

Cyberbullying: Crossing the Line

Essential Question

When does inappropriate online behavior cross the line to cyberbullying, and what can you do about it?

Lesson Overview

Students learn to distinguish good-natured teasing from cyberbullying. Students learn about serious forms of cyberbullying, which include harassment, deception, “flaming,” and threats to safety.

Students watch the video “**Stacey’s Story – When Rumors Escalate**,” a documentary-style story in which a girl reflects on what it was like to be the target of cyberbullying. Students then discuss the video and related case studies in the **Cyberbullying: Crossing the Line Discussion Guide**.

Learning Objectives

Students will be able to ...

- analyze online bullying behaviors that “cross the line.”
- learn about the various ways that students can be cyberbullied, including flaming, deceiving, and harassing.
- adopt the point of view of teens who have been cyberbullied, and offer solutions.

Materials and Preparation

-  Preview the video, “**Stacey’s Story – When Rumors Escalate**,” and be prepared to play the video for the class.
- Copy the **Cyberbullying: Crossing the Line Student Discussion Guide** for all students.
- Review the **Cyberbullying: Crossing the Line Student Discussion Guide – Teacher Version**, and select which case study you would like students to analyze.

Family Resources

- Send home the **Cyberbullying Family Tip Sheet (Middle School)**.

Estimated time: 45 minutes

Standards Alignment –

Common Core: RI.6.7, RI.7-8.10, SL.6-8.1a-d, SL.6-8.2, SL.6-8.6, L.6-8.6, RST.6-8.4, RST.6-8.10

NETS•S: 2a, 2b, 5a, 5d

Key Vocabulary –

harassing: bombarding someone with messages over digital media, or repeated contact when it is least expected

deceiving: using fake names, posing as someone else, or creating a fake profile about someone else

flaming: saying mean things, usually in ALL CAPS, and often in a public forum with the intention to humiliate

hate speech: a verbal attack targeting someone because of their race, gender, religion, or sexual orientation

introduction

Warm-up (10 minutes)

ASK:

What are some of the ways that you and your friends tease each other online for fun?

Sample responses:

- Send jokes back and forth
- Alter photos of one another, in a goofy (not mean) way

When does teasing “cross the line” and become harmful? What are some signs, and what does it feel like to be in that situation?

Sample responses:

- The teasing begins to feel scary, not funny anymore.
- You feel helpless.
- You feel like your reputation might suffer.
- You are worried about your safety.

ASK students if they have ever heard of the the Key Vocabulary terms **harassing, deceiving, flaming,** and **hate speech**. Have students describe the terms, and then provide their definitions.

POINT OUT to students that these are examples of situations that definitely “cross the line” and are considered cyberbullying. (However, they are not the only examples.)

DISCUSS with students why someone might not want to talk to other people about a cyberbullying situation. What would the roadblocks be? Why? Emphasize to students that, no matter what label they put on a situation, if it makes them feel uncomfortable, upset, or hurt, they should talk to someone about it.

teach 1

Stacey’s Story (15 minutes)

EXPLAIN that you are going to watch a video of a teen reflecting on a cyberbullying experience.

▶ SHOW students the video “**Stacey’s Story – When Rumors Escalate.**”

DIVIDE students into groups of four or five.

DISTRIBUTE copies of the **Cyberbullying: Crossing the Line Student Discussion Guide** to each student, and have students discuss the Video Discussion Questions in their small groups.

ENGAGE students in a full-class discussion about their responses to the Video Discussion Questions. Refer to the **Cyberbullying: Crossing the Line Student Discussion Guide – Teacher Version** for guidance.

teach 2

Case Study Analysis (15 minutes)

HAVE each group read and discuss the case study that you selected from the student handout (Case Study 1, “Attacked from All Sides” or Case Study 2, “Election Sabotage”).

ENGAGE students in a full-class discussion about their responses to the case study questions. Refer to the **Cyberbullying: Crossing the Line Student Discussion Guide – Teacher Version** for guidance.

POINT OUT that it can be hard to judge someone’s intentions online. Let students know that no matter how a message is sent, words used with the intention of hurting someone are taken very seriously by schools, parents, and even the police. Let students know that they should tell trusted adults if they observe or are involved in cyberbullying, and that they must report it to the school, their parents, or other trusted adults when someone has threatened to hurt someone else.

closing

Wrap-up (5 minutes)

You can use these questions to assess your students’ understanding of the lesson objectives. You may want to ask students to reflect in writing on one of the questions, using a journal or an online blog/wiki.

