What Needs to Change in Order to End Cyber-Bullying? Perception.
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I. Introduction

While legislation is typically a natural reaction to the rise of any sort of issue or crime, in the case of cyber-bullying, laws are not the most important changes that need to be made. The perception and understanding of cyber-bullying needs to change in order for those who are bullied online to be taken seriously and get the help that they need to stop their bullies. It has been reported that only one in ten victims of cyber-bullying will inform a parent or trusted adult about the cyber-bullying that is taking place.¹ Perhaps if more victims thought that their parents or other adults would take their claims of cyber-bullying more seriously, this number would be higher. Unfortunately, when most adolescents say that they are being bullied, especially online, adults tell them to ignore it, that words are just words, or to just turn off their technological devices. However, cyber-bullying cannot be ignored, words have more power than they are given credit for, and turning off devices does not stop the bullying. Cyber-bullying brings bullies into victims' homes, making them two to nine times more likely to commit suicide.² Perceptions about cyber-bullying need to be changed immediately, and adults need to understand how technology has changed the experience of bullying for adolescents.

With the expansion of the Internet and technology, all fifty states have passed laws pertaining to cyber-stalking and cyber-harassment laws.³ While the term cyber-bullying is sometimes used interchangeably with the term cyber-harassment, addressing cyber-bullying involves the

² Id.
implementation of separate legislation because cyber-bullying pertains to the harassment of students within a school setting.\textsuperscript{4} To date, only thirty-five states have passed legislation or executive orders that address cyber-bullying.\textsuperscript{5} In 2009, the Megan Meier Cyber-Bullying Prevention Act was introduced.\textsuperscript{6} This legislation would have amended Title 18 of the United States Code in order to impose criminal penalties for cyber-bullying.\textsuperscript{7} However, this legislation died in committee.\textsuperscript{8} Perhaps this legislation would have been passed in order to combat cyber-bullying were taken more seriously by legislators and the public, who can mobilize their legislators in order to make the changes that they wish to see, happen.

This paper will discuss the following: (1) the differences between traditional bullying and cyber-bullying, (2) the effects that cyber-bullying has on victims, (3) schools' responses to cyber-bullying, (4) governments' responses to cyber-bullying, and (5) how to change the current understanding of cyber-bullying. Current perceptions of cyber-bullying will be included throughout the paper.

\textbf{II. Bullying vs. Cyber-Bullying}

In order to understand why cyber-bullying is such a huge problem and why changes need to be made as to the perception and understanding of it, it is important to understand the differences between traditional bullying and cyber-bullying. Bullying is a longstanding problem among adolescents, especially in schools. Bullying is defined as: “unwanted, aggressive behavior among school aged children that involves a real or perceived power imbalance. The behavior is repeated, or has the potential to be repeated, over time. Bullying includes actions such as making threats, spreading rumors, spreadering rumors,

\textsuperscript{4} "Cyberbullying," Cyberbullying, Web. 06 May 2014.  
\textsuperscript{5} \textit{Id.}
\textsuperscript{7} \textit{Id.}
\textsuperscript{8} \textit{Id.}
attacking someone physically or verbally, and excluding someone from a group on purpose.” While bullying is nothing new, the rise and rapid expansion of technology in the twenty-first century has caused the Internet to become the new frontier of bullying, cyber-bullying. Cyber-bullying is defined as: “bullying that takes place using electronic technology. Electronic technology includes devices and equipment such as cell phones, computers, and tablets as well as communication tools including social media sites, text messages, chat, and websites.”

The rise of technology has led eighty-one percent of adolescents polled to think that cyber-bullying is easier to get away with than traditional bullying. This does not mean that there are now more bullies, it just means that it is easier to bully. Adolescents aren't becoming more prone to being bullies, but more prone to being bullied by the same bullies. These types of bullying are very closely related, as traditional bullies are cyber-bullies and those traditionally bullied are cyber-bullied. However, while traditional bullies are typically seen as male students who bully other male students, cyber-bullying may actually involve more female students cyber-bullying other female students.

