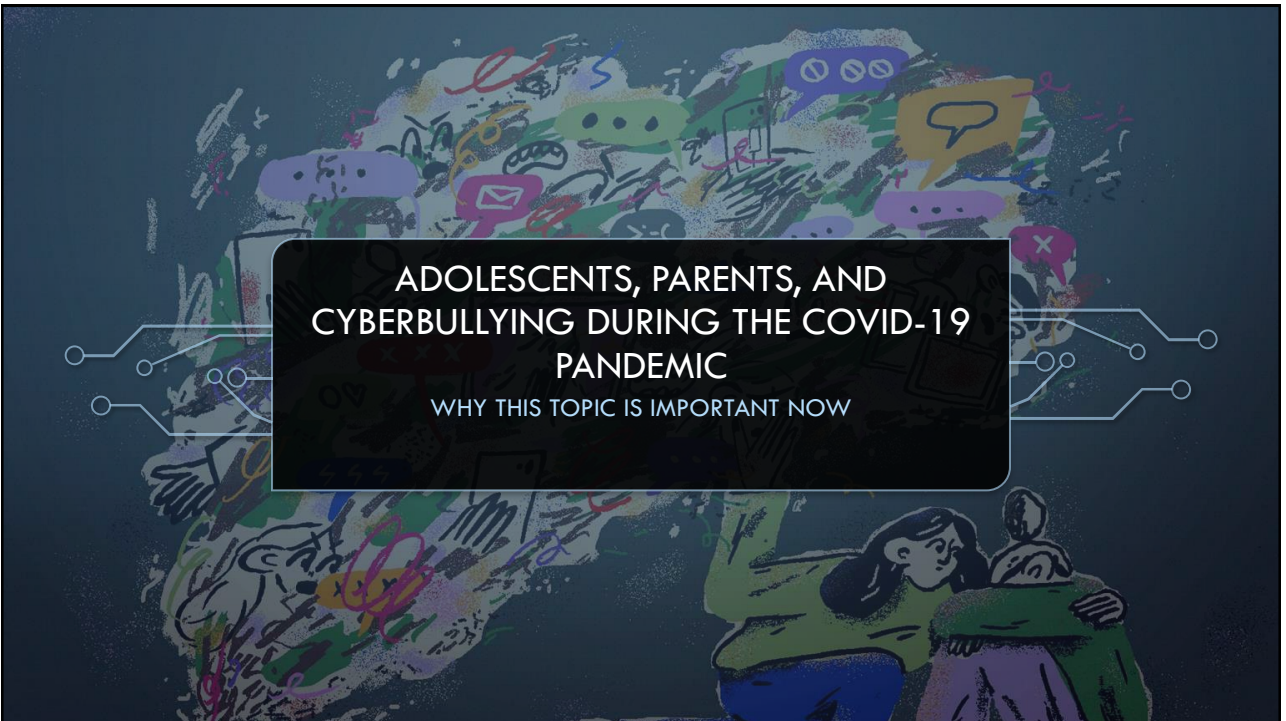# IDENTIFYING CYBERBULLYING AND RESPONDING TO MENTAL HEALTH CONSEQUENCES AMONG ADOLESCENTS

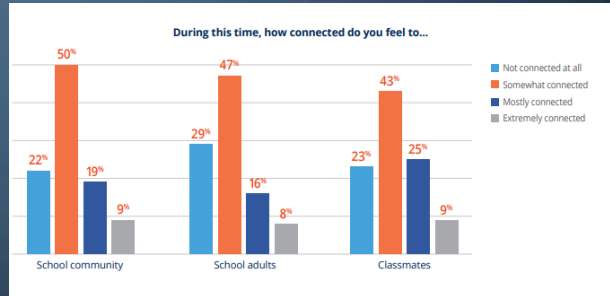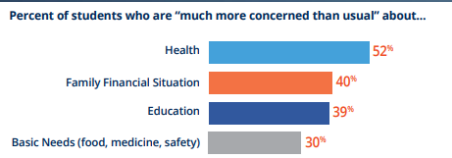**CANDICE BIERNESSER, PHD, LCSW**

