Do The Right Thing….. Even When No One Is Looking

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Abstract

Middle school age range is a time when adolescents experience a very critical transition in their lives. Many students face difficulty with self identity, family circumstances, and relationship development, causing them to turn to social media as an outlet, sometimes translating to cyberbullying. Research has shown that the most effective way to overcome the issue of cyberbullying is through empowering youth to empathize with victims of cyberbullying and stand up against such harmful acts. During this study, middle schoolers completed a survey reflecting on their experience with empathy education, peer to peer empowerment, and use of social media. Teachers and staff within the same schools completed a survey about the cyberbullying culture within the school as well. The data collected will help to determine the most effective strategies and make recommendations for best practices to be implemented for addressing cyberbullying.

Keywords: Cyberbullying, Empathy Education, Peer to Peer Programming

1. Introduction

Over the last decade adolescent presence on social media sites has increased greatly.[1] Eighty percent of teens have reported spending more than an hour per day socializing with their friends online, entertaining themselves through videos and music and keeping up with pop culture.[2] With the many benefits of these sites, also come some negatives, including the act of cyberbullying. Research has suggested that as a result of more adolescents on sites such as Snapchat or Instagram, cyberbullying peaks in middle school, more specifically in sixth grade.[3] Cyberbullying can be defined as "the use of electronic communication technology as a means to deliberately threaten, harm, embarrass or socially exclude another".[4] Unlike traditional bullying, cyberbullying can take place through social media sites, such as Snapchat and Instagram as well as in online chat rooms. Due to the anonymous nature and the permanency of cyberbullying, the outcomes can include psychological, physical, social and academic negative effects.[5] As a result of this anonymity, adolescents who are afraid to participate in traditional bullying, due to fear of negative consequences, may instead engage in cyberbullying.[6] The question becomes, however, how do we address the topic of cyberbullying in middle school? Many researchers have focused on different types of prevention and intervention programs and the positives and negatives of each of them. Most researchers believe that adding empathy education and solutions for students to handle their aggression to these types of programs as well as tools for administrators and parents/caregivers to address cyberbullying are the most beneficial.[7] Combining these different tools with the results of this research will in turn create the best practices for creating a cyberbullying prevention program at the middle school level.

2. Hypotheses

To complete the current study, four hypotheses were tested. The research questions and instrument development are reflective of these hypotheses. The results of this study have been used to determine what makes prevention and intervention programs more successful in the middle school setting.

H₁: Empathy education makes a perceived positive impact on a cyberbullying prevention program.

H₀: Empathy education has no perceived effect on the impact of a cyberbullying prevention program.

Empathy education focuses on meeting the needs of others, no matter what a person's background is.[8] In terms of cyberbullying, this means focusing on the victim and how the incident affected them. To implement empathy education successfully into a prevention program, one must "create an educational tool to help share the experiences" of victims of cyberbullying.[9] These tools can include an instructional video or reading material based on different experiences of the victims. By implementing empathy education curriculum into a prevention program, it will teach students how to be respectful towards their peers as well as allow students to understand what others are feeling, resulting in less cyberbullying taking place.

H₂: Peer-to-peer programming empowers students.

H₀: Peer-to-peer programming has no effect on students.

Peer-to-peer programming has recently become more prevalent among youth development educators because of the positive outcomes on the youth. Peer-to-peer programming can be defined as a program "in which older youth befriends and mentor younger youth".[10] Some of the positive outcomes for youth include; feelings of competency or self-efficacy, academic achievement, connectedness to school peers, and most important for this study, prosocial behavior and attitudes towards their peers.[11] Research has also found that there is a larger effect on the youth if there is at least a two year age gap between the mentor and the mentee.[12] This research shows the importance of peer-to-peer programming, especially during the youth's developmental years.

H₃: Teens are perceived to act more hurtful online than they are in person.

H₀: Teens are not perceived to act more hurtful online than they are in person.

According to a study conducted by the Siena College Research Institute, the Tyler Clementi Foundation and AT&T, one in four teens are being cyberbullied in Upstate New York. Some of the reasons teens are being cyberbullied include physical appearance, social awkwardness, and sexual orientation.[13] While this study did not necessarily focus on Middle School Students, it shows that cyberbullying is taking place across New York at a high rate, regardless of the age surveyed. This study also shows that forty-four percent of teens are likely to say something hurtful to other teens they know online, compared to only eight percent in person.[14] After reading the literature on the subject of cyberbullying, it is apparent that this is because it is very easy to post a mean comment about someone online, but it is a lot harder to do it to a person's face.