Although more traditional bullying still happens at school than cyber-bullying, cyber-bullying is often more serious, despite the physical absence of the threat, because it can follow the students home. It's one thing to be bullied during school hours when the bullies can be caught by teachers and school officials and be punished. But when these school bullies follow their victims home through

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13 Id.
technology, it is hard for the school to take action. Schools must take action against these bullies because while bullies can attempt to be anonymous, it's rare that a cyber-bully is a stranger.\textsuperscript{15} Traditional bullying is often very difficult to prove, as it turns into a “he said, she said” situation. Cyber-bullying, on the other hand, is traceable because digital footprints are unavoidable.\textsuperscript{16} This is good news for the victims of cyber-bullying. Although the bullying can follow them around everywhere, it is much easier to prove that it is actually happening so that action can be taken.

\textbf{III. Effects of Cyber-Bullying on Victims}

Cyber-bullying takes significant tolls on the students that become its victims. While traditional bullying typically ends when a student goes home for the day, as victims are safe from bullying in their own homes, cyber-bullying does not end with the school day. Cyber-bullying follows these victims around day and night, it is inescapable. Research has found that “cyber-bullying is related to low self-esteem, suicidal ideation, anger, frustration, and a variety of other emotional and psychological problems.”\textsuperscript{17} Nearly forty-three percent of adolescents have been bullied online, and one in four of these victims have had it happen more than once.\textsuperscript{18} Fifty-eight percent of adolescents admit that someone has said mean or hurtful things about and to them online, and more than four out of ten say that it has happened more than once.\textsuperscript{19} Bullying victims are two to nine times more likely to consider committing suicide.\textsuperscript{20} Additionally, thirteen percent of teens who use social media say that they have had an experience that made them nervous to go to school the next day.\textsuperscript{21}

\textsuperscript{15} \textit{Id.}
\textsuperscript{16} \textit{Id.}
\textsuperscript{17} “Cyberbullying Facts - Cyberbullying Research Center.” \textit{Cyberbullying Research Center Cyberbullying Facts Comments.} Web. 04 May 2014. \texttt{<http://cyberbullying.us/research/facts/>}.
\textsuperscript{19} \textit{Id.}
\textsuperscript{20} \textit{Id.}
\textsuperscript{21} "Cyber Bullying Facts." \textit{No BullyingExpert Advice On Cyber Bullying School Bullying}. Web.
Victims of cyber-bullying are continuously picked on at all hours of the day and night. After enough cyber-bullying, victims cannot help but to wonder what is wrong with them to have caused the cyber-bullying. When someone is attacked enough, they stop blaming their cyber-bully and start blaming themselves. Victims of cyber-bullying report having emotional, concentration, and behavioral issues. Additionally, victims of cyber-bullying often feel physical effects because of their trauma. These physical effects are often headache, stomach pain, and difficulty sleeping. It is interesting to note that the cyber-bullies themselves often feel the same effects that their victims feel. Because the cyber-bullying can never end and follows victims around all of the time, they see no way out other than suicide. Those who do not follow through with suicide or have failed attempts, emotional trauma changes the way that they interact with their peers. Victims of cyber-bullying often have harder times interacting and bonding with their peers and feel unsafe at school.

Only one in ten victims will report that they have been cyber-bullied to a parent or trusted adult. This means that the victims either are too scared of their cyber-bullies to come forward, fear retribution for telling, or fear that their parents or other adults will not believe them. The fear that is instilled in victims of cyber-bullying will stay with these victims forever. If perceptions about cyber-bullying and its lasting effects were understood by parents and other adults, perhaps these victims would come forward to end the cyber-bullying and get the help that they need to move forward.

