

Preface

Fifteen-year-old Phoebe Prince moved to South Hadley, Massachusetts, from Ireland at the beginning of the 2009–2010 school year. As a new, pretty, interesting girl from another country, she had attracted the attention of some of the local boys, which led to growing resentment from some of the girls at the school. As a result, several students began relentlessly bullying her until she couldn't take it anymore and chose to end her life. Media reports exclusively zeroed in on bullying and cyberbullying as the cause of Phoebe's suicide; some of the teens involved were even criminally charged. Actions taken by the school prior to the suicide were scrutinized, the community and nation clamored for justice, and the family and loved ones of Phoebe were left to face the incredibly painful fallout of what happened.

*Like many of the previous cases of teen suicide tied to bullying that we are familiar with, there is more to the story than the simple sound bite explanation that bullying and cyberbullying led to Phoebe's death (more on this in Chapter 4). Emily Bazelon, bestselling author of *Sticks and Stones*, detailed the emotional and psychological struggles and interpersonal conflict that Phoebe was dealing with in her coverage of the tragedy for *Slate* magazine. For example, she cut herself. She was prescribed medication to help with mood swings. Her parents and the school say they were on watch for signs of depression, but she first attempted suicide the day after Thanksgiving that year by swallowing a bottle of her pills. During this time, she also had dated at least two of the popular boys at her new school who had recently been in relationships with other girls. These girls apparently became jealous and, along with others, targeted Phoebe incessantly both at school and online. When taking into account everything that Phoebe had going on in her life, it appears that the bullying she experienced was the straw that broke the proverbial camel's back.*

Phoebe did not deserve to be bullied—no one does. Without a doubt, adolescence is an incredibly difficult developmental stage of life, fraught with numerous struggles and complexities. Some teens are better able than

others to deal with the challenges of it all, including the stress and harm that stems from peer harassment. To be sure, some demonstrate remarkable resilience and can cope positively and persevere. Others, unfortunately, cannot and are very much affected, feeling angry, frustrated, depressed, and even suicidal.

Would Phoebe have committed suicide if she hadn't been bullied? Of course there is no way anyone can answer that question. There is little doubt she was tormented at great lengths by some of her classmates and that it persisted for a long time. Those experiences, coupled with the other challenges she was working through, were a recipe for disaster. A lot of seemingly little things related to bullying can quickly add up to something humongous in the eyes and lives of adolescents and can be overwhelming—making it feel like the walls surrounding them are slowly but surely closing in. Indeed, technology can magnify these so-called “little things” by exposing the target to a wider audience and by creating a perception in the victim that the whole world is against them. It also makes it harder to escape because of the ubiquitous nature of technology and how teens seem perpetually tethered to their devices and their online social world, which for the most part, mirrors many realities of their offline world.

The purpose of *Bullying Beyond the Schoolyard* is to bring you up to speed about the kinds of hurtful behaviors youth are experiencing and perpetrating online and to equip you with the knowledge and resources necessary to do something about them. Despite significant advances, many adults still lack basic knowledge when it comes to electronic devices, social media, smartphone apps, and the seemingly ever-changing online venues. Or at least they are often behind when compared with their kids. This book will help you catch up by describing the technology that youth are using, and in some cases misusing, every single day. The point is not to scare you into a negative perception of devices, sites, and apps—because they are amazing and here to stay! Instead, we want to educate and empower you to take certain proactive steps to protect youth and prevent and respond to inappropriate behaviors that involve technology.

While this book is primarily concerned with cyberbullying among students, we also touch on what should be done in situations where students employ electronic devices to harass educators. In fact, many of the lessons learned about how a school can and should respond to cyberbullying come from several cases where students were disciplined for cyberharassing staff (Chapter 5 covers these issues in depth). Given the similarities, the methods discussed in this book for preventing and responding to cyberbullying among adolescents can also be applied to incidents of staff harassment.

APPROACH

Rather than acting solely on what is heard in the popular media concerning a new phenomenon, educators, parents, and others concerned about kids need to examine the problem of cyberbullying responsibly to learn how best to address it. The alarmist and sensationalistic headlines in the national news may grab our attention, but they do little to inform or teach us about the actual scope, prevalence, frequency, causes, and consequences of electronic aggression among teenagers. Research does.

Much of the information reported throughout this book stems from our own original research conducted since 2002. We have surveyed nearly 15,000 students from dozens of schools in the United States through eight separate surveys. Most recently (spring of 2014), we gathered and analyzed data from a random sample of 650 middle school students from a school in the northeastern United States. In all of our surveys, we ask youth about their experiences with traditional schoolyard bullying and cyberbullying as well as a number of other related factors (e.g., computer proficiency, stressful life events, self-esteem, and suicidal ideation). Our goal is to systematically and scientifically illuminate the problem of cyberbullying to better inform those who work most closely with youth.