H₄: Middle School Teachers believe the cyberbullying policies within their school are effective.

H₀: Middle School Teachers do not believe the cyberbullying policies within their school is effective.

Teachers have a very big impact on their students, especially during the adolescent years. Not only do "supportive relationships with teachers promote an adolescent's sense of school belonging," but interactions with teachers also provide a sense of socialization for their students.[15] However, even though teachers form great relationships with their students, there should also be consequences when a teacher sees a student bullying another. That is why it is very important for teachers to know the cyberbullying policies within the school and how to use them effectively.

3. Methods

There is one research method that has been employed in two different ways for this quantitative study; first, a survey was sent out to students within the participating schools, then a different survey was sent out to teachers and administrators within the same participating school.

The first population studied were middle school students, ages eleven to fourteen. The students are in sixth, seventh or eighth grade at each participating middle school. The survey was not necessarily random because it was sent out to all students that the researcher had been given parental consent. Therefore, the parental opt-in means the students were more likely to be children of parents who are engaged. To begin the study, a letter about the research project as well as an informed consent was sent to all parents/guardians of students within the schools. This form was sent out through the school districts "parent portal" and signed electronically. Once parents and guardians gave consent, a list of all the students were given permission to participate in this study was obtained. Next, the students participated in a survey regarding cyberbullying. Students have chosen answers to the survey questions based on their own personal experiences or what they would do if they ever witnessed an act of cyberbullying.

The second population studied were teachers and administrators within the participating middle school. The sample was not necessarily random because the survey was sent out to the entire population of employees and therefore, they are self-selected. To begin the study, the survey was sent to all the teachers and administrators within the middle school with some background about what the project was about. Then, the teachers and administrators completed the survey. Finally, the researcher has analyzed the data collected from both of these surveys. By having data from the students as well as the teachers and administrators, the researcher has created a well-rounded set of components that should be included in a cyberbullying prevention program to benefit all types of middle schools.

While the researcher understands that there are many other variables in addressing cyberbullying, the ones that have been addressed in this study are empathy education, peer-to-peer empowerment, and the role of the teachers and administrators within the school. The goal of this research was to find out the possible differing perspectives of students and teachers regarding cyberbullying within their schools.

4. Sample

The first population that was studied were middle school students from two school districts in Long Island, New York (Finley Middle School, Huntington, New York; Sayville Middle School, Sayville, New York). The students were from multiple grade levels; sixth, seventh and eighth. The reason for selecting the middle school age group is because prior research has indicated that cyberbullying peaks in the middle school setting. Having a wide range of students from multiple school districts allowed the researcher to narrow down what tools/ techniques students prefer and think are effective.

The second population that was studied were middle school teachers and administrators from multiple school districts in Long Island, New York. The personnel included teachers that teach multiple levels, specials, and those serving as administrators (e.g., principal, guidance counselor, etc.). The reason for selecting middle school teachers and administrators was to see if they were aware of the cyberbullying policies within there school and to see if they have ever witnessed cyberbullying taking place within the classroom.

5. Data Collection

The student and faculty and administrator survey was administered in March 2019 at the two partner middle schools in Long Island, New York. Both of the surveys (student and teacher/administrator) were administered through an online survey called qualtrics with a sample size of 521 students and 49 teachers/administrators. The student survey consisted of thirteen questions that related to the students online presence, experience with peer-to-peer programming and their social media presence. The survey also had two scenarios relating to cyberbullying and asked the students how the students would respond to this situation. The faculty and administrators survey consisted of seven questions related to instances of cyberbullying that have taken place within their classroom or school.

The response rate for the student population was thirty-five percent (seventy-three percent Finley Middle School students and one percent Sayville Middle School students). The response rate for the teacher and administrator population was forty percent (thirty-five percent Finley Middle School teachers and administrators and forty-four

percent Sayville Middle School teachers and administrators). After all the data was collected, the researcher used qualtrics to download the data and SPSS statistical software to run frequencies on the questions asked in the survey. On the student survey, the researcher also used crosstabs to determine if there were any interrelationships and interactions between different variables.

6. Findings

6.1 Student Survey

After administering the survey to the student population and collecting and analyzing the data, the researcher has been able to determine some findings based off these results.