KARLA JOYCE-GOOD, LSW

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ADOLESCENTS, PARENTS, AND CYBERBULLYING DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

WHY THIS TOPIC IS IMPORTANT NOW
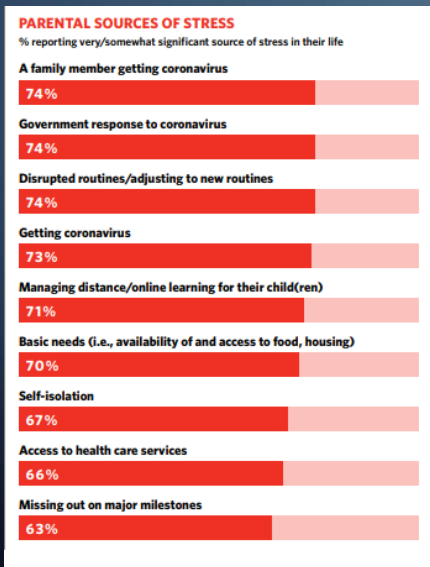
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ADOLESCENTS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Percent of students who are "much more concerned than usual" about...

- Health — 52%
- Family Financial Situation — 40%
- Education — 39%
- Basic Needs (food, medicine, safety) — 30%

During this time, how connected do you feel to...

- Not connected at all
- Somewhat connected
- Mostly connected
- Extremely connected

School community: 22%, 50%, 19%, 9%
School adults: 29%, 47%, 16%, 8%
Classmates: 23%, 43%, 25%, 9%

1 in 4 adolescents report worry, depression, stress, or loss of confidence

more than 1 in 4

https://www.americaspromise.org/resource/state-young-people-during-covid-19

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PARENTS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

PARENTAL SOURCES OF STRESS
% reporting very/somewhat significant source of stress in their life

A family member getting coronavirus
74%

Government response to coronavirus
74%

Disrupted routines/adjusting to new routines
74%

Getting coronavirus
73%

Managing distance/online learning for their child(ren)
71%

Basic needs (i.e., availability of and access to food, housing)
70%

Self-isolation
67%

Access to health care services
66%

Missing out on major milestones
63%

- Nearly half (46%) of parents report high stress levels
- 7 in 10 say managing distance/online learning for their children is a significant source of stress (71%)

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CYBERBULLYING DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

- Babvey et al, 2020- Identified increasing rates of abusive or hateful content and cyberbullying on Twitter, pointed to potential for children to be exposed to increasingly hostile content

- Karmaker & Das, 2020 – collected cyberbullying related public tweets (N = 454,046) posted between Jan 1st – Jun 7th, 2020. Upward trend of cyberbullying-related tweets since mid-March, 2020

- Shanahan et al, 2020 – found pre-COVID emotional distress was the strongest predictor of during-pandemic emotional distress followed by during-pandemic economic & psychosocial stressors, hopelessness, and pre-pandemic social stressors (e.g., **bullying victimization** & stressful life events)

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DEFINING AND CONTEXTUALIZING CYBERBULLYING
DEFINITION, PREVALENCE, VULNERABLE GROUPS

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DEFINING CYBERBULLYING

Cyberbullying is defined as, "**willful and repeated harm inflicted through the use of computers, cell phones and other electronic devices**."
– Cyberbullying Research Center

Criteria for bullying (*Olweus, 1999*):
(1) Deliberate intent to harm
(2) Interpersonal relationship characterized by an imbalance of power
(3) Carried out repeatedly over time

Unique elements of cyberbullying:
(1) 24/7 nature
(2) Different aspects of anonymity
(3) Potential for a broader audience

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CYBERBULLYING CAN TAKE ON MANY FORMS