Moreover, these data are supplemented by information collected from thousands of youth who have formally and informally corresponded with us over the years. We wanted them to tell us about their cyberbullying experiences *in their own words*. We found out that many targets of cyberbullying were scared to talk about it with their parents because they didn't want to be blamed or lose their computer privileges. We learned that some incidents lasted for years and that youth felt helpless and didn't know where to go for help. Adolescents in our research had a great deal to say about cyberbullying and wanted their voices to be heard. We wrote this book in part for that purpose: to tell their stories. And, as you will see, these stories are rich, colorful, eye opening, and even heartrending as they provide a very personal, vulnerable perspective.

The chapters that follow also include accounts from adults who are at the forefront of Internet-based behavioral issues. We have spoken to teachers, school administrators, counselors, law enforcement officers, parents, and many other youth-serving professionals who have been grappling with the complications that arise from cyberbullying incidents. Most of these folks simply improvised and did their best because not much was known about how to handle these unique cases properly. Since there are so many gray areas in terms of responding to cyberbullying, their interpretations and actions are important to consider because they contribute toward building a body of knowledge over time that can consistently provide meaningful guidance. It is

hoped that the best practices we have collected and now share in this book can inform the actions of those of you who are in the trenches so that your prevention and response strategies have utility and value.

TARGET POPULATION

It is important in this introduction that we define the age range of youth to whom we are referring in this book. In short, we focus our discussion on adolescents. That said, we realize that the terms *adolescent* and *adolescence* mean different things to different people. Most researchers identify three distinct developmental periods: early adolescence (usually between ages 10–13), middle adolescence (ages 14–17), and late adolescence (18 through the early 20s).¹ We are most concerned with school-age youth—those under eighteen and in their early and middle developmental stages—so the majority of stories and data in this book originate from this population. While this is not to suggest that the cyberbullying experiences of older adolescents and adults (or even very young children) should be ignored, we have chosen to focus on an age group that is most susceptible to cyberbullying and least likely (comparatively speaking) to have acquired the skills to cope positively with it. In addition, we believe that it is easier to identify and intervene in experiences of online aggression among this population, which is still under the watch and care of parents and educators.

TERMINOLOGY

Throughout this book, we use terms like *cyberbully*, *aggressor*, and *offender* to refer to the one who has engaged in bullying behaviors. Similarly we use *victim* and *target* to refer to those who experience bullying. We want to acknowledge up front that we would have preferred not to use some of these terms in specific ways. For example, we generally don't like using any of the above as nouns (e.g., referring to the “bully” or the “victim”) and try to avoid doing so wherever possible both in this book and when speaking with others. Unfortunately, we were compelled in some cases to use these as shorthand ways to refer to those involved in various roles. It would have been awkward to repeatedly write “the one who was targeted” or “the one who participated in bullying behaviors” over and over again throughout the book. Also, since both boys and girls are involved in bullying and in order to avoid the equally awkward use of *him or her* and *she and he*, we alternate between these gender-specific pronouns throughout.

THE IMPORTANT ROLE OF EDUCATORS

When considering our audience, we decided specifically to target educators with this information, since they are often the first contact when adolescent aggression occurs. In many cases, kids are spending more direct time each school day with their teachers than they are with their parents. As a result, educators may notice when something isn't quite right by picking up on subtle cues. Administrators, counselors, teachers, and others who work with teens on a daily basis also tend to be more proactive in informing themselves about issues facing youth today. In addition, schools that participate in the e-Rate program or are otherwise mandated by their state bullying law (discussed in more depth in Chapter 5) have an obligation to educate their students about responsible technology usage, including cyberbullying specifically. Educators are also required to respond to all forms of bullying that disrupt the learning environment at school, no matter where they occur. Finally, we believe educators can also serve as the conduit through which this important information reaches the parents of their students, as well as others in the community who need to learn about this problem.

Even though the vast majority of cyberbullying behaviors take place off school grounds, they very often make their way back into the school. In fact, many adolescent problems these days either begin at school and progress online or are initiated online and continue at school. Like it or not, educators will frequently have to deal with repercussions of disagreements or issues that began or escalated a great distance from the schoolhouse doors. Thankfully, you will see that there is much educators can and should do with respect to the online behaviors of their students—even if most of those actions and interactions occur outside of the confines of the school.

IMPORTANT FEATURES OF THE BOOK

Bullying Beyond the Schoolyard includes a number of special features that will help you identify, prevent, and respond to cyberbullying incidents. In addition to incorporating personal voices and viewpoints from youth affected by or involved in cyberbullying incidents, as well as educators and parents who are responsible for their safety and well-being, the book also contains several valuable in-text features to help reinforce the key concepts, including the following:

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- Breakout boxes highlighting important strategies to deal with cyberbullying

- Review of the latest research in this emerging area
- Summary of important legal rulings and what they mean to you
- Warning signs to help identify cyberbullies and their targets
- Practical ideas for you to implement to make a difference this school year
- Questions for reflection after each chapter
- Chapter summaries
- Index

Along with the special features in the text, the book also includes a number of tools in the Resources section that can assist you in understanding and addressing cyberbullying. These resources can be reproduced and distributed to others to help inform and educate your community about cyberbullying. They include the following:

- Cyberbullying Scenarios for Discussion
- Technology Use Contract
- Cyberbullying and Online Aggression Survey Instrument (2014 version)
- Cyberbullying Incident Tracking Form
- Cyberbullying Report Card for Schools
- Cyberbullying Trustee Designation
- Supplemental Staff Development Questions

ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

This book has been organized in such a way that will allow for easy access of important information, depending on the issues you currently face. We do not expect you to remember everything you read, so we structured the book to serve as a handy reference or resource. While there is some necessary

overlap between chapters, each part is largely distinct in its examination of a particular topic relating to cyberbullying.