The first finding is that there is a notable difference between seventh and eighth graders' and male and female student perceptions regarding whether teens have become more mean or more kind on social media over time. As seen below in Figure 1, there is a thirteen percentage point difference between whether males and females believe teens on social media are kind.[16] This result is surprising because previous research done shows that females are more likely to be meaner than males.[17]

Generally, do you think teens on social media are kind or mean?

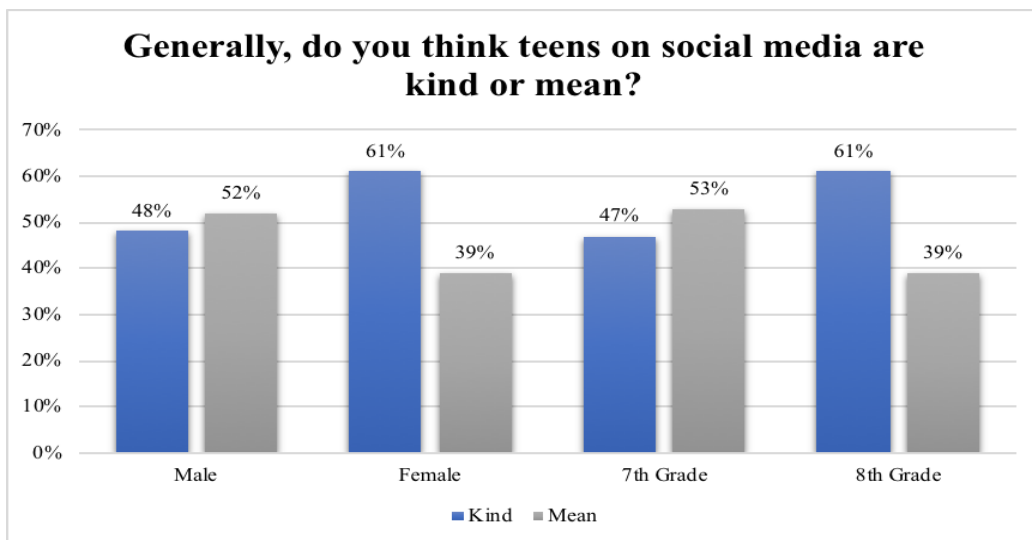|	Kind	Mean
Male	48%	52%
Female	61%	39%
7th Grade	47%	53%
8th Grade	61%	39%

Figure 1. The chart above shows whether the student population sampled in March 2019 believes teens on social media are kind or mean.

The second finding the researcher has determined based on the data is that there is a difference between what students claim they do online versus what they believe other teens are doing online. This finding also proves the researcher's third hypothesis that states *"Teens are perceived to act more hurtful online than in person."* As seen below in Figure 2, there is a twenty-four percentage point difference between respondents perceptions as to whether other teens they know are more likely to do or say something hurtful to another teen online than in person. Due to the anonymous nature of cyberbullying, teens are more likely to participate in cyberbullying because they do not have to face their victims.[18] Another finding worth noting based on Figure 2 is that there is a thirty-four percentage point difference between if a teen would be hurtful online versus if they believe other teens will be hurtful online. This number is staggering because it not only shows that cyberbullying is taking place in the middle schools sampled, but it also shows that teens are not necessarily admitting they are cyberbullies, yet they will admit their peers are.
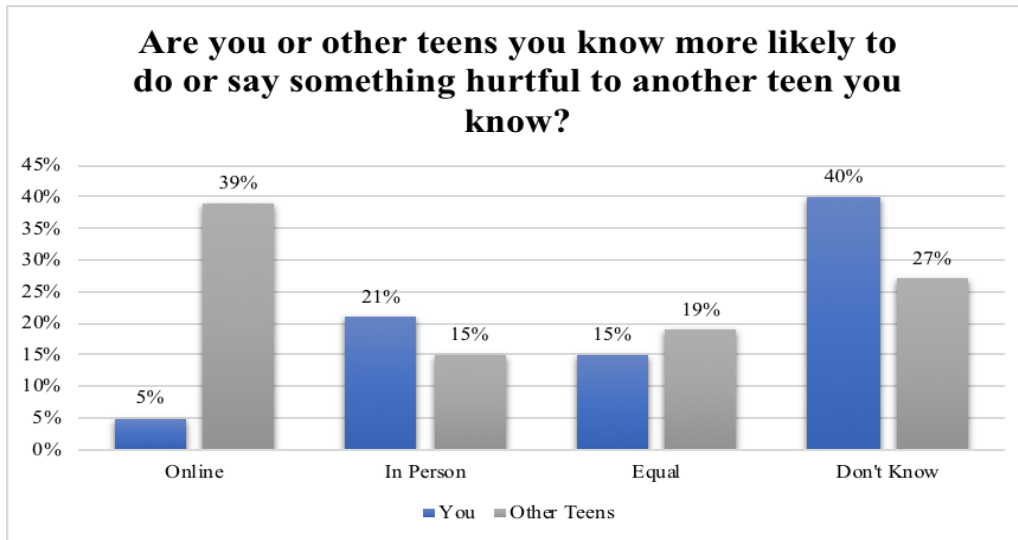
Are you or other teens you know more likely to do or say something hurtful to another teen you know?