Harassment

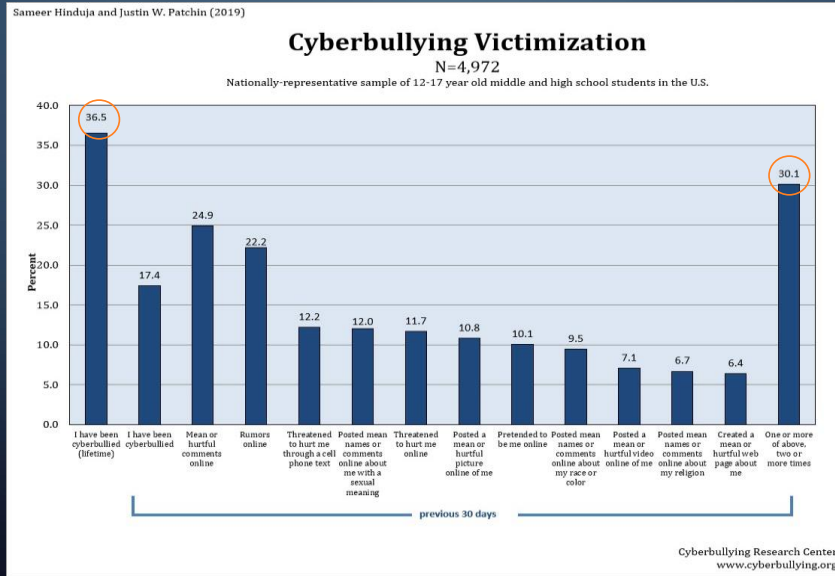Bias-based bullying

Sexting

Misinformation

Impersonation

Flaming

Social exclusion

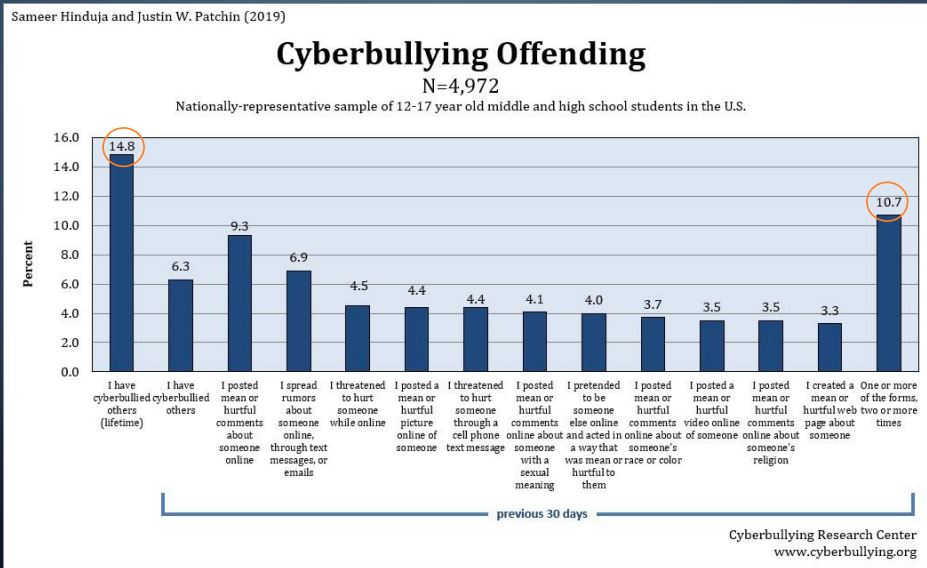R. Kowalski, Limber, & Agatston, 2012.