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Chapter 1 frames the problem of cyberbullying by first summarizing one of the most noteworthy stories from the last few years, and one that powerfully highlights the harm that can result when we ignore the misuse of electronic devices, social media,

and the Internet. It continues by breaking down what we know about traditional forms of bullying in terms of its definition, prevalence, associated factors, and consequences. Cyberbullying is then defined and the important elements are discussed in a way that can inform the remainder of the book.

Chapter 2 provides background on the evolution of smartphones and social media and outlines the benefits they provide for their users. We then summarize the most popular cell phone applications and social media platforms that teens are (currently) using and highlight their attractive qualities, unique features, and societal impact. You may very well know and use some of these but may be unfamiliar or even unaware of others. And hopefully, this foundational information helps in promoting a more robust understanding of what kids like to do online.

Chapter 3 explains why cyberbullying stands on its own as a form of peer harassment by clarifying six key facets to consider: anonymity and pseudonymity, disinhibition, deindividuation, lack of supervision, virality, and limitless victimization risk. These characteristics, simply put, enable individuals to harass, humiliate, and threaten others more easily and readily than in the real world. Here, a number of quotes and real-life examples are presented to highlight the relevance of each facet.

Chapter 4 summarizes our research and that of others who have systematically studied the problem. The findings from these studies can help depict the scope and gravity of cyberbullying and be used to inform policy and programming as we move forward. Also, we are often asked, “Why exactly do kids bully other kids online?” While there is no simple answer to this question, a number of developmental, behavioral, psychological, and sociological explanations can help us understand the possible causes of this problem.

Chapter 5 presents a comprehensive discussion of the legal issues confronting school administrators who are attempting to understand the parameters of their role in responding to cyberbullying incidents. School officials are in a difficult position because they don’t want to overstep their legal authority in disciplining student behavior that occurs off campus. We argue, however, that they can (and should) intervene in specific situations—in incidents that ultimately impact students or the learning environment at school. We review a number of court cases that support this perspective and detail the essential components of a well-developed and structured cyberbullying policy for schools.

Chapter 6 provides a number of practical recommendations for preventing cyberbullying. These include the following: formally assessing the frequency and scope of the problem among students; educating staff and youth through information sharing, assemblies, and rule setting; galvanizing teens to spread the message through peer mentoring programs; creating and maintaining a positive school climate; using blocking or filtering mechanisms; implementing formal anti-bullying prevention programming; and educating parents so they can do their part. The remainder of the chapter focuses on what parents and students can specifically do to reduce the chances of victimization, and to increase the positive and productive use of technology

among adolescents. Our discussion of prevention wraps up with a summary of warning signs that may signal that a child is being cyberbullied, or is bullying someone else online.

Finally, Chapter 7 explores constructive ways in which to respond to cyberbullying. When appropriate, educators must step up quickly to identify and then discipline harmful behaviors in cyberspace by their students. We argue that informal response strategies will prove most useful for the majority of cyberbullying behaviors but also discuss when and how formal disciplinary action must be pursued. Also covered are ancillary but helpful strategies such as creative discipline ideas, aggravating circumstances where enhanced punitive measures are merited, how to reach and work with service and content providers to delete harmful material and accounts, and how to work with law enforcement. Informed and practical advice for parents of both those bullied and those who bully online is also provided, along with guidance for teens who are victimized or witness it happening. Overall, we convey that the role of each is critical to present a united front against cyberbullying and attempt to ensure that everyone knows all possible and optimal courses of action when dealing with incidents.

Bullying is pressing in on us partly because the rise of the Internet forced us to see it up close, in printouts and screen shots or video clips, and partly because of the stubborn nature of the problem, across cultures and centuries. And it merits serious and sustained attention, because awareness is the first step to preventing bullying and to helping kids through it.

—Emily Bazelon, *Sticks and Stones*²

NOTES

1. Judith G. Smetana, Nicole Campione-Barr, and Aaron Metzger. “Adolescent Development in Interpersonal and Societal Contexts.” *Annual Review of Psychology* 57 (2006): 255–284.
2. Emily Bazelon. *Sticks and Stones: Defeating the Culture of Bullying and Rediscovering the Power of Character and Empathy*, p. 298. New York: Random House, 2013.