

CYBERBULLYING: REALITY CHECK

Kids Help Phone
Research Update

2012

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Kids Help Phone

BEING THERE FOR KIDS

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Based on the following data:

Responses to a cyberbullying survey posted to
kidshelpphone.ca, from April 11 – April 26, 2011

Posts in the body of this report have been edited for
grammar, spelling, and to protect user identity

The data trends reported here is based on information
collected by Kids Help Phone. The results of this study
may not represent general population trends.

REPORT HIGHLIGHTS

"It is easy to say ANYTHING over a computer or phone screen. But in person is a totally different story."

Percent of Young People Experiencing Cyberbullying

65% of respondents to the 2011 Kids Help Phone cyberbullying survey reported having been the targets of cyberbullying at least once.

How Young People are Cyberbullied

In comparing the 2011 and 2007 surveys, social networking sites (like Facebook) and IM/MSN platforms have exchanged places. Where social networking once was once ranked third, it now comes in first and vice versa. According to our survey respondents, cyberbullying behaviour is most rampant on social networking platforms. Also, as young people abandon email in favour of phone-based text messaging, text messaging now replaces email as the second most common platform for cyberbullying.

How Cyberbullying is Experienced by Young People

In 2007, the most frequent online bullying experiences for our respondents included 'being called names or made to feel bad, 'having rumours spread,' and 'being threatened or scared.'

In our 2011 survey, insults, rumours and threats still featured heavily in respondent's descriptions (often in combination). In addition, a number of youth described experiences where unwanted photos, videos or altered images were posted on social networking sites.

Reporting Cyberbullying

The perception that reporting cyberbullying is ineffective continues. When we asked the respondents who they would talk to first if they were being cyberbullied, the majority (65%) reported that they would tell a friend versus a parent, teacher or counsellor. 15% used the "other" (free text) field to report that they wouldn't tell anyone.

Unfortunately, the majority of young people believe they have little recourse when it comes to cyberbullying.

Kids Help Phone Recommendations to Address Cyberbullying

1. Educate People in Canada about issues relevant to cyber bullying.

Adults must recognize that technology is an integral part of young people's lives, and it's not going anywhere. We cannot, therefore, try to solve problems like cyberbullying by restricting young people's access to cell phones, computers, or other

technologies as this will likely do little other than alienate them. Instead, adults need to familiarize themselves with the technology young people are using and ensure that they have at least a basic understanding of the range of platforms that are popular among kids and teens as well as what the privacy options are for each.

Towards that end, Kids Help Phone recommends we build on existing best practices in developing and implementing a national public education campaign which would:

- Increase understanding of the importance of technology in young people's lives;
- Model and teach empathy and responsible social behaviour for internet communications;
- Initiate discussions that will help young people identify with targets of cyberbullying;
- Teach young people practical steps to dealing with a cyberbully including blocking users whose behaviour is inappropriate or threatening;
- Familiarize adults with the signs that a young person may be struggling with cyberbullying (including, shifts in habits or personality, loss of interest in social events, changes in phone or internet use, and reluctance to attend school);
- Ensure adults understand the appropriate steps to address cyberbullying.

2. Develop clear definitions and guidelines about what constitutes cyberbullying.

When young people find themselves victimized by cyberbullying, they should easily be able to access clear information for adults and young people to learn about school, city, provincial and nationwide policies and protocols related to bullying and cyberbullying.

Definitions of bullying and cyberbullying should be consistent across provinces with clear information provided to parents and school officials regarding what constitutes bullying and cyberbullying, the types of off-site behaviour that will be captured by these provisions, and to assist in determining appropriate actions to take in each circumstance.

3. Support work that addresses cyberbullying.

The government should support social service organizations and schools to reduce cyber bullying and other forms of victimization, bias, and discrimination in Canadian society. All programs should be based on specific criteria including that they are evidence-based,

promote social and emotional learning, provide individual supports, be inclusive and adapt to local contexts¹.

I. Introduction

I. INTRODUCTION

In April of 2007 Kids Help Phone published *Cyber-bullying: Our Kids' New Reality*. The report collected responses from over 2,500 young people on the topic of cyberbullying, which was at that time, a very new phenomenon. Since then, cyberbullying has gained significant attention in research, counselling, and educational settings. It has also become a well-known issue among the general public in Canada, particularly after online harassment was implicated in the suicides of several young people in late 2010 and early 2011.

