
We long to connect...

With exponential growth in social networking technologies, a new world has been created to enable youth to connect with others beyond their local communities.



Within our own school family, we experienced a marked increase in the number of reported incidents where young people felt bullied by those who exploit the use of on-line social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter. While it was encouraging to know that young people aged 11-14 were becoming more confident talking to an adult about what was happening in cyberspace, it did not seem to make a significant affect in the reduction of the number of incidences of bullying (in comparison to previous years). Several teachers reported that the majority of their students claimed to use social networking as a means to communicate positively, yet our parent community demanded immediate action to curb the rising tide of cyber-bullying and sought support from outside and within the school community. In this paper, I propose a model that the guidance counselor could use to serve to facilitate discussion between parents and teachers, to guide (and inform) colleagues and to empower the student body as a unifying force to become aware of the consequences of cyber-bullying - with the goal to make them more empathic to those who experiencing bullying. The counselor

Cyberbullying is the general term describing any communication activity using cyber technology (eg. computers, cell phones, and smart phones) that could be considered harmful to individual or collective wellbeing. OSCA "Ethical Guidelines for Ontario School Counsellors", p.23

would be charged with conducting qualitative and quantitative research, gathering appropriate resources and contacting support personnel in helping to implement a school-wide program. However, creating a program that built upon the character education focus of the school and board was critical to ensure logical ties with the program goals implemented since the beginning of the year. In doing so, it assured that the cyber-bullying plan would be perceived as not an "add-on" but an important

component of the school's success plan. A counselor would have to be aware of initiatives of this level and to implement relevant and appropriate programs. Consequently, establishing a strong network of support staff including guidance resource teachers at the board level would place the school counselor in a better position to field questions and to offer direction.¹ In addition, the counselor should ensure any material presented to special education students was well vetted by special education teachers to ensure wording and presentation of information remained clear, accessible (e.g. electronic and large-print) and understandable.

Guiding Principles: Making a Difference. Programs that Have Value

A solid school counseling program involves planned involvement of all personnel within a school.² Also, clear assignment responsibilities, competence and an accurate measurement of outcomes helps to ensure that the program has an impact the lives of everyone in the school community (i.e., students, parents, teachers). Using this a foundation of which to build our cyber-bullying awareness campaign (part of our "S.T.A.R." initiative: "Students Taking Action Responsibly"), I used a model to help organize, to

1. "Counsellors should continue to develop their professional portfolio. Counsellors should maintain the practices of exchanging ideas, networking and sharing resources." "Ethical Principles, Illustrative Cases, and Legal Comments", *Ethical Guidelines for Ontario School Counsellors*, OSCA, p. 7

2 "Students can help other students with their learning. Peer assistance or mediation programs provide supportive peer role models for students requiring individual assistance..." "Peer Assistance Programs", *Choices In Action*, pp.21-22

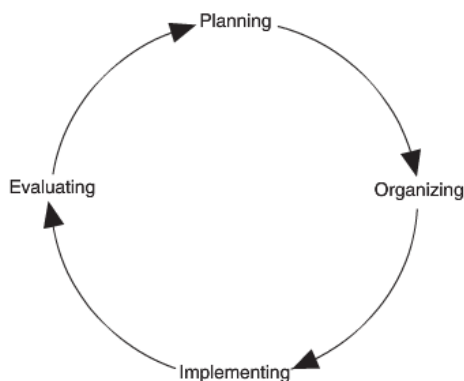


Figure 4.1

Schmidt, J., "Phases of a Comprehensive Program", *Counseling in Schools: Comprehensive Programs of Responsive Services for All Students*, pp.91-92

plan and to evaluate the effectiveness of the program. The model would be reproduced on a large piece of chart paper and posted in the staff room with goals clearly identified and sticky notes placed around the perimeter of the circular graphic to allow for teachers to offer comments, suggestions and even reviews/critiques for the duration of the program. A data wall could be set up in the staff room to reveal current statistics on cyber-bullying and to feature web resources (e.g., MediaSmarts), videos and related materials to generate discussion within the classroom. Several schools have large LCD monitors in their foyer or library resource areas which could display public-service announcements, info-graphics, web sites and presentations. A counselor would need to know how to work with this technological tool to convey program goals in a variety of ways and/or collaborate with staff members who were adept with the technology.

The first stage of the plan was to create an on-line survey to gather data from students, parents and teachers on cyber-bullying in our school community. Three separate surveys (parent, student, teacher) were proposed by the guidance counselor to be created using questions gleaned from a published survey found here: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/nystocyberbullying>. A meeting with the principals was necessary to ensure that privacy issues were addressed and that the survey or any information on the gathering of data from students met freedom of information guidelines. A draft of the survey was to be created and shared with a small team of teachers (3-4) that the principal felt could offer comments on the questions and organization. The counselor would offer insight into who would make an effective team for this program plan.

With a parent community that values clear and immediate response to any issue at school, the team of teachers and the counselor would meet to prepare a short presentation educating the parent council on cyber-bullying. Letters were to be mailed out and sent through e-mail by the counselor, in advance, to parents inviting them to attend the presentation. The aim was to encourage as many members from our school family to attend the meeting. Teachers and members from our superintendency (e.g., superintendent, special education staff, guidance resource teachers) were also invited to attend.