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PREVALENCE OF CYBERBULLYING VICTIMIZATION

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PREVALENCE OF CYBERBULLYING OFFENDING

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CYBERBULLYING BY AGE AND GENDER

- Cyberbullying increases in prevalence after 5th grade, peaks in 8th grade, and remains a problem throughout high school, and college

- Cyberbullying victimization is more prevalent among girls (38.7% vs. 34.1% in boys) vs. lifetime perpetration is more prevalent among boys (16.1% vs. 13.4%)
  - Girls more likely to report being the target of mean/hurtful comments or rumors online
  - Boys more likely to report being the target of threats, mean comments about race, color, or religion

Williams & Guerra, 2007
Hinduja & Patchin, 2019

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CYBERBULLYING AMONG MINORITY GROUPS

- Sexual and gender minority youth (SGMY) report cyberbullying at nearly 3 times the rate of non-SGMY

- Reports of cyberbullying among racial and ethnic minority youth vary

Table 1. Rates of offline bullying and cyberbullying participation for youth of color.

Race/ethnicity	Offline bullying[a]	Cyber Bullying	Offline victimization	Cyber victimization
	%	%	%	%
Black	18–46	7–11	7–30	4–17
Hispanic	18–37	16–18	10–17	6–13
Asian	-	-	20-24	15-57[b]
White	11–23	4–42[b]	10–22	18–30

Edwards, Kontostathis & Fisher, 2016

- However, rates of online discrimination are high among racial and ethnic minority youth – experienced by over half of Black youth

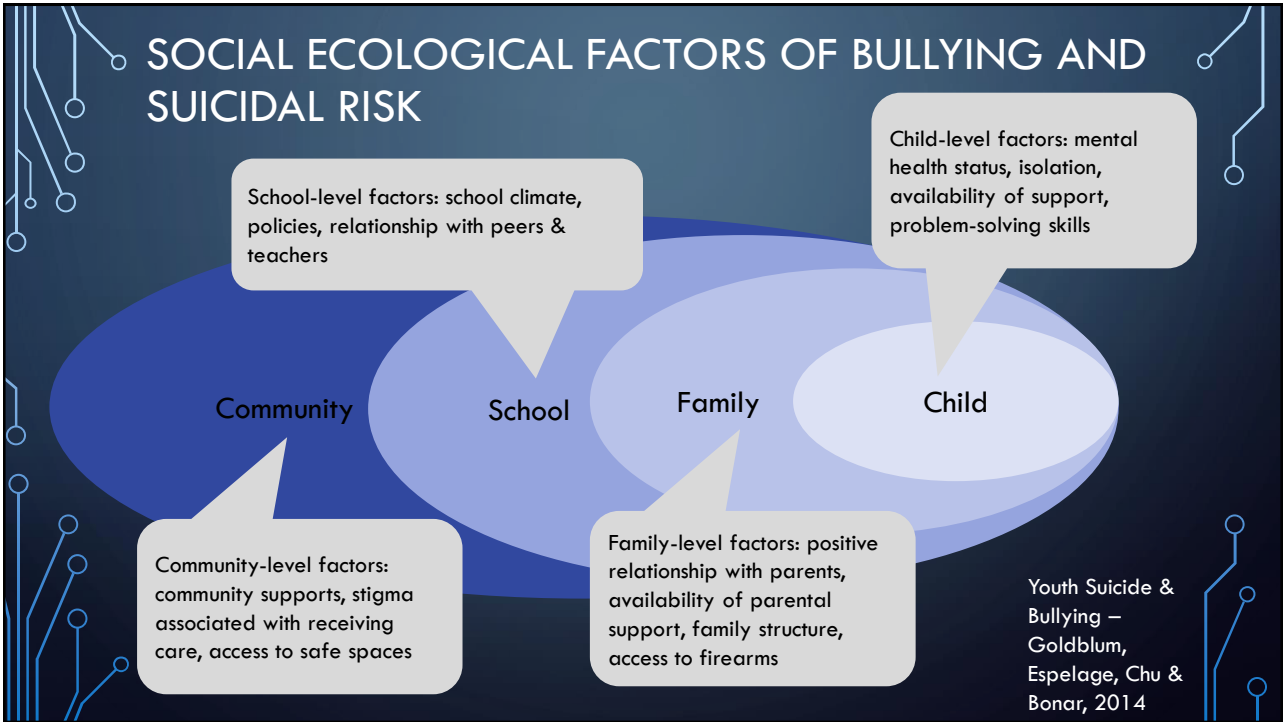Haas et al, 2011; Aboujaoude et al, 2015; Llorent et al,2016; Tynes, 2015