This document is a follow-up to our 2007 report. In it, we will discuss the most recent research-based information on cyberbullying, and provide a short “then and now” overview of a more recent cyberbullying survey that we posted to our website in order to highlight some of the trends in online behaviour that our users have shared with us. The report will conclude with revisited recommendations on what adults can do to support young people as they navigate an increasingly technologically mediated social reality.

II. YOUNG PEOPLE AND TECHNOLOGY

Contrary to popular belief, the overall technology habits of young people aged 13-17 are not radically different from those of any other age group. However, young people do rely more heavily on phone-based text messaging than older users, vastly preferring texting to email or vocal telephone conversations and sending more text messages than any other age group – over 2000 per month, on average. Young people also use social software such as Facebook at greater rates than adults (Nielsen, 2009).

The popularity of text messaging and social software among young people reflects the importance of communication in adolescence. Texting allows teens to communicate with one another frequently, privately and in ‘real time’, while social networking enables them to gather information, express their identities, and define and manage friendships. Among a myriad of technological options, teens gravitate towards those tools that allow them to perform the important developmental and social “work” of

¹ Promoting Relationships and Eliminating Violence Network (PREVNet). (2007). Bullying Prevention and Intervention. Retrieved April 2, 2012 from PREVNet website: <http://prevnet.ca/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=vmQs6po5niU%3d&tabid=392>

their age group with efficiency and creativity. The popularity of communications technology among young people is thus not an alarming trend, but rather a natural instantiation of adolescent social practices in the digital age (Boyd, 2009).

For young people who have grown up with communications technology, the distinction between online and offline life is minimal. Activities performed online or through other technology are often just as “real” and consequential for teens as those performed face-to-face. Accordingly, young people’s lives online both extend and mirror their lives offline, a fact that has important implications for our understanding of cyberbullying (Boyd 2009).

III. CYBERBULLYING – THE BASICS

What is cyberbullying?

Cyberbullying can be defined as the use of electronic communications technology to threaten, harass, embarrass, or socially exclude others (Mishna et al., 2011). As communications technology has evolved, and more young people have access to it, cyberbullying now occurs over a variety of media. Some of these include:

- Phone calls
- Texting (with or without pictures)
- Instant messaging (i.e. MSN)
- Social networking platforms (i.e. Facebook or Myspace)
- Microblogging sites (i.e. Twitter)
- Question and answer-based social websites (i.e. Formspring)
- Rating sites (i.e. Hot or Not)
- Online gaming sites
- Website forums

The specific ways in which young people engage in cyberbullying are also varied. Examples include:

- Rumour spreading by text messaging, email, or social networking sites
- Posting or forwarding embarrassing information or images (including doctored images) online
- Impersonating someone online in order to embarrass or harm their reputation
- Insulting or mocking someone by text messaging, email, social networking sites, blogging, or other communications technology
- Rating someone’s appearance, intelligence, or character on a rating site
- Threatening someone physically through any communications technology

Traditional bullying vs cyberbullying

The technological nature of cyberbullying makes it a unique phenomenon for a number of reasons:

- **The person who is bullying can be anonymous.** The anonymous nature of the internet and cell phone technology makes it difficult to identify the perpetrator.
- **The person who is bullying can be absent.** Perpetrators are physically removed from the victim and don't witness – and sometimes don't even comprehend -- the suffering they are causing.
- **The target is always accessible.** Because contact is virtual, youth engaging in cyberbullying can abuse others at any time of the day. Victimization extends beyond school hours and outside the schoolyard or neighbourhood.
- **The abuse is replicable.** Photos, rumours, and information (real or doctored) can be easily reproduced and distributed quickly both online and via cell phones.
- **There is no central authority online.** With few-to-no rules and sanctions in cyberspace, abusive or damaging behaviour can continue unchecked.
- **The audience is limitless.** Cyber-abuse can be distributed to large numbers of contacts. If it is posted on a blog or website, it can be searched and read by anyone online.
- **More people can participate in bullying.** The online nature of cyberbullying makes it easy for larger groups to participate than in traditional bullying.
- **Cyberbullying can worsen the effects of face-to-face bullying.** Many young people who are being harassed online are also experiencing face-to-face abuse. (Sontag et al., 2011) The combined effects of bullying and cyberbullying can be particularly damaging to young people's well-being (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010)
- **Many adult social supports (parents, teachers) are at a loss as to how to respond.** Where, for example, many schools have comprehensive policies about physical bullying, these policies are often ineffective at addressing cyberbullying. Young people's perceptions that these adults don't really understand their online practices or the impacts cyberbullying can worsen this schism.