Part of the presentation was to provide parents current resources, supplied by local law enforcement, our school board and even from the media, to spark questioning at the meeting and with their children at home. Second, the group would be broken into smaller discussion groups that had a blend of parents, teachers and other personnel to share their concerns and to review the resources. iPads were to be supplied with bookmarked links to testimonies of children who faced cyber-bullying and how they responded to it. The role of the counselor was to facilitate discussion where needed, and to circulate around the room to record comments to help in the implementation of a school-wide plan. In conclusion, the draft of the on-line survey, its purpose and plan of implementation would be revealed, and attendees of the meeting had the opportunity to view and to complete the survey if they so wished. Any changes to the survey would be made based upon any comments received during the survey viewing session.

Developing a Plan: Taking it Into Action

The data collected from the parent-info night and surveys would be used by the team (comprised by the counselor and small team of teachers) to develop goals for the cyber-bullying program. However, the actual planning of the program would occur alongside the

team of students who participate in the school “S.T.A.R.” program. The goal of the counselor would be to ensure that the voice of the students are not only recognized, but their ideas are followed through appropriately.

A major criticism of programs such as these by students is that, once a plan and program has been launched, it often remains challenge to account for any positive developments – or to note if the program has made any difference and can be measure quantitatively (or is still relevant). From my experience, children wish for some measure of immediacy when they are working with teachers to spearhead a program of this type. An idea would be to use a “thermometer” or some other visual aid to gauge performance of the program and to assess and reevaluate the goals of the program consistently throughout its duration. The counselor could work with the physical education, art and drama teachers to develop role-playing games, posters, student-developed brochures, “info-mercials” where students are encouraged to reflect upon scenarios, not necessarily about cyber-bullying, but bullying in general , to develop a deeper sense of empathy and to develop problem-solving skills. Sometimes, a guest speaker or role model from the community has been effective in helping to launch programs and to inspire youth to take action for a specific cause. In differentiating the ways in which the program could be delivered, the counselor can address the needs of wider range of learners³ - and to involve a greater number of teachers.

The Plan:

- gather resources, create networks, meet with experienced program planners, collect data on cyber-bullying at school
- meet to present data to principals, brainstorm a program plan and propose ideas for a school-wide initiative
- develop on-line surveys
- hold parent info-night, facilitate discussions
- conduct on-line surveys with students
- develop action plan with teachers and student leaders that involves visual aids for tracking progress
- establish clear and measurable goals
- design a final celebratory event

Long term impact and Policy Making

According to J. Schmidt, a successful counseling program depends on accurate assessment of a child’s readiness for this type of relationship.⁴ In our case, our counselor faced a challenge of building a program that, at first, was deemed unnecessary by some colleagues, but was critical in meeting needs as determined by the counselor’s assessment of the school community. Counselors are able to build such a program as they are in a prime position to acquire a big picture of the school’s climate, cultural and social needs.

In this matter of cyber-bullying, a school-centric policy was created by the counselor in conjunction with students, staff and community members. A proposal was made by the parent council that this policy would have to be in some visual form where it can be referred to easily by all. Therefore, the students decided on developing a new logo design that reflected the school stance on bullying. The logo was printed on t-shirts, revealed at an assembly and would be used on future school letterhead and media. Each teacher received a poster that outlined the school’s policy on cyber-bullying (aligned with the school board’s) and it would be mounted in a visible spot in the classroom, computer lab and library resource centre.

³ “Today, the counseling profession is attempting to formulate a more proactive stance.” “Diverse Students, Communities and Schools”, Counseling in Schools: Comprehensive Programs of Responsive Services for All Students, Fifth Edition, pp. 27

⁴ “Young children, whose perceptions are limited by egocentric views of the world and who conceptually do not grasp the notions of social interest and cooperation, might not fully appreciate the benefits of individual helping relationships.” “Ethical Principles, Illustrative Cases, and Legal Comments”, Ethical Guidelines for Ontario School Counsellors, OSPA, p. 60

In this scenario, the counselor shifted from program leader, resource to facilitator as the need arose. The counselor was well aware of the unique characteristics of the school community and worked with the principal to develop a meaningful, long-lasting program.

References:

1. Ministry of Education and Training., (1999). "Choices Into Action: Guidance and Care Education Program Policy for Ontario Elementary and Secondary Schools", Toronto: Queen's Printer for Ontario
2. Ontario School Counsellor's Association., 2009. "Ethical Guidelines for Ontario School Counsellors", Bridgenorth: Naylor (Canada), Inc.
3. Schmidt, John J., (2008) . "Counseling in Schools: Comprehensive Programs of Responsive Services for All Students, Fifth Edition", Boston: Pearson Education, Inc.
4. Legislative Assembly of Ontario., (2012). "Anti-Bullying Act, 2012". Toronto: 2012, http://www.ontla.on.ca/web/bills/bills_detail.do?locale=en&BillID=2550

Consulted web sites:

1. <http://www.stopabully.ca/bullying-resources/bullying-statistics>
2. Canadian Teachers's Federation, <http://www.ctf-fce.ca/>, "Cybertips for teachers", http://www.ctf-fce.ca/Documents/Resources/en/cyberbullying/2011/Cybertips_english.pdf and <http://www.ctf-fce.ca/Documents/Priorities/EN/cyberbullying/CyberOCTperspective.pdf>
3. "Erase Bullying", <http://www.erasebullying.ca/resources/resources.php>

An older resource, but it contained some pertinent information as to the role of a guidance counselor in Middle School:

1. Levi, M., (1991). "Making Connections", Toronto: MGS Publication Services, <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/document/reports/ereg1016.pdf>