ASK:

What does it feel like when a teasing situation “crosses the line” from harmless to harmful?

When teasing no longer feels funny and starts to feel upsetting or scary, then students should start taking it seriously. People can feel helpless, ganged up on, worried about their reputation, worried about their safety, etc.

What are some different forms of cyberbullying?

Sample responses:

- Harassment, which feels virtually impossible to escape
- Deception, because it is dishonest to impersonate someone else, and it can damage their reputation
- Flaming, because of the extreme and cruel language
- Hate speech, which is discriminatory, and very damaging to someone’s reputation

What advice would you give to someone who feels cyberbullied?

Talk to friends about what you are going through. Tell an adult you trust, especially if you feel you are being flamed, deceived, harassed, are the target of hate speech.

Extension Activity

Students brainstorm about an anonymous reporting system. Tell them that most kids say they would report cyberbullying if they did not have to identify themselves. Ask students to brainstorm ways for students to anonymously report cyberbullying at school. Have them make an action plan for dealing with the problem and a proposal for convincing administrators, teachers, students, and parents to get involved.

At-Home Activity

Have students interview family members about a time when they might have felt that someone “crossed the line” from teasing to harassment. How did they respond to the incident? What do they wish they had done differently? What advice can they share? (Students can use a smartphone’s voice recorder, a laptop’s microphone, or download the free audio editor Audacity (www.audacity.sourceforge.net) to capture the interview(s)).

Cyberbullying: Crossing the Line

Video Discussion Questions

Stacey's Story

1. *Why did the girls start to harass and threaten Stacey online in the first place?*
 2. *When do you think the girls' behavior "crossed the line"?*
 3. *Stacey says, "People talk really big, when there's, like, miles between you." What do you think she means by this statement?*
 4. *In what ways might the online context make the situation worse than if the bully had harassed Stacey offline?*
 5. *Stacey's mom says that Stacey should call the school and report the incidents. Stacey responds that it would "just make it worse." Do you think this is true? Why or why not?*
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Case Studies

Directions

Read the two case studies and answer the questions with your group. Be prepared to share your responses with the class.

case study 1

Attacked from All Sides

Eric gets a lot of pressure from his parents to do well in school. Other kids in school tease him because he works so hard but still gets poor test scores. He gets instant messages and text messages during the day and at night about his poor grades. The word "loser" is in most of them, and the language becomes stronger every day. Today he received a text from a number he did not recognize, with a photo of his body with a turkey's head. A thought bubble above the picture reads: "Why am I so STUPID? What a *!*&*** I am." Eric thinks Alexis, the most popular girl in the eighth grade, is behind the message.

1. *What forms of cyberbullying did the students use on Eric? What is your evidence?*
2. *How do you think Eric feels? What elements of this situation make him feel this way?*

3. *Do you think Eric should tell his parents about the cyberbullying?*
4. *What qualities do you think a “trusted adult” should have? Who are these people in your life? In what ways can a trusted adult actually be effective?*
5. *If Alexis was the bully, what could school personnel, such as the principal, do or say to Alexis to make her realize that her behavior is wrong?*
6. *Have you ever been part of, or heard of, a situation similar to this? If so, share the story with the group without using names or details.*

case study 2

Election Sabotage

Tanya is pretty popular. She is running for class president. The election is a week away, and Tanya is neck and neck with Sara. Sara’s friends decide to sabotage Tanya. They create a fake social network page for Tanya. They use a photo of Tanya for her profile picture, and for her interests, they write: “partying, making fun of anything ASIAN, loving myself.” Most of the students at the school are Asian, and rumors start to spread that Tanya is a racist. As election day nears, Sara’s friends start to flame Tanya with texts that say things like “racist” almost every hour.

1. *What forms of cyberbullying did Sara’s friends use on Tanya? What is your evidence?*
2. *Do you think there is ever a good reason for impersonating someone else online or creating a profile about them?*
3. *Do you think Sara knew what her friends were doing? What is Sara’s responsibility in this?*
4. *What do you think the consequences should be for Sara and her friends if the school finds out?*
5. *If you found out about what happened, would this be a reason not to vote for Sara?*
6. *Have you ever been part of, or heard of, a situation similar to this? If so, share the story with the group without using names or details.*

Cyberbullying: Crossing the Line

Video Discussion Questions

Directions

The following discussion questions are for the video, “**Stacey’s Story – When Rumors Escalate.**” The vignette is a real cyberbullying story. The goal of the video questions is for students to apply critical thinking to the information they have learned about cyberbullying.