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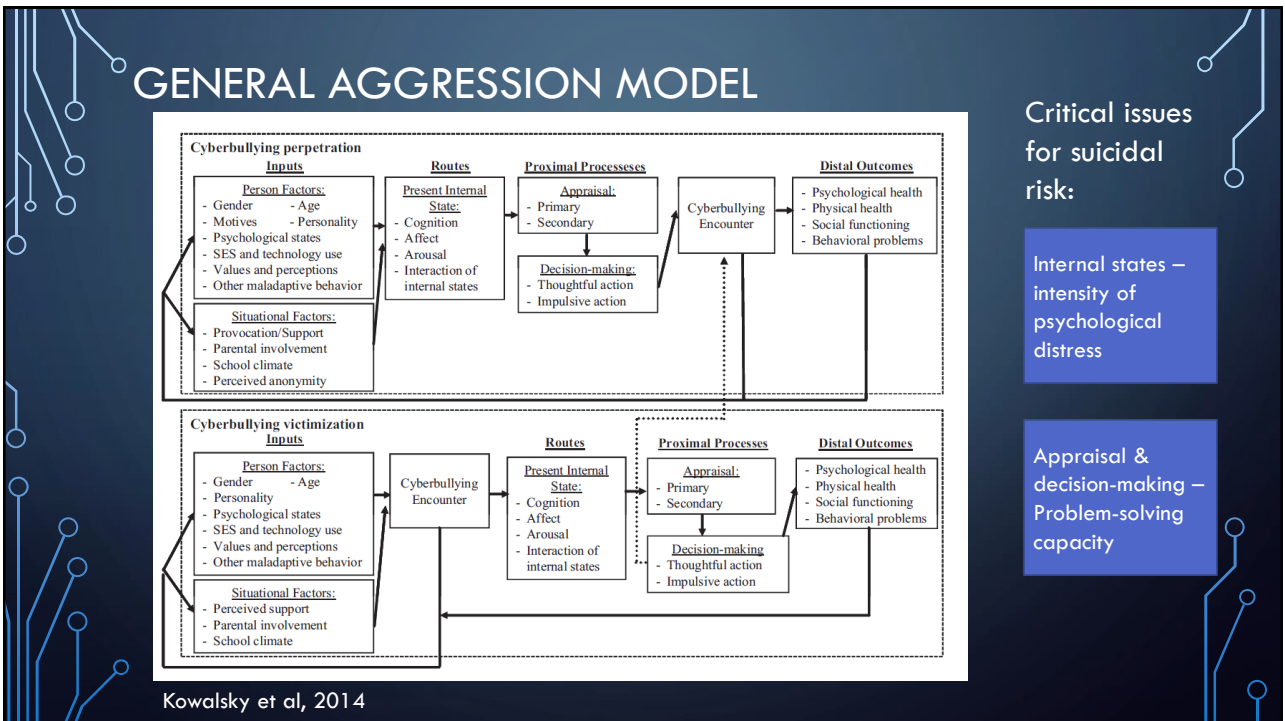# MENTAL HEALTH CONSEQUENCES OF CYBERBULLYING

- Strongest associations with **cyberbullying perpetration** include normative beliefs about aggression and moral disengagement.
  - associated with aggressive acts, substance use, delinquency, and suicidal behavior
  - emotional impacts: anger, sadness, frustration, and embarrassment
- Strongest associations with **cyberbullying victimization** include stress and suicidal ideation.
  - associated with internalizing symptoms of depression & anxiety and both suicidal ideation & behavior
  - emotional impacts: sadness, hopelessness, powerlessness

> Youth who are cyberbullied are TWICE as likely to exhibit suicidal thoughts and behavior than youth who are not cyberbullied.

