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Assessment of Students' Knowledge of Internet Risk and Internet Behaviors: Potential Threat to Bullying and Contact by Internet Predators[1]

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Purpose of the Study

Given the serious issue of bullying, this study sought to assess middle and high school students' knowledge of appropriate use and their behaviors on the Internet and social networking sites, especially regarding behaviors that may lead to cyberbullying or contact with potential Internet predators.

Framework

The topics of school administrators' awareness and development of preventive plans becomes more important in light of the currently increasing discussion of bullying in the national news. For example, the MA District Attorney recently indicated that the South Hadley MA ninth grader, Phoebe Prince, suffered a nearly three-month campaign of assultative behavior and threats of physical harm prior to walking home and hanging herself. Currently, nine students are facing criminal charges. In CT, a 2008 law requires schools to report incidences and develop plans to prevent bullying behaviors. The key to these efforts is assessment of what students know about the risks of bullying and what behaviors they are currently victims of or tend to engage in themselves.

Methodology

Sample

Middle and High School students from *N*=6 school districts in a Southern New England state participated in this study. A total of *N*=4215

students, *n*=1594 high school students and *n*=2621 middle school students, participated in the study.

Instrumentation

Scales and scoring technique. The instrument contains 7 literature derived demographic items (Franek, 2005/2006; Lenhart, 2007; Ma, 2001; McKenna, 2007; Shariff, 2008) and 26 statements constructed to describe students' knowledge of risks and behaviors associated with using the Internet, as well as their experiencing or exhibiting specified attributes associated with Internet use.

Response format. Students were asked to "Agree" or "Disagree" with each statement. Responses were scored "1" or "0" to reflect a high level of the attribute measured by the scale (e.g., Knowledge) or higher levels of having experienced the attribute (e.g., Bully Victim, Adult Notification, and Parental Involvement) or exhibited the attribute (e.g., Bully Behavior; Internet Behavior).

Appropriate agreeing or disagreeing with a statement received a score of "1" (e.g., agree with the statement: *Making threats online can get me into trouble with the police* or disagreeing with the statement: *I have posted mean or threatening statements about another student online*.); an inappropriate agree or disagree response was scored "0. This scoring technique was designed to produce scores where high scoring students had higher levels of knowledge, were more often bullied, tended

not to participate in bullying, had parents who were aware of their child's Internet activities, used the Internet more often, and were willing to contact an adult if they were threatened by a peer or stranger on the Internet.

The "Knowledge" scale was composed of seven items describing the students' knowledge of appropriate behavior on social networks and potential risk of Internet predators (Franek, 2005/2006; McKenna, 2007). The remaining 19 items on the instrument were designed to identify whether or not students had experienced (e.g., Bully Victim, Parental Involvement) or exhibited specified attributes (e.g., Bully Behavior, Adult Notification, Internet Behavior).

Validity. Content validity of the items was supported through the literature (Franek, 2006; McKenna, 2007; Shariff, 2008; Weaver, 2007) and judgmental review by *N*=5 middle school teachers and *N*=2 principals. For prior data gathered on *N* = 1366 middle school students construct validity was examined using confirmatory factor analysis, Rasch model analysis, and latent class analysis.

Data Analysis

Descriptive data, using response percentages for the agree and disagree options, were calculated along with dimension and item-level mean correct percents for both high school and middle school grade

levels. Additionally, differences among and beween grade levels at the dimension level are reported.

Findings

Table 1
Knowledge of Internet risk and Internet behavior regarding predators by Middle School and High School.

	Item	Response	Middle School	High School
12.	With the contact information I put on MySpace or Facebook, it would be easy for an Internet predator to contact me.	Agree	**30%**	**26%**
		Degree	70**%**	74**%**
17.	An Internet predator could make contact with me based on the information I have posted online.	Agree	**31%**	**27%**
		Degree	69%	73%
25.	An Internet predator could contact me based on what my friends have posted about me.	Agree	**28%**	**19%**
		Degree	72%	81%

Note. Bold percents indicate "appropriate" response.

Table 1, Knowledge of Internet risk and Internet behavior regarding predators by Middle School and High School, reveals that the greater majority of students do not believe a predator could contact them based on information they, or their friends, post online. The risk associated with electronic forms of communication is clearly not understood. This ignorance is yet one example of how predators can contact our children.