Stacey’s Story

1. *Why did the girls start to harass and threaten Stacey online in the first place?*

Guide students to recognize that the girls started to bully Stacey because of a misunderstanding. It seems that they thought she was trying to flirt with one of the girl’s boyfriends. It turns out the boy was actually Stacey’s cousin. Make it clear, though, that cyberbullying Stacey was not an appropriate response even if the guy had not been her cousin.

2. *When do you think the girls’ behavior “crossed the line”?*

Pretty much right from the beginning. They called her names publicly on MySpace and said she was stupid. But the threats did get worse over time.

3. *Stacey says, “People talk really big, when there’s, like, miles between you.” What do you think she means by this statement?*

Students might take Stacey’s statement literally. It is fine if they do, but guide them to think about the intent behind Stacey’s comment.)

Sample responses:

- *People say things that aren’t true online because they are not face to face with you.*
- *People are meaner online because you’re not there to react.*
- *People make bigger threats online because they feel invincible behind their computers.*

4. *In what ways might the online context make the situation worse than if the bully had harassed Stacey offline?*

Students might say that online bullying is either not as bad or the same as offline bullying. This is okay, because there is no right or wrong answer. The point is that there are differences between these two forms of bullying, and it is important to untangle some of the similarities and differences.)

Sample responses:

- *It’s more public. Many MySpace friends and users who don’t have anything to do with the incident can see the postings.*
- *The offenders may be bolder over the Internet, saying things they might not say in person.*
- *People may say things that are meaner online because it seems that actions are separated from consequences.*
- *Bullying is no worse online than offline because the impact on the victim is the same.*

5. Stacey's mom says that Stacey should call the school and report the incidents. Stacey responds that it would "just make it worse." Do you think this is true? Why or why not?

Guide students to think about the importance of finding an adult they trust, though inform students that some schools have clearer and more well-thought-out policies than others. Ideally, a trusted adult would listen closely to students' concerns, take them seriously, investigate the problem, make it clear that there will be consequences for offenders, clearly define those consequences, and involve the parents.

Sample responses:

- *There are people such as counselors, psychologists, and other school staff who might be trusted adults.*
- *Maybe Stacey is scared. Perhaps Stacey's mom can go with her to talk to adults at her school.*

Case Studies

Directions

Case Study 1: "Attacked from All Sides" is about students who harass someone for something about which he is already quite sensitive. In groups of four or five, have students read the case study, answer the questions, and report to the class what they discussed.

Case Study 2: "Election Sabotage" is about what happens when someone is impersonated and maligned online. In groups of four or five, have students read the case study, answer the questions, and report to the class what they discussed.

case study 1

Attacked from All Sides

Eric gets a lot of pressure from his parents to do well in school. Other kids in school tease him because he works so hard but still gets bad poor scores. He gets instant messages and text messages during the day and at night about his poor grades. The word "loser" is in most of them, and the language becomes stronger every day. Today he received a text from a number he did not recognize, with a photo of his body with a turkey's head. A thought bubble above the picture reads: "Why am I so STUPID? What a *!*&* I am." Eric thinks Alexis, the most popular girl in the eighth grade, is behind the message.

1. What forms of cyberbullying did the students use on Eric? What is your evidence?

Sample responses:

- *Harassment, because of the constant texts*
- *Flaming, because of the mean messages*

2. How do you think Eric feels? What elements of this situation make him feel this way?

Sample responses:

- *Eric probably feels trapped, like he can't get away from the students' cruelty.*
- *The texts might make him feel stupid, especially because his parents have placed so much emphasis on his school performance.*
- *Eric might feel as if he has no choices, because Alexis is so popular. If he gets her in trouble, people might give him the cold shoulder for good.*

3. Do you think Eric should tell his parents about the cyberbullying?

Guide students to think about how important it is that students find adults they trust to tell them about harmful communication and cyberbullying. In this case, Eric’s parents may not be the best people for him to tell because they are so focused on Eric’s academic success. It is also important to recognize that there are certain situations when kids do not want to tell their parents or teachers, and instead want to work it out themselves or just ignore it.

Sample responses:

- *Maybe Eric should find another trusted adult because his parents seem more focused on academics. The right adult might be a teacher that Eric thinks will listen to and help him.*
- *Yes. Eric’s parents will probably care, even though they seem more focused on his academic achievement. They probably have no idea what’s happening to Eric at school.*

4. What qualities do you think a “trusted adult” should have? Who are these people in your life? In what ways can a trusted adult actually be effective?