Figure 2. The above chart shows how students responded when asked the following question "Are you or other teens you know more likely to do or say something hurtful to another teen you know?"

The third finding is that empathy education encourages increased empathy, which results in positive reactions and support for peers in social media. This finding relates to the first hypothesis that "*Empathy education makes a perceived positive impact on a cyberbullying prevention program.*" Empathy education plays a very large role in whether a teen is more likely to be the cyberbully. If a teen is more empathic, they will think about how the victim will feel before they post something about them online. However, if the teen is not empathic, they will not think twice about posting something hurtful about another teen online. As seen below in Figure 3, students were asked to indicate their level of agreement with a series of statements. These results were used to determine how empathic the student population sampled are. To do this, the researchers ran a factor analysis on the variables to ensure construct validity exists. The factor analysis determined that all of the statements factored together. Thus, all the variables are valid and they are all measuring the same underlying construct-empathy.
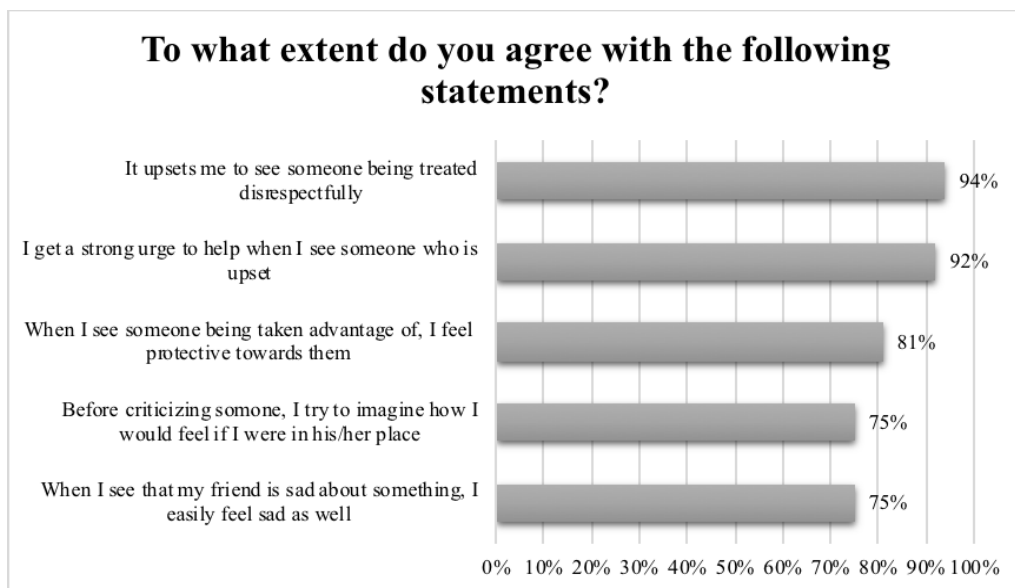
To what extent do you agree with the following statements?

Figure 3. The chart above shows the percentage of students who agreed with the statements presented to them in the survey.

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The final major finding is that sixty-eight percent of students surveyed believe peer-led assemblies are effective for middle school students and seventy-three percent say they relate more to their peers than a school administrator. This finding relates to the researchers hypothesis that *"Peer-to-peer programming empowers students."* It also shows that twenty-three percent of students would rather have an assembly run by a peer than school administer or outside source.

6.2 Teacher Survey

After administering the survey to the teacher/administrator population and collecting and analyzing the data, the researcher has been able to determine some findings based off these results.

