

What Parents and Educators Need to Know

The Cyclic Process Model

Victimized adolescents experience anger and in order to cope with their anger, they turn to media in which antisocial and risky behaviors are portrayed (such as swearing, violence, vandalism, substance abuse). Adolescents who often watch this type of media content are more inclined to perform cyberbullying behavior than adolescents who do not often watch this media content. Stimulated by anger and media use, bullied adolescents are at increased risk to perform cyberbullying behavior. Because cyberbullies often become victims again, these adolescents get caught up in a cyclic process of being bullied, becoming a cyberbully and being bullied again. In the following, we elaborate on what parents and educators can do to prevent this cycle to occur.

Victims of Bullying Behavior could Become Cyberbullies

Victims of bullying behavior (either online or offline) tend to become cyberbullies themselves.

Advice for Parents:

Per 2014, Dutch schools (both primary and secondary) are obliged to come up with an action plan on how to combat bullying behaviors.¹ Make sure you are informed about the school's policy on bullying behavior. Furthermore, try to keep in close contact with your child; if your child becomes a victim of bullying, he/she will be more inclined to tell you what has happened if your child feel safe with you and feels he/she can talk with you openly.²

¹ The (Dutch) letter on anti-bullying protocols of Sander Dekker (Parliamentary State Secretary in the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science) can be found here: <http://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/veilig-leren-en-werken-in-het-onderwijs/documenten-en-publicaties/kamerstukken/2014/10/03/brief-over-plan-van-aankan-tegen-pesten-n-a-v-motie-bergkamp-van-der-burg.html>

² For tips on what to do when your child is being cyberbullied, see <http://cyberbullying.us/tips-for-parents-when-your-child-is-cyberbullied.pdf> by Sameer Hinduja and Justin Patchin (2015)

Advice for Schools:

It's important to find an anti-bullying program that is right for your school. Currently, the efficacy of various Dutch anti-bullying programs is being tested.³ In addition, a positive school climate (in which students and staff members feel positively about their school) is crucial for the well-being of adolescents. Research indicates that a positive school climate can help in reducing cyberbullying behaviors.⁴ As part of the program, you can consider to educate staff members to be the schools' anti-bully coach to whom adolescents can turn when they are bullied.

Anger and Frustration Could Stimulate Cyberbullying

One explanation for the relationship between victimization and cyberbullying behavior is anger and frustration: being bullied stimulates anger, and anger is one of the key predictors in cyberbullying others. The effect of anger on cyberbullying behavior is especially alarming for those adolescents that apply negative emotion regulation strategies to deal with the anger of being bullied (e.g., blaming others, emphasizing the terror of the experience, or constantly reminiscing the experience). This research showed that these adolescents cyberbully more than adolescents who positively cope with their anger, for example by accepting the situation or focusing on something positive.

³ More information is available at <http://www.nro.nl/aanvullend-onderzoek-naar-anti-pestprogrammas-van-start/>

⁴ For practical tips on how to improve the school climate, see "School Climate 2.0. Preventing Cyberbullying and Sexting One Classroom at a Time" by Sameer Hinduja and Justin Patchin (2012).

Advice for Parents and Schools:

It is important to teach adolescents how to cope with stressful events or unpleasant feelings in a positive manner. Discourage adolescents to use coping strategies such as blaming others, catastrophizing the event or constantly thinking about the experience. Reinforcing adolescents to positively regulate their emotions reduces the risk of them becoming cyberbullies. Positive strategies could be refocusing on positive stimuli, thinking about what can be learned from the experience, putting the stressful event into perspective, thinking about how to positively handle the negative event, and accepting what has happened. For instance, programs exist that teach children and adolescents to constructively cope with their emotions by using mindfulness techniques.⁵ In a pilot study that starts in September 2016, we will test whether mindfulness techniques indeed lower adolescents' anger levels and hopefully lead to a reduction in cyberbullying behavior.

Exposure to Media with Antisocial and Risk Behavior Content Could Stimulate Cyberbullying Behavior

When an adolescent regularly uses media in which antisocial and risk behavior is portrayed, this could lead to an increase in cyberbullying behavior. Media in which antisocial and risk behavior is portrayed are for example media in which people swear, fight, gossip, use drugs or (a lot of) alcohol, etcetera. Watching antisocial behaviors encourages antisocial behaviors.

⁵ For example: <http://www.elinesnel.com/>

Advice for Parents and Schools:

Restricting your child from watching particular media content is probably not a realistic solution. Antisocial media content is omnipresent nowadays and adolescents will somehow be exposed to this. Instead, it is imperative to make the adolescents aware of the effect that media exposure can have on their behavior. Some adolescents think that when they are angry, exposing themselves to violent media content (such as violent video games) helps them release their anger. However, research shows the opposite: exposure to this type of media content actually increases levels of anger.⁶ Exposure to media with antisocial and risk behavior content is not harmful in itself, but adolescents need to be conscious of the consequences it might have on their behavior. When you, for example, notice that your son or daughter is often angry or aggressive, it could be helpful to discuss with your child which programs/videos he or she watches, which videogames he or she plays, etcetera.

⁶ See for example: Bushman, B. J., & Whitaker, J. L. (2010). Like a magnet: Catharsis beliefs attract angry people to violent video games. *Psychological Science*, 21(6), 790-792. doi: 10.1177/0956797610369494