being overweight, so you ignore them. But now they are coming more often and include threats that make you feel unsafe. How do you respond?
3. Your parents agree to hold your birthday party at your favorite laser tag place, but because of the cost you are only allowed to invite five friends. One of your classmates is angry that he is not included and sends a text message about you to another friend, who sends it to someone else and it starts spreading around the school until you get it. How do you respond?
4. A group of kids have created a private message board, where they talk about what they're going to wear to school and make social plans for the weekends. You try to join, but are rejected. When you ask a friend to ask why you have been excluded, she replies that some of the others think you're weird because of the thick glasses you wear. How do you respond?
5. You are texting one evening with a friend, who asks you what you think of a classmate. At first you don't reply, but she keeps asking, writing things like, "Isn't she stuck up?" You finally write back that you agree and then get an angry message from the classmate, who looked at your friend's phone and saw the texts. How do you respond?

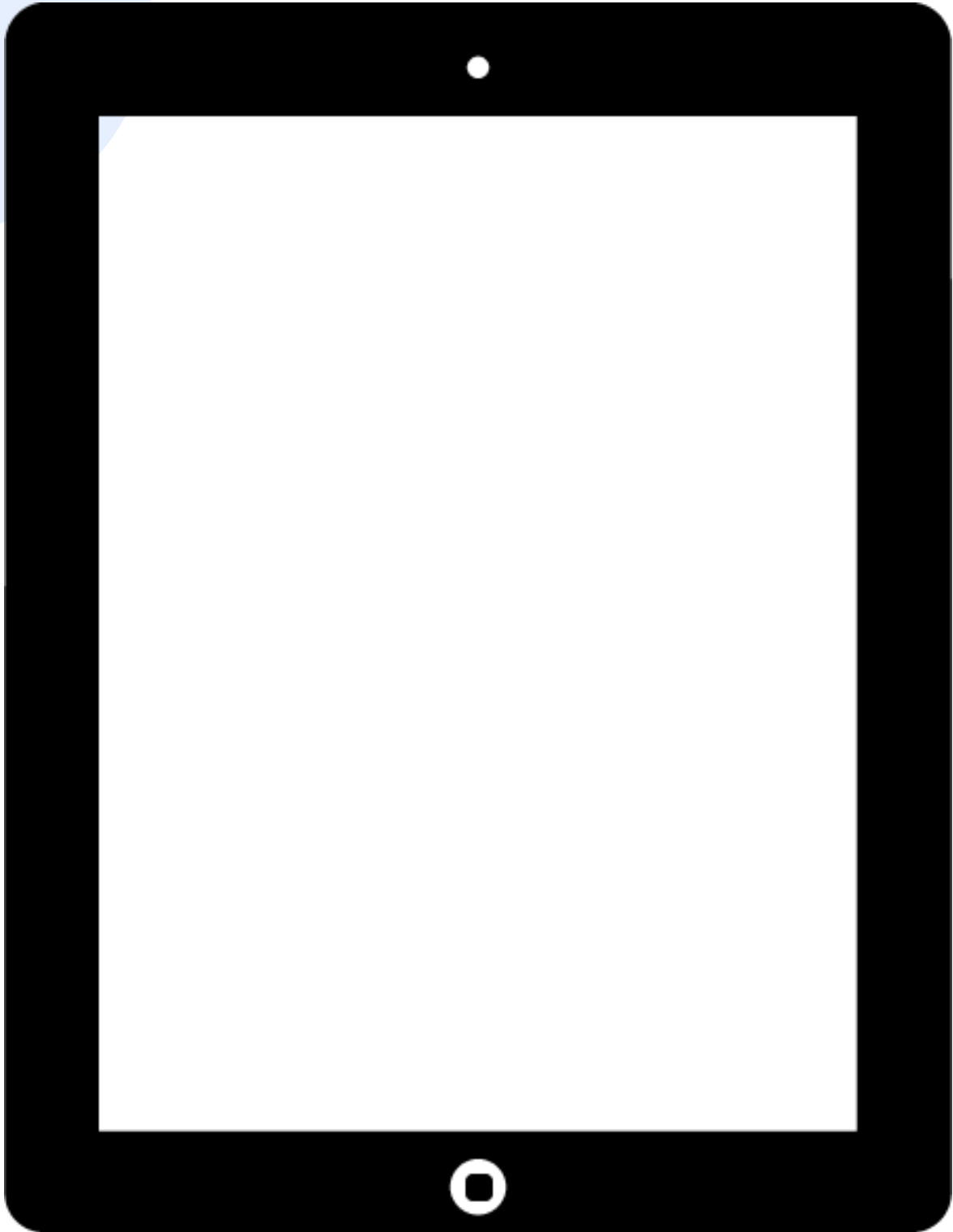
6. You get a message from an unknown user with an embarrassing photo of you. You can tell that the picture was taken during recess when you were trying out some silly dance moves, but it has been changed to make you look ridiculous. A classmate tells you the name of an older student who he says took the picture with a cell phone. How do you respond?