IV. Schools' Responses to Cyber-Bullying

23 Id.  
24 Id.  
25 Id.  
26 Id.  
While schools typically have the power to combat the bullying of its students by other students, as typically the bullying takes place on school grounds, cyber-bullying is completely different. Although it may take place on school grounds, often the cyber-bullying leaves school grounds and persists at all hours of the day and night. This leaves schools unsure of how to proceed. It is clear that their students are involved, but often they feel as though they do not have the power to punish students for things that happen outside of school. Especially before the government stepped up and instituted legislation to combat cyber-bullying, schools had no idea how much power they had to punish cyber-bullies. However, dealing with instances of cyber-bullying is actually relatively similar to dealing with instances of traditional bullying despite the fact that it takes place over the internet. Cyber-bullying within the school must be assessed, youth and parents must be engaged in the fight against cyber-bullying, policies and rules pertaining to cyber-bullying must be created, the school must be made a safe environment against cyber-bullying, and students and school staff must be educated about cyber-bullying and its dangers. The institution of legislation in most states regarding cyber-bullying has certainly helped schools institute policies about dealing with cyber-bullying. While schools have made huge strides in recent years to combat the growing problem of cyber-bullying, more work still needs to be done to ensure that it stops happening.

The Cyber-Bullying Research Center has a number of resources available on its website for educators. These resources include fact sheets for educators and students, with information to keep in mind when on social media websites, scripts for discussion about cyber-bullying, guides for cyber-bullying identification, prevention and response, guides about sexting, guides for legal and policy

29 Id.
issues, etcetera.31 One such document is titled, “Responding to Cyber-Bullying: Top Ten Tips for Educators.”32 Among the tips suggested are that educators thoroughly investigate all incidents, develop a response that is commensurate with the harm done and the disruption that occurred, work with parents, keep all evidence, work with social media sites, solicit advice from neighboring schools, and use creative informal response strategies.33 Also, there are a number of activities available that can be distributed to students in classrooms in order to promote discussions about cyber-bullying.34 These activities include word traces, word searches, crossword puzzles, etcetera.35 Additionally, there are a number of resources on this website available to parents in order to educate them about cyber-bullying and how to talk to their children about it.36

V. Governments' Responses to Cyber-Bullying

Every state currently has either legislation or an executive order pertaining to cyber-stalking and cyber-harassment.37 Thirty-five states currently have legislation or an executive order pertaining to cyber-bullying, which requires separate legislation because it deals with the harassment of students within a school setting.38 State legislation pertaining to cyber-bullying generally defines it as “the willful and repeated use of cell phones, computers, and other electronic communication devices to

31 Id.
33 Id.
35 Id.
36 Id.
harass and threaten others.” Illinois, for example, enacted legislation in 2010 regarding cyber-bullying. This legislation, SB 3266 “prohibits bullying through the transmission of information from a school computer, a school computer network, or other similar electronic school equipment and includes private schools.” Unfortunately, this legislation is very restricting in its language because it only pertains to cyber-bullying that takes place on a school computer or network. This will help to stop cyber-bullying that occurs during school hours on school computers or networks, which would likely include any student device that logs into the school network while at school. However, it does nothing to combat cyber-bullying between students once they leave school property.

Other states, such as Louisiana, have implemented legislation that do a much better job of combating any cyber-bullying that takes place on school property and off of school property. The Louisiana legislation, which was enacted through HB 1458 and HB 1259 in 2010, “requires the adoption of policies establishing procedures for the investigation of reports of harassment, intimidation, and bullying, including cyber-bullying, of a student by another student.” As long as the cyber-bullying is between a student and another student, action can be taken against the cyber-bully. This sort of legislative language gives schools much more discretion to investigate instances of cyber-bullying in institute policies that will effectively punish students who cyber-bully other students.

