

# The Offense of Cyberbullying

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How dare anyone mock another of God's precious children? How dare anyone laugh at the physical or mental limitations that God in his wisdom gives to one of his children! We all have thorns; physical and psychological problems that cause us to be inadequate. These thorns are given us by God for countless reasons. They cause us to hope for glory, lead the body of believers to aid one another, they teach us patience, and they also lead us to not glory in the abilities recognizing that they also are from God. How dare one member of Christ's body make a mockery of another's God-given limitations?

Perhaps a "slip of the tongue," in an unguarded moment, can be understood and overlooked. The tongue, after all, is that powerful member of the body that no man can tame and is set on fire of hell (James 3). But the fingers, they don't function as the tongue does. They make no sudden slips. The tongue may spew a stream of consciousness so that that which is present in the mind is formed into words by the tongue. That which is in the heart comes out at the mouth. But when the fingers do the talking, simple excuses fail. Consciousness does not pour out of our fingers. Our fingers only make intentional movements. Designed by God to do work and manipulate the world, our fingers are under the purposeful, resolute direction of our soul. How incredibly intentional and incredibly cruel is bullying when practiced by our fingers!

Online bullying is known as cyberbullying. Bullying occurs when a person repetitively abuses or mistreats others weaker than themselves. The internet has become a vehicle for bullying. The same repetitive and aggressive power displays that otherwise happen face to face is also done online. Snapchat, Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, blog sites, email, online polls, and the comments section of news sites can all be used to shame and demean others.

Cyberbullying is committed when one takes an untimely picture of another and posts it all over social media with degrading comments. It happens when a poll is produced asking which of the following students is the biggest loser in the senior class. Cyberbullying occurs when a student directly messages another about the uncool clothes, shoes, styles, etc. that another wears. Cyberbullying can take the form of rumors that are fabricated and spread on social media. It happens when one student makes fun of a comment or post that was made in an online chatroom that includes multiple people. Finally, it can happen when a student produces a fake profile of another student and fills it with demeaning and embarrassing content.

The significance of cyberbullying is understood when one understands what the online environment has become. Originally, the internet was a medium for sharing information and promoting one's business. Today it is a virtual or online public space. Similar to other public spaces, the internet is a place to gather, to gossip, to share stories, to make friendships, and to put one's best face forward. Young people prefer to meet in real, physical, public spaces. They desire to meet at school, at the park, in the gym, at the beach, or at each other's homes. But opportunity is limited, so this new virtual public space has become their public space to maintain sociability when they are otherwise restricted by time and their own demanding schedule. This public space is open 24 hours a day and can be accessed within seconds whenever there is a tiny break in their busy schedule.

Unlike the public spaces of the school playground, the gym, the library, and a friend's home; there is no official monitor online. Those impulses that may otherwise be restrained by the presence and watchful eye of an authority are often not present online. As a result the conversation can quickly become ugly, and bullying comments are both produced and subsequently liked by others.

Cyberbullying is more intentional than other forms of bullying. One has to compose, edit, and then finally publish an online attack. Multiple opportunities to exercise self-control have to be suppressed before the missive is broadcast for other's enjoyment.

What's worse is that the public space of the internet is a competitive environment. With everyone posting it is hard to capture everyone else's attention. Attention is the currency of the internet or the online status symbol of choice. When people post, they want a good number of number of looks, shares, retweets, and forwards. Bullies have discovered that exaggerated, harsh, humiliating, and degrading comments about others pay handsomely.

It can be argued that cyberbullying is more damaging than traditional bullying. Other forms occur when one is out in public. The victim could always retreat to their home. Today the home provides less protection. The computer, the tablet, and the smartphone are all open doors for additional attacks. Today's victims of bullying have no place of escape.

The internet also makes the attacks much more public. At school the victim is degraded in front of those currently in ear shot. But the sound waves of the internet do not attenuate. The comments linger for all to see for days and weeks.

The internet's public space provides a safety barrier behind which the bully can cower. Online media distance the bully from his victim. Hiding behind a screen gives those who otherwise are not bold enough to bully in person an opportunity to bully from a distance and bold bullies are less restrained. The immediate facial expressions of the victim are not seen, their cries are not heard, and so the taunts grow more aggressive and have a longer duration.

Cyberbullying is an issue of the heart. As the regenerate soul grows in conversion so that he hates his sin and lives a sanctified life he will stop his behavior of bullying. Addressing the heart of the bully can reduce the incidence of cyberbullying.

A Christian's heart is affected by the preaching. May we all hear God's command to love the neighbor, to seek the neighbor's well-being, and may we be convicted of our sins.

A Christian's heart is affected by friends. Degrading online comments will be seen in the public space that friends choose to occupy together. Close friends ought to go the way of Matthew 18 and admonish their erring brother. Repentance ought to be sought and forgiveness given.

A Christian's heart is affected by adults. Parents, elders, ministers, and teachers ought to be present and actively monitoring the public spaces of the online world. Especially those that have authority over the platforms and devices that bullies use ought to be monitoring those devices. The teacher that produces a chatroom must monitor that room. The minister that chooses online platforms to interact with his sheep must be present in that environment.

A Christian's heart is also affected by laws and punishments of the land. Cyberbullying is against the law. As of Oct. 1, 2015 all public school districts were compelled by law to adopt a policy against bullying and were authorized to execute that policy. The law stated that cyberbullying must be included in policies that these schools produced. The bullying policy must be implemented whenever a student uses school sanctioned sites for academic work. You can read about this yourself by searching Michigan Compiled Laws, Chapter 380—The Revised School Code, Act 451 of 1976, Section 1310b. Private schools ought to adopt similar policies to suppress the ungodly behavior of cyberbullying.

May God give us wisdom and love as we interact with one another. May the words of Psalm 19:14 guide our online and offline interactions, "Let the words of my mouth, and the meditations of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight, O LORD, my strength, and my redeemer."

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