Table 2, Bullying behaviors and victims by Middle School and High School, reveals the responses to questions regarding identifying as being a bully victim, or having participated in bullying behaviors. Although the percentages of student being bullied may look low, it represents 636

Table 2
Bullying behaviors and victims by Middle School and High School.

	Item	Response	Middle School	High School
1.	**Victim** I have been bullied by another student while online.	Agree	30%	26%
		Degree	**70%**	**74%**
18.	**Bullying Behavior** Online, I sometimes say hurtful things to others that I would not say in person.	Agree	30%	26%
		Degree	**70%**	**74%**
6.	I have posted mean or threatening statements about another student online.	Agree	31%	27%
		Degree	**69%**	**73%**
3.	I have logged onto my friend's social networking site and pretended to be them.	Agree	28%	19%
		Degree	**72%**	**81%**

Note. Bold percents indicate "appropriate" response.

students over just 6 districts. This represents over 100 bullies per district, and this is just a small sample frrm said district. Likewise, those who participated in bully behaviors represent far too many students.

Table 3
Parental Involvement and Adult Notification.

	Item	Response	Middle School	High School
1.	**Parental Involvement** My parents have access to all of my passwords	Agree	**30%**	**10%**
		Degree	70%	90%
18.	My parents regularly check my activity on the internet.	Agree	**33%**	**17%**
		Degree	67%	83%
6.	**Adult Notification** If I had been bullied online, I would tell a parent or another adult.	Agree	**64%**	**42%**
		Degree	36%	58%
3.	If I were contacted by someone I did not know on instant messenger, I would tell an adult.	Agree	**56%**	**26%**
		Degree	44%	74%

Note. Bold percents indicate "appropriate" response.

Table 3, Parental Involvement and Adult Notification, reveals that Parental Involvement in Internet activities is believed to be low. A mere 30% of the middle school students responded that their parents have access to their password and 33% believe their parents check their internet activity regularly. This number becomes more disturbing as students move from middle school to high school, with only 10% responded that their parents have access to their password and 17% believing that their parents check their internet activity regularly.

Likewise, the responses to the Adult Notification items were unsettling. Just over half, 56%, of the middle school students responded that they would notify a parent or adult if they were contacted by someone they did not know on instant messenger, a bit higher, 64% if they were bullied. Conversely, high school students plummet to only 26% responding that they would notify a parent or adult if they were contacted by someone they did not know on instant messenger and 26% would tell and adult or parent if they were bullied.

Table 4, The differences seen between middle school and high school students on these two dimensions; Parental Involvement and Adult Notification. The findings revealed that there is a significant difference between the grade levels on both dimensions. The knowledge of Parental Involvement reduces dramatically from middle school (t=16.36, p=.001,

M=.27, *ES*=.50) to high school (*M*=.12). Likewise, there is a drop off in responses to Adult Notification from middle school (*t*=20.23, *p*=.001, *M*=.59, *ES*=.64) and high school (*M*=.34).

Table 4: Comparison of Parental Involvement and Adult Notification Dimensions with respect to grade level

Dimension/Item	Grade Level	*M*	*t*	*P*	*d*
Parental Involvement	Middle School	.27	16.33	.001	.50
	High School	.12			Medium
Adult Notification	Middle School	.59	20.23	.001	.64
	High School	.34			Large

Note. A higher mean for yes indicates on Bully Victim, Internet Behavior, and Parental involvement indicates higher activity (have been bullied, use the internet more, have involved parents) Whereas a high mean for Bully Behavior means that they are **not** involved in bullying behavior, therefore, making good decisions.

Conclusions

The internet introduces new issues for school administrators, parents, and the community at large. Research suggests that teens do not understand the consequences or risk of on-line behaviors. They feel invisible; therefore, invincible. They are able to hide behind the technology, oftentimes allowing them to act in ways they would not if they were speaking in person.

The results of this study revealed the following:

1. Students do not recognize the risk associated with electronic forms of communication. They fail to realize that anything placed on-line is, in fact, public communication.
2. An alarming number of students have admitted to being bullied in school, *N*=636 students, *n*=366 middle school students and *n*=270 high school students.

3. There is an increase from middle school to high school for students who reported being bullied, and participating in bulling behaviors.
4. Parental involvement, overall, is low; middle school 33%, high school 17%, with regard to monitoring of internet activities.
5. Parental involvement decreases as students move from middle school to high school.
6. A low percent of students reported that they would tell an adult if they were bullied; middle school 64%, high school 42%, or contacted by a stranger; middle school 56%, high school 26%.

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