In 2009, the Megan Meier Cyber-Bullying Prevention Act was introduced as the federal government's attempt to enact cyber-bullying legislation. This legislation would have amended Title 18 of the United States Code in order to impose criminal penalties for cyber-bullying. Under this legislation, “anyone who transmits in interstate or foreign commerce a communication intended to

39 Id.
40 Id.
41 Id.
43 Id.
coerce, intimidate, harass, or cause substantial emotional distress to another person, using electronic means to support severe, repeated, and hostile behavior.” Because criminal statutes are generally the jurisdiction of the states’, federal legislation to institute criminal sanctions on cyber-bullying was a long shot and, inevitably, failed when it died in committee. However, the findings in the language of the legislation, HR 1966, show that the legislation was proposed with the right idea. The most notable finding was that: “Cyber-bullying can cause psychological harm, including depression; negatively impact academic performance, safety, and the well-being of children in school; force children to change schools; and in some cases lead to extreme violent behavior, including murder and suicide.” The federal government realizes the danger of cyber-bullying, but must use a different approach to combat it at a federal level.

VI. How to Change Perceptions About Cyber-Bullying

The current perception of cyber-bullying, typically the perception of older generations, is that while it is an issue, it is easy to combat because victims of cyber-bullying can just turn off the technology that is causing them so many problems. However, sixty-eight percent of teens agree that cyber-bullying is a serious issue. Cited throughout this paper is the “When Bullying goes High Tech” article on the CNN Health website. At the end of the article, which describes the seriousness of cyber-bullying and its effects on victims, there are a number of comments which read something like “turn off your electronic gadgets and go outside and play.” Anyone who commented in response to this posting saying that cyber-bullying is not that easily solved was attacked by other users. Once such user posted, “Life's full of disappointments and people talking crap about you, get used to it. If you can't handle it

44 Id.
online you going to have one heck of a time in the real world.”48 In the United States, we have the right to free speech, and everyone is entitled to their own opinions. But the experiences of cyber-bullying victims cannot be trivialized and made to seem ridiculous. For victims of cyber-bullying, there is no escaping the things being said to them and about them via text, chat, or website. No one should be subjected to cyber-bullying, especially people who are trying to stand up for the victims of cyber-bullying on an article and end up victims themselves.

Even after the government has reacted with legislation and executive orders that work to combat cyber-bullying, people are not taking it seriously. Just because a device can be turned off, does not mean that cyber-bullying should be ignored or tolerated, ever. We must stop blaming the victims of cyber-bullying for reading and being upset by the things being said to them and start realizing that no one should ever be bullied in any form. Cyber-bullying is just as harmful as traditional bullying, as much as some might disagree. As long as people operate with the perception that cyber-bullying is not as serious as traditional bullying, it does not matter what steps schools and governments take in order to combat the problem. Without people taking cyber-bullying seriously, people will continue to let it slide, let victims suffer, and let cyber-bullies get away with causing major psychological harm.

Although technology, the Internet, and social media can be used for negative reasons, such as cyber-bullying, it is time to take back control and use it for good. Social media campaigns can be incredibly effective for spreading information and getting messages out to the general public. A social media campaign targeted towards those who believe that cyber-bullying is not a serious problem would be the first step in educating people about its dangers and long-lasting effects on victims. Traditional print media must also be utilized in order to educate everyone about cyber-bullying. Because it is often older generations who do not realize just how serious cyber-bullying is, it is important to reach out

48 Id.
specifically to these generations. Those who did not grow up attached to the technology we have today have a harder time conceptualizing the inability to just “turn devices off” when cyber-bullying is happening. Would they tell victims of traditional bullying to stay home from school because they are being bullied? No. And telling victims to turn their devices off is basically the same concept. There is so much research being produced pertaining to the wide-spread occurrences of cyber-bullying and its effects on victims. This research needs to be more widely publicized in order for changes to be made.

VII. Conclusion

Cyber-bullying is a major issue in the United States that has only progressed and gotten worse in recent years, do to advances in technology and increased access to social media. While schools and governments are trying to put an end to this by enforcing policies and laws that will work to combat the growing problem of cyber-bullying, it will not be enough until perceptions and everyone's understanding about cyber-bullying change. Social media, as well as traditional print media, need to be utilized in order to launch a large-scale education campaign about the seriousness and long term harms