The first major finding from the teacher/administrator survey is that fifty-four percent of teachers surveyed do not know their school's cyberbullying policies. This number is very concerning, considering fifty-two percent of also believe cyberbullying to be a prevalent issue within their school. If a teacher or administrator does not know their school's cyberbullying policies, how are they supposed to address the issue and help the victim? Another major finding is that twenty percent of teachers surveyed believe the cyberbullying policies within their school should be changed. Many of the teacher/administrators reported that they believe the policies should be "followed more closely and defined carefully," "rules should be more strict," "penalties need to be more automatic as opposed to being scheduled at the student's convenience." This finding disproves the researcher's original hypothesis that "*Middle school teachers believe the cyberbullying policies within their school are effective."*

7. Limitations

This study had several limitations that are worth noting. First, the researchers found that it was very difficult to have schools commit to the study. In fact, one of the original three schools pulled out of the project just as the launching period approached. The original goal was for three schools to participate to include a more diverse sample, however there ended up being two partnering schools. Another limitation was the difference in population size between the two schools studied. At Finley Middle School, we had a response rate of seventy-five percent for the students compared to one percent at Sayville Middle School. This could be due to a lack of school support, parental involvement, or knowledge on the serious topic of cyberbullying. The third limitation of this study is the lack of a diverse population taking the study, which could have skewed the results. The fourth limitation determined by the researcher is that many questions, more specifically on the teacher/administrator survey were skipped by the population taking the survey, which could also result in skewed data. The fifth limimation the researcher concluded was honestly by the students completing the survey. There were no measures taken to promote more honest responses from the students over those the students believed to be the "right choice". Finally, the study was completed at two public middle schools in Long Island, New York. If this study was to be completed again, the researcher would suggest using a different type of school (charter or private) or in a different location to receive more diverse results.[19]

8. Recommendations

In response to the results of this study, the researcher suggests a number of recommendations to prevent cyberbullying from taking place within the middle school setting.

8.1 Student Survey

The first recommendation is to further integrate empathy education into the curriculum as young as possible. The results from the study showed that many students within the middle schools surveyed, already show signs of being empathic. To continue implementing empathy education into the daily curriculum, many different techniques can be applied. For starters, students need to understand what empathy is. If they do not understand empathy, they will not understand how to practice it. However, you cannot just give the students a clear cut definition of what empathy is. To teach empathy you can use different literature about perspective taking. These different types of literature should represent the reading level and understanding of the students being taught. After the story is read, students can make connections to the different characters and how they each showed signs of being empathic. Another way you can teach empathy is by teaching students to listen to one another. When a peer is telling a story or explaining a problem they

may have, students should not be thinking about how they will respond to their peers. Instead, they should be taking in everything their peer is saying to them. By acknowledging what their peer is saying, the students show that they are interested in the conversation and they may even learn something new. The final and easiest way to teach empathy is to model it. Teachers and administrators are the best role models in the school setting for students to learn empathy. If teachers and administrators model good behavior, students will, in turn, begin to mimic these good behaviors.

The second recommendation to prevent cyberbullying at the middle school level is to begin talking about and addressing cyberbullying as early as sixth grade with both students and parents. With students using social media at an earlier age than ever before, it is important to ensure students understand how their actions online can be hurtful to others. Students should be taught what cyberbullying is and how it is different from traditional bullying. Students should also understand that there are consequences to cyberbullying, whether it is taking place at school or at home. Teachers and administrators within the school should educate parents and guardians on how to handle an instance of cyberbullying if it were to take place at home. Parents and guardians should know what tools are available to them if their child is a victim of cyberbullying or how to handle if their child is the cyberbully. Additionally, if a student becomes a victim of cyberbullying, they should know what resources are available to them and what adults they can speak too. Students should also be taught about the bystander effect. The bystander effect "occurs when the presence of others discourages an individual from intervening in an emergency situation".[20] Students should be taught that if they see cyberbullying taking place, there are different ways they can be an upstander in the situation instead of being a bystander. For example, if they feel comfortable, students can intervene and stand up for the victim of cyberbullying. If students do not feel comfortable intervening, they can also go over to the vicium afterwards to make sure they are ok or talk to a trusted adult about what they just saw and have the adult handle it from there.

