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 “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 Internet 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, Challenging Social Norms at Rutgers University and Challenging Social Norms at University of Missouri-Columbia (create overhead transparencies of these images or save them on a laptop so they can be projected on to a large screen)
- Social Norms Theory: Background for Educators (for teacher reference only)
- Navigating a Digital World: Tips for Youth (one for each student)

Other Material:

- Large sheets of newsprint or construction paper, assorted art supplies (markers, crayons, etc.)
- Laptop/LCD projector or overhead projector, screen, Internet access

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 honestly.

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 “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 Internet 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 willful and repeated harm inflicted through electronic media.3)
   • Where does it happen most often? (Common vehicles include social networking sites, other Web sites, chat rooms, e-mail, instant messaging, text/picture/video 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 Let’s Fight It Together, a seven-minute film produced in the United Kingdom by Childnet for the Department for Children, Schools and Families to help sensitize young people to the pain and hurt which can be caused by cyberbullying. After the viewing, elicit student reactions and discuss the following questions:

   • Why do you think Kim targeted Joe for harassment?
   • Why do you think Joe endured the cyberbullying without seeking help?
   • Why do you think Rob and the other bystanders joined in or allowed the cyberbullying to go on without interrupting it?

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Have you experienced or witnessed instances of cyberbullying like this one? If so, how did you respond? After watching this film, would you respond differently in the future?

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 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:

   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. Ask students if they think that it is possible to change the social norms in a community. Inform them that social scientists have come up with ways to re-educate students about social norms to address campus problems such as binge drinking, sexism and homophobia. Display the Challenging Social Norms at Rutgers University and University of Missouri-Columbia posters and explain that these were part of campaigns designed to correct misperceptions of, and to reduce, student alcohol and other drug use. Tell students that these posters were distributed through campus media, presentations, and mailings to first year students, members of Greek organizations, athletes and other groups most likely to engage in excessive drinking.

5. 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. On the Internet 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 text a private picture or something personal to someone, it is not okay for them to send it to anyone else.

6. Instruct each group to come up with a message for re-educating their peers about the norm they were assigned, to create a poster illustrating the message and to identify some strategies for disseminating their message.

7. 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.

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4 This process, survey and social norms adapted with permission from Tanya Smolinsky, “What Do We Really Think?”, original unpublished work.
8. Distribute the handout, *Navigating a Digital World: Tips for Youth*, and review the information with students to reinforce safe and responsible Internet use. Send the handout home for students to share and discuss with family members.
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. On the Internet 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 text 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.acem.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

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.

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2 Ibid.
Challenging Social Norms at Rutgers University

Yes, 2/3 of Rutgers Students Stop at 3 or Fewer Drinks.
Almost 1 in 5 Don't Drink at All.
We got the stats from you!
Challenging Social Norms at University of Missouri-Columbia
Cyberbullying Resources

Print and Online Publications


Children’s Books


Videos and DVD Resources


Created in partnership with the New York City Department of Education, the Mayor's Office of the Criminal Justice Coordinator and Microsoft, this four-part Internet safety video—created by youth for youth—raises awareness of Internet risks and teaches preventive measures. Featuring introductions by “Gossip Girl” star Jessica Szohr, the DVD contains two narrative pieces and two documentaries that explore online sexual predators, cyberbullying, maintaining anonymity and online gaming; [http://a002-vod.nyc.gov/html/search.php?qr=clicking+with+caution](http://a002-vod.nyc.gov/html/search.php?qr=clicking+with+caution).
Diane Sawyer reports on how cell phones, digital cameras and personal Web sites combine in new ways that seems to encourage and amplify the meanness of teenage behavior; [www.abcnnewstore.com](http://www.abcnnewstore.com). (For clips and description, see Gray, Keturah (September 12, 2006). “How Mean Can Teens Be?,” [http://abcnews.go.com/Primetime/story?id=2421562&pa ge=1](http://abcnews.go.com/Primetime/story?id=2421562&page=1).

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; [http://archive.adl.org/education/curriculum_connections/cyberbullying/Kitchen_Final%20Viral%20Video.wmv](http://archive.adl.org/education/curriculum_connections/cyberbullying/Kitchen_Final%20Viral%20Video.wmv).

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.digizen.org/cyberbullying/fullFilm.aspx](http://www.digizen.org/cyberbullying/fullFilm.aspx), [www.childnet-int.org](http://www.childnet-int.org).


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.chasewilson.com/sticksandstones](http://www.chasewilson.com/sticksandstones).

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; [http://archive.adl.org/education/curriculum_connections/cyberbullying/Talent%20Show_Final%20Viral%20Video.wmv](http://archive.adl.org/education/curriculum_connections/cyberbullying/Talent%20Show_Final%20Viral%20Video.wmv).