Guide students to identify people who listen to them, who understand enough about technology to know why cyberbullying is so damaging, and who would be able to impose consequences (e.g., mediation or punishment) on the cyberbullies or be an advocate.

5. If Alexis was the bully, what could school personnel, such as the principal, do or say to Alexis to make her realize that her behavior is wrong?

Guide students to think of responses that focus on educating Alexis about the harm of cyberbullying. Educating Alexis could involve the principal showing her various news stories about the problems that cyberbullying causes or having Alexis talk to her classmates about the dangers of cyberbullying. Either way, it is important that the principal make sure that Eric feels safe from retribution or future harm.

6. Have you ever been part of, or heard of, a situation similar to this? If so, share the story with the group without using names or details.

Stress that cyberbullying is very common, and that most people have some story of cyberbullying to tell.

case study 2

Election Sabotage

Tanya is pretty popular. She is running for class president. The election is a week away, and Tanya is neck and neck with Sara. Sara’s friends decide to sabotage Tanya. They create a fake social network page for Tanya. They use a photo of Tanya for her profile picture, and for her interests, they write: “partying, making fun of anything ASIAN, loving myself.” Most of the students at the school are Asian, and rumors start to spread that Tanya is a racist. As election day nears, Sara’s friends start to flame Tanya with texts that say things like “racist” almost every hour.

1. *What forms of cyberbullying did Sara's friends use on Tanya? What is your evidence?*

Sample responses:

- *Deception, by impersonating her on her profile*
- *Flaming, because of the mean messages*
- *Hate speech, because of the untrue comments about Tanya making fun of anything Asian*

2. *Do you think there is ever a good reason for impersonating someone else online or creating a profile about them?*

Guide students to the conclusion that nothing good can come of impersonating someone else online, even as a joke, because things can get out of hand pretty quickly if information is seen by others and spreads.

3. *Do you think Sara knew what her friends were doing? What is Sara's responsibility in this?*

Guide students to speculate about different scenarios, such as Sara knowing about it and not doing anything to stop it, versus Sara not knowing about it.

4. *What do you think the consequences should be for Sara and her friends if the school finds out?*

Guide students to think about how the consequences for Sara will likely depend on how much she knew or participated in the creation of the fake profile. Have students consider the end results that will raise awareness about the issue of cyberbullying for Sara, her friends, and the school community.

Sample responses:

- *Sara should have to drop out of the race if she knew about the cyberbullying.*
- *The friends should issue a public apology to Tanya to clear her name.*
- *Sara's friends should be punished (suspended, etc.)*
- *The administration might organize an assembly on hate speech and why it's harmful.*

5. *If you found out about what happened, would this be a reason not to vote for Sara?*

Guide students to think about how the answer depends on how much involvement Sara had with cyberbullying. If Sara knew about it and did nothing to stop it, how can she be trusted to do the right thing when in office? If she didn't know, why should she be punished for something her friends did?

6. *Have you ever been part of, or heard of, a situation similar to this? If so, share the story with the group without using names or details.*

Stress that cyberbullying is common, and that most people have some story of cyberbullying to tell.

Cyberbullying: Crossing the Line

1. Every time Ricardo messes up in an online game, another player sends him several messages making fun of him. Ricardo thinks the messages are funny, until he gets one that hurts his feelings. True or false: Ricardo is being cyberbullied.

- a) True
- b) False

2. Which of the following are examples of cyberbullying? Read each answer choice, and then circle YES or NO accordingly.

| | | |
|---|-----|----|
| a) Altering photos of friends in a goofy way, but not in a mean way | YES | NO |
| b) Making a physical threat online | YES | NO |
| c) Telling someone that you like them online | YES | NO |
| d) Physically pushing someone | YES | NO |
| e) Saying something mean about someone based on their race, gender, or religion | YES | NO |

3. The answer choices below are examples of comments someone might say online. Each one contains words written in ALL CAPS. Which one would be considered flaming?

- a) "NO WAY! That's SO cool!"
- b) "LOL i can't stop laughing"
- c) "SERIOUSLY? NOBODY CARES. GET OUT."

Cyberbullying: Crossing the Line

1. Every time Ricardo messes up in an online game, another player sends him several messages making fun of him. Ricardo thinks the messages are funny, until he gets one that hurts his feelings. True or false: Ricardo is being cyberbullied.