Who are the victims?

While cyberbullying can affect people of any age, those most at risk are ages 12-14 (Tokunaga, 2010). Research also suggests that girls are more at-risk for experiencing cyberbullying than boys (Engupta & Chaudhuri, 2011; Tokunaga, 2010); a phenomenon that reverses the dynamic of traditional bullying, where "boys are more involved as both bullies and victims than girls" (p. 280, Sontag et al., 2011).

Who are the perpetrators?

Youth who engage in cyberbullying are not always the same youth who engage in face-to-face bullying. Young people who are otherwise non-aggressive may engage in cyberbullying because technology grants a sense of safety and distance from the victim (Tokunaga, 2010). Because they can remain anonymous, young people may be more likely to target young people they perceive as “powerful” or “threatening” offline, sometimes as revenge (Dooley et al, 2009).

Effects of cyberbullying

Like face-to-face bullying, cyberbullying can be very damaging to young people’s mental health and well-being. According to recent research, cyberbullying has a range of negative social, emotional, and educational outcomes on victims, from anxiety, to poor concentration and lowered school performance, to hopelessness or helplessness, to depression and suicidality (Fredstrom et al., 2011; Hinduja & Patchin, 2010; Klomek et al., 2010; Tokunaga, 2010). Perpetrators also experience the impact of cyberbullying and may be at a higher risk for relationship problems, delinquency, substance abuse, and suicidality (Mishna et al, 2011; Klomek et al, 2010).

Kids Help Phone’s 2011 Critical Issue Report (*Youth Mental Health and Well-Being: what’s Hope Got To Do With It?*) Explores how the experience of violence, and other negative social experiences can erode a young person’s well-being and ability to imagine a better future. To read the **full report**, please visit the Media Centre at org.kidshelpphone.ca

Cyberbullying and suicide

Recent research indicates that the more relentlessly a young person is being targeted, the less able they are to escape victimization, and the more domains of their life they are bullied in (i.e. both face-to-face and across a variety of online media), the higher the risk of suicidal ideation (Fredstrom et al., 2011; Klomek et al., 2008). This risk is further compounded for youth who are experiencing bullying across multiple domains while also experiencing other significant stressors in their lives (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010).

IV. THE KIDS’ HELP PHONE 2011 CYBERBULLYING SURVEY: RESULTS AND COMPARISON

About the survey

In 2007, Kids Help Phone posted an exhaustive survey on our kids’ website to capture young people’s experiences of cyberbullying. Nearly 2,500 young people responded.

The full report based on the results of this survey can be found in the Media Centre at org.kidshelpphone.ca

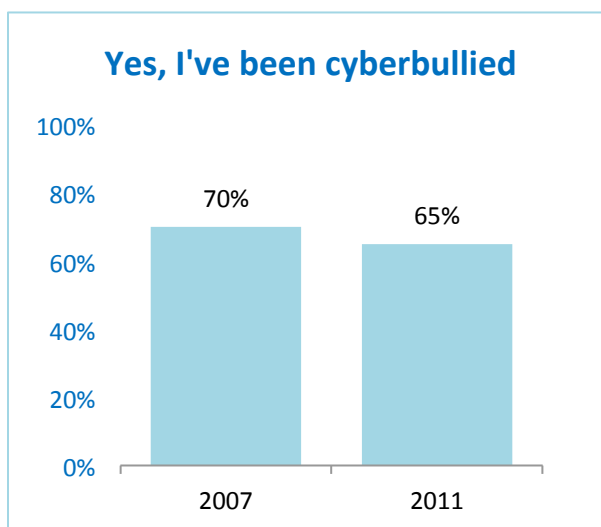
This year, we decided to revisit the issue of cyberbullying in order to build on what we learned from the 2007 report. A modified and abridged version of the original survey was posted to the kids' website for approximately two weeks (April 11 – April 26, 2011). 617 responses were submitted, with approximately 10% excluded as prank, spam, or malicious responses. 460 respondents completed the survey, with the remaining providing partial data.