Online Resources: Websites on Cyberbullying and Online Safety
Anti-Defamation League
[www.adl.org/education-outreach/bullying-cyberbullying](http://www.adl.org/education-outreach/bullying-cyberbullying)
Provides curriculum, information on in-school workshops, tips for responding to cyberbullying and a model bullying/cyberbullying prevention law.

Embrace Civility in the Digital Age
[www.embracecivility.org](http://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](http://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](http://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/topics/by-audience/parents/bullying/cyberbullying; www.ncpc.org/topics/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
www.athinline.org

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.

Wired Safety
www.wiredsafety.org

Dedicated to protecting all Internet users from cybercrime and abuse, and teaching responsible Internet use. It operates several programs and Web sites, including Stopcyberbulling.org, Wiredcops.org, Teenangels.org, and Tweenangels.com.
Navigating a Digital World
Tips for Youth

Before going online…

☑️ Set Guidelines
Make some rules together with your family before you go online, like the time of day and length of time you can use technology, and sites and apps you are allowed to use. Don’t bend the rules or use unapproved apps without their permission.

☑️ Limit Electronic Use
Be self-aware of how often you are on your phone, computer and other electronic devices. Make sure you are keeping a healthy balance between digital and in-person activities.

☑️ Consider What It Means to Be Responsible Online
Keep in mind that no digital message is completely private, including texts, private/direct messages, etc. Others may be watching your online activity, and law enforcement can recover all messages—even if you deleted them. Using your phone or the Internet to embarrass, threaten, harass or hurt others is irresponsible and can have serious consequences.

☑️ Understand Digital Behavior
Be aware that many apps, social media sites and cell service providers have rules about behavior. If you break them, your account—and every account in your home—could be disabled or canceled. Law enforcement may become involved in serious situations.

While online…

☑️ Be Respectful of Others
Consider whether your actions contribute to creating a positive digital community. Don’t write mean things to or about others, spread rumors/gossip or post things that might make others feel unsafe or uncomfortable, even if you mean it as a “joke.” Never share others’ private information, messages, photos or videos without their permission.

☑️ Be a Positive Role Model
Model positive digital behavior by writing supportive posts and messages and applauding positive content that affirms people and communicates respect. Don’t follow along when others are behaving negatively and remember to press pause and think before hitting “send.”

☑️ Engage in Respectful Dialogue
If you choose to engage in online discussions about controversial topics or issues, remember to always pause and think: Is this how I want my ideas to be expressed online? Focus your discussion on the ideas and not the individual(s) with whom you’re communicating. It’s okay to agree to disagree.

☑️ Don’t Confide in People You Don’t Know
It is very easy for people to lie about who they are online. Use caution when sharing personal information or discussing your life with someone you meet online.
Never Meet a Stranger without Parental Approval

Don’t arrange to meet up in-person with people you have met online without your family’s permission.

Maintain Privacy and Safeguard Security Information

Don’t share personal or private information online—like your full name, school name, home address, phone number and personal photos—with people you don’t know or trust. Use the privacy and security features for social media apps you use. Keep passwords and PINs to yourself, but share this information with your parents/guardians. They’ll trust you more if you’re open with them and they can help you if a serious problem occurs.

Be Cautious of Messages from Strangers

Don’t open messages or attachments from people you don’t know. In many instances it may be best to just delete them and even report them.

Keep Electronics in View at All Times

Don’t leave electronic devices out of sight because they can be hacked or stolen.

What can I do if I experience CYBERBULLYING?

Don’t Respond

Don’t respond to bullying or inappropriate messages, but save them as proof.

Act as an Ally

Support people who are targets of mean behavior and bullying by reaching out to the target and/or telling the aggressor to stop. Report what is happening through the site’s anonymous reporting procedures or tell a trusted adult in your life what is happening.

Communicate Issues with a Trusted Adult

Talk about problems you experience or witness online with an adult that you trust, like a family member, teacher or school counselor.

Report Behavior/Incidents

Always report cyberbullying, hate messages, inappropriate sexual content and threats (including possible suicide attempts) to an adult family member, school staff or the police right away. Use ADL’s online Cyber-Safety Action Guide to find out how to report inappropriate content to popular online companies, including reporting abuse to apps if available. For serious or continuing problems, file complaints with Internet Service Providers, social media companies, e-mail services, Web sites, cell phone companies, etc. They can find the offenders and take further action.

Ask for Assistance in Reporting

If you don’t feel comfortable reporting problems yourself, ask an adult to do it for you. Keeping the people close to you aware of what’s going on and seeking their support helps when you are targeted.

Stop and Reject Communication

Block the cell phone numbers and electronic communication (e.g., posts, texts, etc.) of people who are sending unwanted messages. Change your phone numbers, e-mail addresses, screen names and other online information, if necessary.

Log Off!

When in doubt about what to do, log off or shut down and ask for help from a trusted adult.

Resources for Youth, Parents/Families and Educators