7. After telling your friend a personal secret in a text message and making her swear not to tell anyone, you find out that she took a screen shot of it and sent it to someone else. How do you respond?

8. You get an angry direct message through a gaming site from a friend who accuses you of spreading rumors about him. You deny it and he forwards messages from your account, saying that he is poor, dirty and wears the same clothes every day. You know that you never sent the messages and figure that someone must have stolen your password and pretended to be you. How do you respond?

9. You have a disagreement with a teammate at practice, and the coach ends up benching your teammate for the next game. That night you receive furious texts from the teammate, calling you names and telling you that you've ruined everything. At first you don't reply, but the texts keep coming and get more and more angry. How do you respond?

How Would You Respond?



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 cyberbullying 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 young people 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 about 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.

Key Words

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

Age Range

Grades 6–8

Time

Approximately 90 minutes or two class periods

Requirements

Handouts and Resources:

- [Welcome to the website 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)

Other Material:

- [Talent Show](#) and [Kitchen](#) public service announcements (video clips)
- Chart paper, markers and other colorful writing implements

Advanced Preparation

- Reproduce handouts as directed above.
- 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).
- 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 website 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 website?
 - What about those who added comments or emails 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 website or a message inviting you to visit and join in?
 - Have you ever seen or experienced something like this?
 - What did you do in this situation? What did others do? What do you wish you had done?
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. Elicit 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. 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. Invite each group to do the following, allowing about 15 minutes to complete the tasks:
 - a. Identify the reasons or motivations for the cyberbullying.
 - 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 actions and behavior. (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.)
4. 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.
5. 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 behavior 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:

- Use respectful language.
- Protect your own and others' safety.
- Value all people and don't put down others.
- Respect privacy and avoid gossip/rumors.
- Include others in digital communities.
- A person with feelings is on the other end of every click.

6. 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.

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).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Picture yourself saying this to someone in person. <i>Could you? How would it feel?</i>
3. See you later (communication that does not involve immediate, real-time feedback may reduce inhibitions).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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 website that Makes Fun of Dave²

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

The students who created the website included pages of hateful comments directed at David and his family along with photos others took of Dave when he wasn't looking. 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 phone to send text 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 and worse.”

The abuse went on for seven long months before the social media company agreed to take down the account. 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 millions of people to see. Anyone with a phone 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 based on 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. There is a gaming site, where you like to play with your online friends. One day your parents discover a DM 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 account 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 a link for people to send their messages directly to Larry. You receive an invitation with a link to the site. Though you don’t post any new comments to the site, you forward the invitation 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 angry that you send a nasty 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 incident on your phone and later spread it around the school from an unofficial school Instagram 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 of her dancing. As a joke, you decide to create a fake social media account for Jill that contains some of the footage, and you invite many other students in the 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.

High School Lesson

Cyberbullying and Online Cruelty: Challenging Social Norms

Rationale

The purpose of this lesson is to increase awareness and empathy among students with regard to cyberbullying and online social cruelty. Through visual media and discussion, students are encouraged to reevaluate their own online behavior and to explore their collective civic responsibility to make the internet a safe and inclusive “neighborhood.” Students are challenged to analyze how social norms contribute to negative online behavior and to design a campaign to reshape these norms in their school community.

[NOTE: This lesson focuses only on the ways in which students communicate with peers online. It is not intended to be a comprehensive approach to digital safety, which should address topics such as predatory behavior, pornography, 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 about the problem of cyberbullying and develop greater empathy for the targets of online social cruelty
- Students will explore their civic responsibility to make the internet a safe space
- Students will investigate how social norms around online behavior influence them
- Students will work to change the social norms in their school community

Age Range

Grades 9–12

Time

Approximately two hours or three class periods (Note: If time is limited, implement only Part II of the lesson, which can be completed in 45 minutes)

Requirements

Handouts and Resources:

- [Online Behavior: What Do We Think?](#) (one for each student)
- [If the Internet was a Neighborhood](#) (create overhead transparencies of this image or save them on a laptop so they can be projected)
- [Are You OK?](#) video (8 minutes, 45 seconds, Wonder Media)
- [Social Norms Theory: Background for Educators](#) (for teacher reference only)

Other Material:

- Large sheets of newsprint or construction paper, assorted art supplies (markers, crayons, etc.)

Key Words

Bystander
Civic
Cyberbullying
Denigration
Exclusion
Flaming
Harassment
Impersonation
Misperception
Outing
Social networking sites
Social norm

Advanced Preparation

- Reproduce handouts as directed above.
- Prepare a laptop/LCD Projector for viewing of cartoon (see Part II #1), film (see Part II #3) and poster (see Part III #4).

