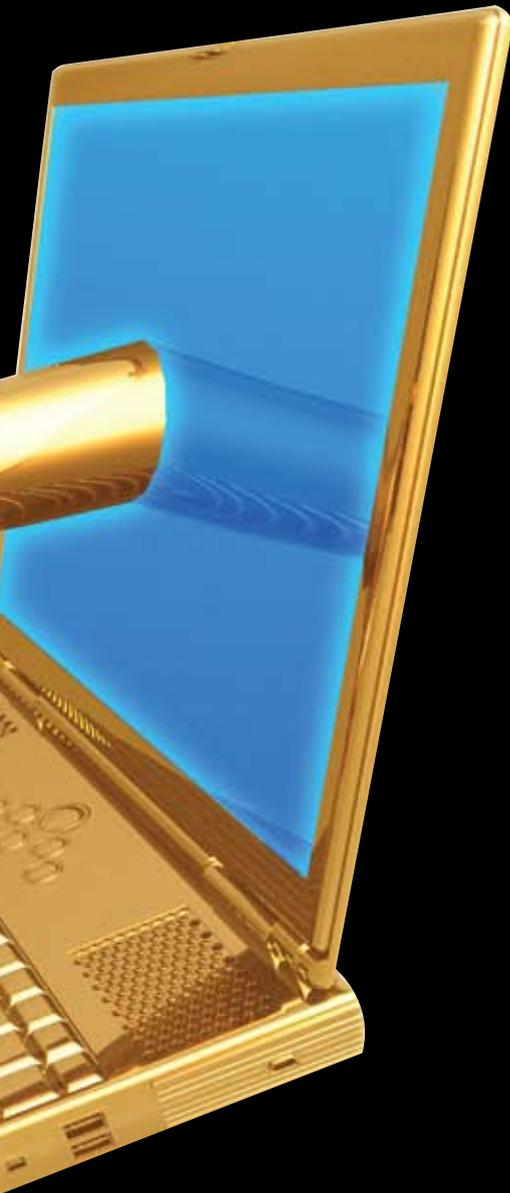


Cyber Relationships: The New Challenge for Educators





Peer relationships at school are dynamic and often volatile, and teachers can spend a great deal of time trying to manage those situations so that students can achieve their learning potential.

By **Dr Barbara Spears**

With the increased uptake of students engaging with social networking sites, chat rooms, blogs, and texting, the challenge of managing relationships and behaviour is amplified in an 'always on' environment. As students cycle between the two worlds: the real, physical world of the school; and the virtual, cyber world that technology brings, teachers and school leaders are having to reflect upon the boundary-less nature of these interactions, and the processes and strategies required to support students and staff whilst at school.

How Has School Changed?

School has always been a centre of social activity for students. Friends and foes co-exist, relationships form and adjourn, conflicts and bullying occur. The dominant social culture in the school defines who and what is accepted or rejected, leading to a social dynamic that is active and at times unpredictable. After the weekend, for example, there is much talking in the yard about who has done what with whom. During school, clusters of students hang out together, welcoming or excluding others. After school, there is much conversation about what happened during the day. At home in the past, phone calls would continue those conversations. The difference with today's

schooling environment is that as well as the phone conversations, there is a parallel universe in operation – cyber space, and it operates 24/7 in a boundary-less environment. Students now also conduct their relationships via technology which, then impacts on relationships whilst at school.

Two boys have an argument which escalates to a physical fight. It was filmed using a mobile phone and uploaded to a video sharing website. The loser of the fight was humiliated to the extent that he i-solated himself to avoid being taunted and eventually left the school. (Transcript summary from [cyberbullying stories.org.au](http://cyberbullyingstories.org.au))

The shift from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0 environments has meant that emails are old technology; that computers are no longer tied to desks; that every mobile phone has a camera and is Internet ready, with direct links to social networking sites. The interactive nature of the environment has opened new avenues for friendships and relationships to evolve, for conflicts and bullying to occur, and for new, extended audiences outside the usual social circle to witness all. The challenge for teachers and school leaders is to manage these remarkable technologies and the relationships that occur in and around them.

Cyber Relationships and Risk

Relationships in cyber space, just as those in the physical world, involve family, peers and strangers. At first glance, the risky, unsafe relationship would appear to be the one with strangers. Much is written about the need for young people to protect their online identity, to not divulge personal information and to avoid meeting strangers they meet online. These cyber relationships are recognized as being highly risky.

But what of the peer relationships of students? How risky are they? What is the risk? Students have access to a full range of technologies that allow them to engage in and promote their relationships, and also to vent their anger and manipulate and control others' relationships. Teachers and schools must now deal with the fallout from these.

One of my students was actually... dumped on MySpace... unbeknownst to her. It wasn't until she actually... had friends text message her... and tell her... that he had actually, you know... announced to the world on her MySpace that they were ov-er... (Summary transcript from cyberbullyingstories.org.au).

When in the confines of a trusted friendship or relationship, young people may take films or photos of themselves, send emails, and chat online feeling quite safe, as the fundamentals of that relationship are trust and loyalty. There are multiple risks however, if that relationship falters and trust is betrayed, just as there are in the real world. In cyber world, however, the risks are magnified.

