

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.