The demographic characteristics of this year's survey respondents were similar to those who responded in 2007. 74% of this year's respondents were female (only 2% fewer than in 2007), and in both sets of responses 54% were between the ages of 13 and 15. This demographic is well positioned to identify trends in cyberbullying, as girls have been identified as overrepresented among both targets and perpetrators of cyberbullying, and the age group most involved in cyber-aggression is 12-14 year olds (see below for more information on risk groups).

Survey results

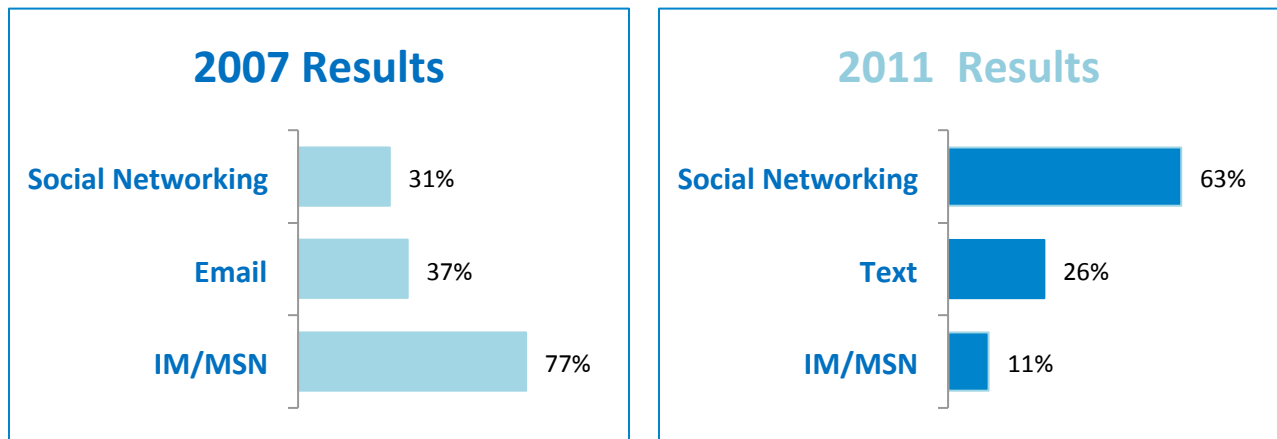
The following is a question-by-question breakdown of the survey results, with comparison to equivalent questions in the 2007 survey where relevant. Analyses of these comparisons aim to identify trends in cyberbullying among young people.

Q. Have you ever been cyberbullied?



Cyberbullying does not seem to have increased among our service users, yet it is something that most have faced at least once. In both 2007 and 2011, the majority of respondents to our survey had been the targets of cyber aggression at least once. The 5% decrease evidenced above is likely attributable to a shift in wording between the 2007 and 2011 surveys (in 2007 'cyberbullying' was not named explicitly, where in 2011 it was).

Q. Through which media did you experience cyberbullying?



In comparing the 2011 and 2007 surveys, we can see that social networking sites (like Facebook) and IM/MSN platforms have exchanged places. Where social networking once was once ranked third, it now comes in first and vice versa. According to our survey respondents, cyberbullying behaviour is most rampant on social networking platforms. Also, as young people abandon email in favour of phone-based text messaging to communicate with peers, text messaging now replaces email as the second most common platform for cyberbullying.

Q. What were your most frequent online bullying experiences?

In **2007**, the most frequent online bullying experiences for our respondents included **'being called names or made to feel bad, 'having rumours spread,' and 'being threatened or scared.'**

In our **2011** survey, respondents were not presented with a list of choices but rather asked to describe their experiences of cyberbullying. **Insults, rumours and threats still featured heavily** in these respondent's descriptions (often in combination). In addition, a number of youth described experiences where

"whenever I am on youtube, there are always a bunch of random trolls [online bullies] who say immature, disrespectful, inappropriate and offensive things for no reason. ... they just think they can say anything because it's the "internet" and they don't have to worry about the consequences."

"ive been called a whore, and stuff for not doing anything at all.. and been told i was gonna be beat up and stuff, so i had to switch schools.."

unwanted photos, videos, or altered images were posted on social networking sites.

The nature of cyberbullying (verbal aggression, rumour spreading, and threats) remains similar even while the type of media used to disseminate the abuse has changed.