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SOCIAL ECOLOGICAL FACTORS OF BULLYING AND SUICIDAL RISK

School-level factors: school climate, policies, relationship with peers & teachers

Child-level factors: mental health status, isolation, availability of support, problem-solving skills

Community — School — Family — Child

Community-level factors: community supports, stigma associated with receiving care, access to safe spaces

Family-level factors: positive relationship with parents, availability of parental support, family structure, access to firearms

Youth Suicide & Bullying – Goldblum, Espelage, Chu & Bonar, 2014

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GENERAL AGGRESSION MODEL

Kowalsky et al, 2014

Critical issues for suicidal risk:

Internal states – intensity of psychological distress

Appraisal & decision-making – Problem-solving capacity

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IDENTIFICATION AND RECOGNITION OF CYBERBULLYING AMONG ADOLESCENTS
RISK FACTORS AND WARNING SIGNS

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BEHAVIORAL RISK FACTORS

- Involvement in offline bullying (Guo 2016 & Hinduja & Patchin, 2010)
  - 65% of cyberbullying victims reported also being targeted offline (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010)
- Engagement in frequent internet/device use (Iannou et al, 2018 and Juvonen & Gross, 2008)
- Engagement in "risky online behavior"
  - Interacting with unknown individuals
  - Sharing passwords
  - Sharing personal information

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ADDITIONAL RISK FACTORS

- Lack of parental oversight/supervision (Sengupta & Chaudhuri, 2011)

- Having fewer friends/socially isolated (stopbullying.gov)

- Special educational needs and/or disabilities (stopbullying.gov)

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WARNING SIGNS – EXTERNAL

- Sudden variation in device usage
  - Spending more or less time on device(s)
- Appears nervous when using device(s)
- Becomes upset, depressed or frustrated while online, or after going online
- Hides screen when others are around

(Hinduja and Patchin: "Cyberbullying: Identification, Prevention & Response, 2021 Edition www.cyberbullying.org)

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WARNING SIGNS - EXTERNAL

- Avoids discussion about online activity
- Secretive about online activity
- Deleting social media accounts
- Creating new social media accounts
- Blocking people on social media accounts and/or contacts on their phone

(www.stopbullying.gov & www.cyberbullying.org)

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WARNING SIGNS – BEHAVIORAL

- Sudden variation in mood
- Social Isolation
- Substance Use
- Decreased school attendance
- Change in academic performance

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RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PARENTS,
SCHOOL PERSONNEL, AND CLINICIANS

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RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PARENTS

- Document, document, document!
  - Save and collect evidence
- For a first offense, if minor in nature, ignore, delete, or block the sender
- Contact content provider
- Investigate
- Monitor your child's online presence

(Kowalski, R. M., & Limber, S. P., & Agatson, P. W., (2012). Cyberbullying: Bullying In The Digital Age. (2nd ed). Riley-Blackwell

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RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PARENTS

- Contact parents of perpetrator

- Seek legal advice when necessary

- Involve law enforcement when necessary

- Communicate with the school if incident involves another student
(Kowalski, R. M., & Limber, S. P., & Agatson, P. W., (2012). Cyberbullying: Bullying In The Digital Age. (2nd ed). Riley-Blackwell)

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RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PARENTS

- Mental health support: If your child expresses emotional distress or thoughts of self-harm seek help from a school counselor or other mental health professional immediately

- Reassure your child that the cyberbullying is not their fault. Let them know that you'll work with them and the school, if needed, to safely resolve the situation

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CAVEAT ABOUT PARENTAL MONITORING

- Active forms of monitoring, such as engaging in open discussion with a child, facilitates adolescents' voluntary disclosure