A girl who cheats with her friend's boyfriend finds out that her friend has posted erotic pictures of her on MySpace. (Summary transcript from cyberbullyingstories.org.au)

Friendships are not static, and conflict is a normal part of any relationship. Students need to be reminded of this. Relationships will ebb and flow according to developmental concerns and the dynamics of the peer group, and so being in an exclusive friendship can further increase the risk

of cyber bullying when viewed this way. The other risk is that the afore-mentioned photo is now out of the control of the individual and could turn up anywhere at anytime.

Cyber Bullying and Bystanders

Bullying is an old problem that is morphing into new forms through the advent of technology. Hate books that were passed around the class now take the form of polling websites where you can rank others. Exclusion occurs when individuals are blocked in chat rooms. Physical fights shift to cyber space where humiliation is on a grand scale. Now teachers can also be filmed and held up for ridicule and humiliation. For any behaviour to be deemed bullying, however, three components must be present: a deliberate intent to hurt or harm; some element of repetition; and a power imbalance (Olweus, 1993). Current understandings of bullying further suggest that bullying is not only a group-related behaviour, but is a "relationship problem – because it is a form of aggression that unfolds in the context of a relationship, in which the child asserts interpersonal power through aggression" (Pepler, Craig, Connolly, Yule, McMaster and Jiang, 2006, p376). A fight at school may remain just a fight

between two individuals until it is either overtly or covertly filmed and uploaded to a video sharing site, or forwarded to other students via mobile phones. It takes on a new dimension when the potential for humiliation increases back at school and cycles to and fro across the ether. It also raises issues about any punishments or sanctions.

A fight was planned by two boys. Another boy was asked to video tape it and then sent it around the school. The boy who filmed the fight was expelled, but nothing happened to the others. (Transcript summary from cyberbullyingstories.org.au)

The role of bystanders is important to consider here. Where are the "white knights" in cyber space that will come to the aid of those being victimized? In the real world, bystanders are encouraged to intervene, to report to an adult, or to advocate for the target/victim, thus contributing to shifting the power imbalance that exists between bully and victim. In terms of cyber relationships, cyber bystanders may have a different role to play in addition to this. To assist in stopping the problem, students should be encouraged to avoid forwarding on images and texts, to avoid visiting websites that denigrate and humiliate, and to avoid contributing to nasty

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blogs and online slam books. Bystanders in cyber relationships need to engage morally and become part of the solution, actively deciding not to be part of the problem by choosing to 'not forward on'.

Conclusion and Strategies for Teachers to Consider

Cyber relationships are extensions of our real world relationships. Not everyone is a bully, victim, or bystander, but everyone interacts within and across relationships, whether it is peer to peer, student to teacher, boyfriend to girlfriend, parent to school or teacher to teacher. The new challenge is that these relationships occur in both schooling contexts and also in a parallel universe. They operate 24/7, straddling both worlds: the physical space of school and the cyber space of ICTs, and this has implications on how teachers and students manage the behaviours they experience. Jurisdictions, however, are blurred between home and school, and it should be considered in this 'always-on' environment, that behaviour which impacts on the wellbeing of someone at school, is school-related behaviour that needs to be addressed, regardless of whether it occurred at school or not. Schools are communities, and the whole community must take responsibility rather than relying on arbitrary schoolyard boundaries, which no longer apply in cyber space.

Strategies to support the development of healthy cyber relationships should do several things:

- Empower victims
- Empower others to support them, such as cyber bystanders

- Develop understanding of how young people behave and engage with ICTs
- Help the perpetrators understand the impact of their behaviour. (www.cyberbullyingstories.org.au).

One way of empowering individuals is to recognize the cyber skills, potential level of risk and possible vulnerability that students may have (See Willard, 2007).

Establishing which students have the knowledge and skills to function safely in cyber space will free up time and energy to devote to those students who are at greater risk. Making students aware of their relationship responsibility is important. Identify those who lack the decision-making skills to make sound decisions, and offer them skills training which will support them to become responsible cyber citizens. Those students who react or act without thinking need assistance to recognize the impact that any knee-jerk reaction could have, as once something is posted online, it cannot be fully retrieved. Determine which students are at risk of alienation and could be especially vulnerable in cyber space. Acknowledge that those with any mental health issues are particularly at risk. These last two categories require most of the attention from teachers and school leaders as these are the most vulnerable in our schooling communities. Other ways of engaging students around the notion of cyber relationships and cyber bullying can be found on the following website: www.cyberbullyingstories.org.au (Also see Spears, Slee, Owens, & Johnson, 2009).

Managing friendships, peer, and dating relationships in the real, physical world of schooling is difficult enough for most. The challenge for school communities is to now manage them as they cross over to cyber space and back again, particularly as technology continues to change. ■

A full list of references is available upon request from editorial@australianmediagroup.com

Dr Barbara Spears is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Education, University of South Australia. A former primary school teacher, she is a leading national and internationally recognized researcher into girls' peer relationships and bullying behaviours. She has led the Australian Government investigation into Covert Bullying: Insights into the Human Dimension of Covert Bullying, and is a member of the evaluation team for KidsMatter, a national mental health initiative in primary schools. She is also a chief investigator in the Australian Research Council project: Cyber bullying: an evidence-based approach to the application and reform of law, policy and practice in schools. She is a founding member of the Coalition to Decrease Bullying, Harassment and Violence in South Australian Schools, which advises government on policy and practices. Email Barbara with any questions at Barbara.spears@unisa.edu.au

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