

2018 Women's Giving Circle Fall Educational Event

Cyberbullying Education and Prevention: Responding to Adolescent Misuses of Technology and Its Effects on Children

Monday, September 24, 2018, from 5-7pm at Grace Lutheran Communities Capernaum Room

Event Introduction

Women's Giving Circle Chair Sarah Stokes introduced the presentation; she thanked the WGC Education Team for all their hard work—especially Chair and Co-Chair Jennifer Hanson-Bremer and Andrea Sullivan—as well as Premier Sponsor People's Bank and Room Sponsor Grace Lutheran Communities. She also invited audience members to join the WGC and to “like” the WGC Facebook page if they hadn't already done so, and she encouraged WGC members to take advantage of WGC's available leadership opportunities.

Dr. Hardebeck's Presentation

Dr. Mary Ann Hardebeck, Superintendent of the Eau Claire Area School District (ECASD), was next to take the podium. She pointed out that all school districts are dealing with cyberbullying, and she explained ECASD's approach to handling it.

Critical to ECASD's strategy is teaching children that “Words Have Power”—both to hurt and to heal—as well modeling positive behavior. Staff members also use cyberbullying incidents as teachable moments rather than focusing on punishment. For example, when three students wrote and shared a document that insulted fellow students and staff members, teachers showed the class how tracking the document's revision history ultimately led to the authors. The lesson was not only that the insults were hurtful to the victims, but that it's virtually impossible to remain anonymous in the digital world.

Dr. Hardebeck also explained that cyberbullying is especially insidious because it means that home is no longer a haven for students; they often have to deal with hurtful messages in the privacy of their own rooms. Even though much of it takes place off school grounds, schools recognize the importance of confronting cyberbullying.

ECASD has implemented curriculum at the elementary and middle school levels that emphasize “Digital Citizenship” by leading students through lessons that model positive Internet behavior. While the high school level is currently using mostly discussion to address cyberbullying, ECASD is working on getting curriculum appropriate to that level.

Dr. Hardebeck listed some of the challenges schools face in addressing cyberbullying. Students are “digital natives” while older adults are more like second language learners when it comes to technology. As a result, it's more difficult to keep up with both increasing technology and students' ability to use it. Also, the perceived anonymity of Internet posts makes users feel they can type things they wouldn't say in face-to-face conversation. ECASD also needs to balance the need of students and parents to feel that schools are safe while not alienating troubled youngsters with a harsh zero-tolerance policy.

However, by working to increase student empathy, making them understand they leave “digital footprints” when they post online, and encouraging them to report their concerns to trusted adults, ECASD is working to

give young people tools to deal with cyberbullying. The district also encourages parents to talk to children about their online expectations and possible online dangers; to take advantage of parental control apps in a way that's open and respectful to their children; and to monitor children for any changes in behavior that could indicate a problem.

Ultimately, ECASD is working to create an environment where all students feel safe, respected, and nurtured.

Dr. Justin Patchin's Presentation

Next to take the podium was Dr. Justin Patchin, a pioneer in the field of cyberbullying research. He pointed out that old precautions like "Don't talk to strangers" are no longer enough; students need to understand WHY they need to be careful as well as have a variety of strategies for dealing with online situations.

He defined bullying as behavior that's intentionally hurtful, repeated over time, and involves a power differential between the bully and victim. He said it's important to distinguish between true bullying and isolated instances of rudeness or aggression because over-reporting of bullying has tended to distort perceptions of true bullying and make some schools reluctant to report it.

Dr. Patchin pointed out that a conventional definition of cyberbullying—"willful and repeated harm inflicted through the use of computers, cell phones, or other electronic devices"—has some flaws but generally conveys the main points.

Unfortunately, cyberbullying has been difficult to deal with because it's hard to identify a responsible party. Dr. Patchin illustrated this point with the story of a boy whose classmates published a web page full of nasty and hurtful content about him. The school didn't feel it was responsible because the behavior took place off school grounds; the police couldn't do anything because there were no direct threats against the student; and Yahoo refused to take the page down because of censorship concerns. As a result, the page stayed online for seven months, until the threat of a lawsuit by the parents finally encouraged Yahoo to take it down.

The schools' role has increased since this incident seven years ago because they can now intervene if the content is proven to negatively affect students' performances in school. However, Dr. Patchin points out that it's everyone's responsibility to help by creating an environment where victims feel acknowledged and supported.

He displayed statistics from studies he'd conducted which (among other things) demonstrate that victims of cyberbullying feel less safe at school than even victims of traditional bullying because it's so much harder for them to identify and avoid the bullies.

Dr. Patchin also addressed the surprisingly prevalent phenomenon of digital self-harm, in which students anonymously post negative and/or threatening comments about themselves. He said there are a variety of reasons for it: cries for attention, self-hatred, reflections of bullying from other sources, and, in a few cases, students feeling their posts were simply a joke. While not much research has been done on this phenomenon yet, it's something for parents to be aware of.

Dr. Patchin also gave parents a list of Do's and Don'ts for handling cyberbullying, both when their children are victims and when they're the bullies.

DON'T

- **Take away the technology** because denying access to negative posts won't make them go away.
- **Increase formal sanctions**; research indicates that threats of punishment don't tend to deter bullies, although students are more inclined to fear consequences from schools and parents than from the police.
- **Enact zero-tolerance policies**; they've been proven not to work, and they create situations where kids are punished excessively for minor offenses. Since there's a strong correlation between school suspensions and students who end up in jail, even if they weren't suspended for serious offenses, zero-tolerance can create more problems than it solves. Instead, each situation should be dealt with individually, and there should be more focus on stopping the behavior than on punishing the offenders.
- **Publicly shame bullies**; this causes psychological damage that's difficult to repair. Instead, as Dr. Patchin put it, "Punish privately, praise publicly."

DO

- **Give students a stake in conformity**—adhering to norms regarding respectful behavior—by nurturing their in-school interests and relationships. Students who care deeply about something available at school, like sports or a favorite teacher, are more likely to fear suspension than students who feel alienated.
- **Connect and interact**; kids who feel loved at home and school are less likely to bully because they don't want to disappoint people they love and respect.

Dr. Patchin closed with his contact information and invited the audience to connect with him if they have questions or concerns:

Email: patchinj@uwec.edu

Twitter: @justinpatchin

Facebook: [facebook.com/cyberbullyingresearch](https://www.facebook.com/cyberbullyingresearch)

Website: cyberbullying.org