Techniques and Skills

analyzing visual art, brainstorming, collecting and analyzing data, cooperative group work, forming opinions, large and small group discussion, media literacy, social action

Procedures

Part I: Pre-Lesson Survey (10 minutes)

1. A day before the lesson, have students fill out the survey, [Online Behavior: What Do We Think?](#) Explain that they should answer each question twice, once based on what they believe and once based on what they think the majority of their peers believe. Emphasize that the survey is anonymous (no names should be written on top) and encourage them to answer as honestly as they can.
2. Collect the surveys and tally student responses by calculating both the average numerical response for each item and the number of students who chose 4 (agree) or 5 (strongly agree) for each item. Save the original surveys as they will be used in class during the lesson.

Part II: Building Awareness and Empathy about Cyberbullying (45 minutes)

1. Project the cartoon, [If the Internet was a Neighborhood](#), on to a large screen. Discuss the image using the following questions:
 - What do you observe?
 - In what ways does this cartoon reflect your online experience?
 - Is there anything missing from this picture? (*Mention cyberbullying and online social cruelty if students do not bring it up.*)
 - Would you want to live in a real-life version of this neighborhood?
 - Why do people put up with such environments online?

NOTE: During this discussion, begin to explore with students the notion of a collective civic responsibility to make the internet a safe and inclusive “neighborhood.” Challenge the assumption that negative behavior online is something that “we just have to put up with” or “can’t do anything about.”

2. Tell students that while this cartoon highlights a number of negative online behaviors, this lesson’s focus will be on the issue of cyberbullying because it seems to be a growing trend among young people. Use the following questions to learn what students know about cyberbullying and what their experiences have been with this problem.
 - What is cyberbullying? (*Cyberbullying is intentional and repeated mistreatment of others through the use of technology, such as computers, cell phones and other electronic devices.*)
 - Where does it happen most often? (*Common vehicles include social media like Instagram, TikTok, X/Twitter, Facebook, etc., other websites, chat rooms, email, text messages, gaming sites, blogs and message boards.*)
 - What experiences have you had with cyberbullying?
 - How do you/other youth respond when it happens? How about adults?
3. Show [Are You Ok?](#), a nine-minute film produced in the United Kingdom by [Childnet](#) for the Department for Children, Schools and Families. After the viewing, elicit student reactions and discuss the following questions:
 - What happens in the video?
 - When Raquelle observes the bullying and cyberbullying happening to Noah, how do you think she feels and how can you tell?
 - What does she do?

- Has something like this ever happened at your school or to someone you know?
- How does Raquelle go from being a bystander to a target?
- When Raquelle asks Noah, “Are you okay,” what happens? What do you think is the impact of her question on Noah?
- How did Raquelle act as an ally to Noah?
- What is the overall message of the video?

Part III (60–90 minutes)

1. Suggest that one reason many young people put up with online bullying and cruelty has to do with something called social norms. Explain to students what this means and how it relates to cyberbullying by paraphrasing from the reading, [Social Norms Theory: Background for Educators](#).
2. Tell students that the survey they filled out, [Online Behavior: What Do We Think?](#), is meant to demonstrate how social norms work. Randomly redistribute the surveys filled out earlier, one to each student. Ask students to stand or raise their hand if the survey they received indicates that the individual (who filled it out) agrees (4) or strongly agrees (5) with the first statement. Have everyone look around before sitting down. Next ask people to stand if the survey in their hand indicates that the typical peer agrees (4) or strongly agrees (5) with the statement. Have everyone look around again before sitting down. Repeat this process for the remaining three statements. Summarize the results of this survey by posting or verbally sharing the tally you compiled in step #2 above, then discuss the following questions:³
 - a. What did you observe during this exercise? *(Most often, individuals believe that their own online behavior and attitudes are different from their peer’s behavior and attitudes.)*
 - b. How do you think that this misperception affects people’s behavior? *(Students are more likely to take part in negative online behavior and less likely to stand up to it.)*
 - c. Now that you have more accurate information about your peers’ attitudes, how might this affect your behavior? *(Students will feel more comfortable resisting cyberbullying and other forms of online social cruelty and acting as an ally to those who have been targeted.)*
3. Ask students for concrete examples of how the four social norms listed on the survey play out in their day to day lives. Elicit stories that demonstrate, for example, how assumptions about the meaning of free speech have led students to say cruel things online; or how the unwritten code, “what happens online stays online,” has prevented students from reporting cyberbullying that they witnessed even though they knew it was wrong.
4. Tell students that they are going to engage in an experiment to see if they can reshape the norms in their community around negative online behavior. Divide students into four groups and assign each group one of the following online social norms from the survey:
 - a. I have a free speech right to say whatever I want online.
 - b. In digital spaces it is okay to reveal personal secrets for others to see.
 - c. What happens online should stay online.
 - d. What happens online is mostly a game, so no one can really get hurt.
 - e. If I send a private picture or something personal to someone, it is not okay for them to send it to anyone else.
5. Instruct each group to come up with a message for re-educating their peers about the norm they were assigned, to create a PSA (public service announcement) poster illustrating the message and to identify some strategies for disseminating their message.
6. Reconvene the class and have each group share its work. Ask students to come up with a name for the overall campaign and to create a plan for launching it in the school.