- a) True
- b) False

Answer feedback

The correct answer is **a**, True. The other player’s behavior has crossed the line into cyberbullying when the message hurts Ricardo’s feelings.

2. Which of the following are examples of cyberbullying? Read each answer choice, and then circle YES or NO accordingly.

| | | |
|---|-----|----|
| a) Altering photos of friends in a goofy way, but not in a mean way | YES | NO |
| b) Making a physical threat online | YES | NO |
| c) Telling someone that you like them online | YES | NO |
| d) Physically pushing someone | YES | NO |
| e) Saying something mean about someone based on their race, gender, or religion | YES | NO |

Answer feedback

Any online behavior that is meant to upset, offend, or humiliate someone else is considered cyberbullying.

3. The answer choices below are examples of comments someone might say online. Each one contains words written in ALL CAPS. Which one would be considered flaming?

- a) “NO WAY! That’s SO cool!”
- b) “LOL i can’t stop laughing”
- c) “SERIOUSLY? NOBODY CARES. GET OUT.”

Answer feedback

The correct answer is **c**. Flaming involves saying mean things online, usually in ALL CAPS, and often in a public forum with the intention to humiliate.

Common Sense on Cyberbullying

What's the Issue?

Cyberbullying is the use of digital media tools, such as the Internet and cell phones, to deliberately humiliate and harass others, oftentimes repeatedly. Though most teens do not do this, those who do are often motivated by a desire for power, status, and attention – and their targets are often people they are competing with for social standing. Cyberbullies often take advantage of the Web's anonymity to antagonize someone without being recognized.

Cyberbullying can take a variety of forms, such as harassing someone, impersonating someone, spreading rumors, or forwarding embarrassing information about a person. A bully's mean-spirited comments can spread widely through instant messaging (IM), phone texting, and by posts on social networking sites. This can happen rapidly, with little time for teens to cool down between responses. And it can happen anytime – at school or at home – and oftentimes it involves large groups of teens.

Why Does It Matter?

Cyberbullying is similar to face-to-face bullying, but online tools magnify the hurt, humiliation, and social drama in a very public way. Whether it's creating a fake Facebook or MySpace page to impersonate a fellow student, repeatedly sending hurtful text messages and images, or spreading rumors or posting cruel comments on the Internet, cyberbullying can result in severe emotional and even physical harm.

And though anyone can spot bullying behavior in the real world, it's much more difficult to detect it in the online world. Sometimes an entire social circle will get involved, and then it becomes harder for an individual teen to disengage from it. In fact, whole groups of teens may be actively or passively participating, and the target can feel that it is impossible to get away from the bullies. In addition, hurtful information posted on the Internet is extremely difficult to remove, and millions of people can see it.

The following tips can help you recognize the warning signs of cyberbullying and serve as a guide for talking to your teens about preventing it.

What Families Can Do

You seem down. What's going on at school? Is anything upsetting happening online?

I'm here for you and so are your friends. Talk to me anytime.

Are there any teachers at school who have dealt with these kinds of situations before? I think you should tell one of them about what's been happening.

Bullies want attention, power, and status, which explains why they need to cause drama.

I saw a news story about a teen who was bullied online. What would you do in that situation?

common sense says

Recognize context. Cyberbullying is often not thought of as “cyberbullying” to the teens involved. Even though an incident has a history, a story, and nuance, rather than referring it as “cyberbullying,” try the words “digital cruelty,” “abuse,” or “being mean” online.

Help teens understand when behavior crosses the line. Help your teen tune into his or her own feelings. If they feel emotionally or physically scared, it’s time to get help.

Encourage empathy. Help teens understand the detrimental impact of cyberbullying on people who are targeted, now and later in life. Encourage them to listen to targets and to become their allies.

Be realistic. Teens have their own social dynamics that often don’t include parents, so helping them directly may be difficult. Encourage teens to find friends or other trusted adults to help them through the situation, even if it’s not you. Websites are often slow to respond, if they respond at all, but reporting an incident to a website administrator can be an empowering step.

Remember that your teen might be the bully. Teens can take different roles in cyberbullying at different times. A teen who is cyberbullied might turn around and cyberbully someone else to feel powerful again. Ask questions to understand what role or roles your teens are playing.

Tell them to disengage. Encourage your teens to ignore and block the bully, and even log off the computer for a while. Point out that cyberbullies are often just looking for attention and status, so don’t let them know that their efforts have worked.