The final recommendation that can be made based off of the student survey data is to discuss with students the assumptions they are making about their peers' behavior online. The data from the student survey shows that five percent of students say they would say or do something hurtful online, however, thirty-nine percent of students say that they believe their peers would say or do something hurtful online. This number is very concerning because we want to make sure that teens who said they are not saying or doing something hurtful online, will not do something harmful in the future because they believe their friends are. To prevent students from making assumptions there are a few different courses of action that can take place. First, students will need to recognize that they are making an assumption and that not all assumptions are true. Next, students need to understand how to not make an assumption. Instead of asking the "why" questions, students should ask "what" or "how" questions to help them understand the situation taking place. An example question may be; *"What facts do I have to prove this is true?"* These types of questions will help the student sort out if the information they have is true or false. Finally, if a student is feeling comfortable enough, they can ask their peer the question they were making assumptions about. This tactic will hopefully get to the bottom of the assumption and the student will have the truth.

8.2 Teacher and Administrator Survey

Based on the data from the teacher and administrator survey, the first recommendation is to ensure all school staff and personnel are aware of and understand the school's cyberbullying policies. Fifty-two percent of teacher and administrator respondents at the middle schools surveyed do not know their schools cyberbullying policies. Before each school year, the superintendent and central office officials should review cyberbullying policies with not only middle school administrators and teachers but the entire school district staff. This will ensure cyberbullying is being addressed at all grade levels. However, before they review the policies with middle school teachers and staff, the superintendent and central office officials should sit down with a group of school administrators (e.i middle school principal, vice principal and guidance counselors) to discuss these policies and determine if they need to make any changes before bringing them to the entire staff. While they are reviewing policies with the staff, administrators and central office officials should also show examples of how cyberbullying can take place within their school. This will be beneficial to teachers who do not use social media or have never witnessed an act of cyberbullying taking place. To do this, the researcher suggests using real life scenarios or skits to "act out" different ways cyberbullying has been seen within the classroom. Some examples of how cyberbullying can take place include but are not limited to; posting an embarrassing photo on instagram, blocking a peer on "finstagram," saying something rude or inappropriate about a peer on twitter, airdropping a photo to the entire school, etc. Since cyberbullying is constantly changing and evolving, school officials should make sure they are aware of how cyberbullying is changing and make themselves familiar with new social media sites. School policies should also be reviewed annually to make sure they are consistent with new technologies and social media sites.

The final recommendation is for school districts to consider changing the course of action taken to ensure teachers are aware of the policies and have the most up to date information. To do this, administrators should review what the

next steps are if a teacher witnesses a cyberbullying incident taking place within their classroom. However, before they do this, teachers and administrators should be educated on what the signs are of a student being cyberbullied or a student acting as the cyberbully. Some examples can be seen below in Table 1.

Table 1: The table below shows examples of how a student would act if they are being cyberbullied or if the student is the cyberbully.

Signs of a student being cyberbullied	Signs of a student being a cyberbully
Becomes a loner	Large number of social networking accounts
Displays symptoms of depressions	Resist following the rules
Doesn't attend school	Judgemental or critical of others
Work ethic/grades drop	Makes insulting or snarky comments
Stops participating in social activities	Spends long hours online
Stops eating or sleeping	Does not care how they act towards others
Changes in friends	Peer pressure from other students

Once the superintendent and school administrators review the signs of a student who is a cyberbully and a student who is the victim of cyberbullying with teachers, school districts should implement (if they have not already done so) an "action plan" that lists the necessary steps to address cyberbullying in their school community. These steps should be adjusted accordingly to the degree of the offense made by the cyberbully and the needs of the specific school. When teachers or administrators witnessed cyberbullying, it should be addressed immediately and students should face some type of consequence, appropriately representative of the offense they committed. In addition, restorative justice efforts should be made to repair the relationship between the cyberbully and the victim.

9. Conclusion

Due to an increase in social media sites and growing access to media devices, cyberbullying has become a prevalent issue among adolescents, especially middle school aged students. Even though there has been sustainable research regarding current cyberbullying prevention and intervention programs, none of these existing programs include the two key components that could contribute to making them the most successful; empathy education and peer-to-peer empowerment. To implement these two crucial factors into cyberbullying prevention and intervention programs, the schools should use creative ways to keep students engaged as well as learning. In addition, school districts need to inform their teachers and administrators of the tools that are available to them if cyberbullying were to occur within their classroom. If all of these components (empathy education, peer-to-peer empowerment and having resources readily available for teachers and staff) are implemented, middle schools will be able to successfully combat the growing issue of cyberbullying and implement a prevention program for the middle school level.

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