³ This process, survey and social norms adapted with permission from Tanya Smolinsky, “What Do We Really Think?”, original unpublished work.

Online Behavior: What Do You Think?

For each of the statements below, circle the numbers that most closely correspond with both your own belief and the belief you feel is typically held by members of your peer group.

1=strongly disagree; 2=disagree; 3=unsure; 4=agree; 5=strongly agree

1. I have a free speech right to say whatever I want online.
 - a. Your response 1 2 3 4 5
 - b. Your peers' typical response 1 2 3 4 5

2. In digital spaces is it is okay to reveal personal secrets for others to see.
 - a. Your response 1 2 3 4 5
 - b. Your peers' typical response 1 2 3 4 5

3. What happens online should stay online.
 - a. Your response 1 2 3 4 5
 - b. Your peers' typical response 1 2 3 4 5

4. What happens online is mostly a game, so no one can really get hurt.
 - a. Your response 1 2 3 4 5
 - b. Your peers' typical response 1 2 3 4 5

5. If I send a private picture or something personal to someone, it is not okay for them to send it to anyone else.
 - a. Your response 1 2 3 4 5
 - b. Your peers' typical response 1 2 3 4 5

The norms on this survey are adapted from Nancy Willard, "An Educator's Guide to Cyberbullying and Cyberthreats" (Center for Safe and Responsible Internet Use), www.accem.org/pdf/cbcteducator.pdf (accessed November 2012); and the survey itself was adapted from "What Do We Really Think?", original unpublished work by Tanya Smolinsky. All material used with permission.

If the Internet Was a Neighborhood



Image created using AI

Social Norms Theory: Background for Educators

Social norms are people's beliefs about the attitudes and behaviors that are "normal," acceptable, or even expected in a particular social context. In many situations, people's perceptions of these norms will greatly influence their behavior. When people misperceive the norms of their peer group—that is when they inaccurately think an attitude or behavior is more (or less) common than is actually the case—they may choose to engage in behaviors that are in sync with those false norms.¹ *Pluralistic Ignorance* is the term that is used in academia to discuss social norms theory and refers to the incorrect belief that one's private attitudes, judgments or behavior are different from others.

Social norms theory has been most commonly applied to the problem of excessive alcohol consumption on college campuses. Many studies have shown that college students overestimate how much their peers drink. Prevention experts have argued that this misperception of the norm drives greater alcohol consumption. A growing body of evidence suggests that providing information to students about accurate drinking norms is associated with decreased drinking on campus.²

With regard to cyberbullying, many youth may falsely believe that online rumors, teasing and cruelty are approved of by their peers and that it would invite ostracism to refuse to participate in or to take a stand against such behavior. This misperception may cause young people to avoid acting as an ally to the targets of cyberbullying and to even engage in negative behaviors with which they privately feel uncomfortable. Over time, online social aggression may become normalized for youth, and they may become desensitized to its damaging effects on others. However, interventions that correct students' misperceptions by demonstrating that most young people don't find online cruelty to be "cool" could provide students with the awareness and confidence needed to avoid cyberbullying behavior and to speak out against it.

¹ Alan D. Berkowitz, "Social Norms Approach" (Boston, MA: Education Development Center's Higher Education Center), www.researchgate.net/publication/255579949_The_Social_Norms_Approach/download; www.alanberkowitz.com/articles/social_norms_short.pdf (original and published versions, accessed December 4, 2013).

² Ibid.

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*. <https://mediasmarts.ca/teacher-resources/classroom-resources-counter-cyberbullying-portal-page>.

OnGuard Online. *Net Cetera: Chatting With Kids About Being Online*. https://consumer.ftc.gov/sites/default/files/articles/pdf/pdf-0001-netcetera_0.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>.

Videos and DVD Resources

Cyberbullying – Cruel Intentions. Howell, MI: ABC News, 2006.

Diane Sawyer reports on how cell phones, digital cameras and personal Websites 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?," <https://search.worldcat.org/title/Cyberbullying-:-cruel-intentions/oclc/709673224>

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=dubA2vhllrg, www.childnet-int.org.

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

<https://www.adl.org/resources/lesson-plan/tweens-digital-spaces-and-cyberbullying>

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, MTV

<https://www.adsoftheworld.com/campaigns/a-thin-line-fliers>

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.