Q. Is reporting cyberbullying helpful?

In 2007, about a third of respondents who had taken action when cyberbullied (whether by reporting what had happened, or by blocking or confronting the perpetrator) **reported that their efforts had no impact.** Many others indicated that they felt that reporting or confronting actually made the situation worse.

The perception that reporting cyberbullying is ineffective seems to also be true of the 2011 survey. When we asked the respondents who they would talk to first if they were being cyberbullied, the majority (65%) reported that they would tell a friend versus a parent, teacher or counsellor. 15% used the “other” (free text) field to report that they wouldn’t tell anyone.

“i wouldn't say anything, no one would listen”

“i wouldnt tell anyone. i just write down my feelings or let things roll off”

*“F**k that, I keep it to myself. It's my problem.
Best keep it that way.”*

The majority of young people feel that reporting cyberbullying, particularly to authorities, is not helpful, Fear of being dismissed or having their situation minimized (often based on past experience) and the belief that there are no effective mechanisms to stop cyberbullying are often at the core of this perception.

Q. What would help?

In 2007, respondents offered ideas and suggestions on what could be done to stop or prevent cyber-bullying. **Less tolerance and/or more options for recourse within school settings** were often cited, as was a forum where victims could report cyberbullying anonymously.

In contrast to the open format of the 2007 survey, **2011** respondents were asked to check off all that applied on a list of options. The three most often selected were:

1. Talking to someone who 'get's it' and won't judge or blame you 75%
2. A way to make it stop -65%
3. Knowing that people will believe you when you tell them what's happening 57%

These results suggest that **young people still feel like they have little recourse when it comes to cyberbullying**. The majority feel that a sympathetic ear would be most helpful.

Q. What message, advice, or tips would you give to other young people who are being cyberbullied?

(This was a new question for the 2011 survey; there is no equivalent in the 2007 survey.)

307 youth responded to this question. Responses were broken down into several broad categories:

- Tell someone or ask for help (34%)
- It's not you, it's them / don't let it get to you b/c they're not worth (16%)
- Ignore them (15%)
- It gets better / won't last forever (9%)
- Tech tips (how to block, what to do) (8%)
- Stand up for yourself / confront the bully (6%)
- Don't retaliate or provoke (it will make it worse) (5%)
- Prank / malicious / spam (7%)

Respondents could also answer this question using a **free text field**. Sample responses included:

"It is easy to say ANYTHING over a computer or phone screen. But in person is a totally different story. And it is also exactly that, words on a screen. No matter how hard it is, Don't try and

get the last word, And if you can, say nothing. It is hard because you CAN say almost anything and get away with it. But don't, It will be worth it to just block them out."

"Tell someone. Some battles are too big and painful to fight alone."

"Don't give up"

"One of my friends killed herself after being cyberbullied. She never told anyone, so if you are being cyberbullied get help. Talk to a teacher, friends or parent. Suicide is never the only option"

It seems that **young people are most likely to advocate reporting cyberbullying when other people are the victims**. This response contrasts with others in the survey, where young people indicated that reporting cyberbullying was personally unhelpful.

V. CONCLUSION

Cyberbullying remains a significant problem for many young people in Canada. Though the results from this survey cannot be generalized to the entire population, they do illustrate some of the current trends (and shifts in trends) in both young people's use of technology, and in cyberbullying behaviour. The technology through which cyberbullying is perpetrated changes as young people's overall use of technology evolves. Social networking sites such as Facebook and text messaging are now the most popular media for cyberbullying, reflecting their general popularity among young people in Canada.

With regard to help-seeking, young people seem to consider reporting cyberbullying to authorities (teachers, parents, etc) the "best" option, but overall ineffective at stopping or preventing abuse. They indicate that there is a need for increased understanding and non-judgemental communication about cyberbullying.

While the face of cyberbullying may have changed, the negative effects remain as significant as ever. Young people take cyberbullying seriously and speak articulately of its impact, reflecting how their online lives are as "real" as their lives offline.

At Kids Help Phone, we are encouraged that the perception of cyberbullying has shifted dramatically: tolerance is no longer the norm and "tough it out" is no longer acceptable advice. Cyberbullying is a serious issue and the effects can be harmful, painful and devastating. We recognize that any strategy moving forward to address cyberbullying must be premised upon the experiences and realities of young people - from all walks of

life. We know that bullying and cyberbullying intersect with different forms of oppression, such as sexism, racism and homophobia, as well as with harassment to create a qualitatively different experience. While some strategies should be overarching, it is also important to ensure differences in experience are accounted for. We are committed to supporting the future development and implementation of national strategies, policies and programs through our access to young people and their lived experiences, through our partnerships, and our experience to help improve the mental health and well-being of young people within and outside their virtual worlds.

Kids Help Phone is helping young people every day learn that if they are witness to or experience cyber-bullying in any manner, they *must* reach out; it is responsibility of all of us, as adults, to ensure that these kids have somewhere safe to turn for help.

VI. RECOMMENDATIONS

Adult caregivers, educators and government can all help reduce the impact of cyberbullying among young people by making a few important changes. Here are some places to start:

1. Educate People in Canada about issues relevant to cyber bullying.

Adults must recognize that technology is an integral part of young people's lives, and it's not going anywhere. We cannot, therefore, try to solve problems like cyberbullying by restricting young people's access to cell phones, computers, or other technologies as this will likely do little other than alienate them. Instead, adults need to familiarize themselves with the technology young people are using and ensure that they have at least a basic understanding of the range of platforms that are popular among kids and teens as well as what the privacy options are for each.

Towards that end, Kids Help Phone recommends we build on existing best practices in developing and implementing a national public education campaign which would:

- Increase understanding of the importance of technology in young people's lives;
- Model and teach empathy and responsible social behaviour for internet communications;
- Initiate discussions that will help young people identify with targets of cyberbullying;
- Teach young people practical steps to dealing with a cyberbully including blocking users whose behaviour is inappropriate or threatening;
- Familiarize adults with the signs that a young person may be struggling with cyberbullying (including, shifts in habits or personality, loss of interest in

social events, changes in phone or internet use, and reluctance to attend school);

- Ensure adults understand the appropriate steps to address cyberbullying.

2. Develop clear definitions and guidelines about what constitutes cyberbullying.

When young people find themselves victimized by cyberbullying, they should easily be able to access clear information for adults and young people to learn about school, city, provincial and nationwide policies and protocols related to bullying and cyberbullying.

Definitions of bullying and cyberbullying should be consistent across provinces with clear information provided to parents and school officials regarding what constitutes bullying and cyberbullying, the types of off-site behaviour that will be captured by these provisions, and to assist in determining appropriate actions to take in each circumstance.

3. Support work that addresses cyberbullying.

The government should support social service organizations and schools to reduce cyber bullying and other forms of victimization, bias, and discrimination in Canadian society. All programs should be based on specific criteria including that they are evidence-based, promote social and emotional learning, provide individual supports, be inclusive and adapt to local contexts².

Cyberbullying by the numbers:

- Currently, “over 66% of fourth to ninth graders are able to go online from the comfort of their bedrooms.” (p. 277, Tokunaga, 2010)
- Between “15-35% of student have been victims of cyberbullying while about 10-20% of students admit to cyberbullying others.” (p. 208, Hinduja & Patchin, 2010)
- Up to “85% of children and teens who are victimized electronically are also victims at school” (p. 279, Tokunaga, 2010)
- “38% of youth who experienced online harassment reported emotional distress as a result of the incident” (p. 6, Mishna et al., 2011). “One-fourth of victims feel their home life has noticeably suffered” (p. 281, Tokunaga, 2010).
- “Bullying and cyberbullying victims and offenders were almost twice as likely to have reported that they attempted suicide” (p. 216, Hinduja & Patchin, 2010)

² Promoting Relationships and Eliminating Violence Network (PREVNet). (2007). Bullying Prevention and Intervention. Retrieved April 2, 2012 from PREVNet website: <http://prevnet.ca/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=vmQs6po5niU%3d&tabid=392>

- One study found that “at least 40-50% of those who are victimized by cyberbullies know the identity of the perpetrator.” (p. 279, Tokunaga, 2010)
- “Roughly 15-35% of youths confront cyberbullies by telling them to stop.” (p. 281, Tokunaga, 2010)
- One study found that “over 50% of his sample were aware of an instance of cyberbullying, but only 30% of respondents who knew that someone was being cyberbullied said that they would inform an adult” (p. 72, Jones et al., 2011)

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