- Restrictive forms of monitoring, particularly when adolescents' privacy is invaded, can contribute to secrecy, and while effective in reducing amount of time spent online is not effective at reducing risky online activity

- Monitoring should be in accordance with the child's maturity level & their level of vulnerability

Chen & Shi, 2018; UNICEF, 2019

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RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SCHOOL PERSONNEL
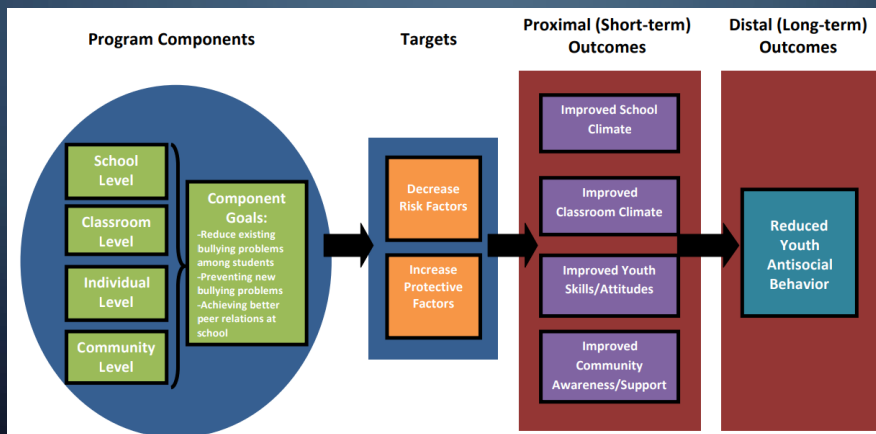
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ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS SCHOOL PERSONNEL

- Thoroughly investigate all reports of cyberbullying

- Work with families of involved students

- Contact the website, game or app where the bullying occurred. Most platforms have procedures in place to deal with issues relating to cyberbullying.

- Involve school resource officer/law enforcement when necessary

(www.safeschools.info & www.homelandsecurity.pa.gov/Pages/Cyberbullying, www.nasponline.org, www.cyberbullying.org)

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ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS SCHOOL PERSONNEL

- Be observant for changes in individual student behavior and physical appearance

- Provide support and resources to the targeted student and parents:
    - Reassure student that the bullying is not their fault
    - Make SAP/mental health referrals when needed

(Bullying Beyond the School Yard, Second Edition, Sameer Hinduja)

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RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MENTAL HEALTH CLINICIANS: AAS GUIDELINES (2019)
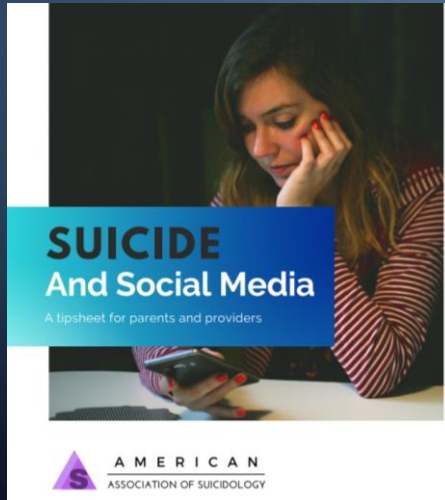
- Ask youth about social media & how it impacts their daily life
- Include digital lives/social media use as a component of safety planning
- Recognize positive aspects of social media use that are important to adolescents, in addition to potential negative effects
- Recognize that some children are more vulnerable than others
- Mitigate exposure to harmful/hateful content

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RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MENTAL HEALTH CLINICIANS: AWARENESS

- Gain & maintain an awareness of the trends in cyberbullying and guidance for how to recognize & respond to it
  - Cyberbullying Research Center's guidance for healthcare providers:
    https://cyberbullying.org/resources/health-care-providers
  - Understanding the role of mental health professionals in community-wide bullying prevention efforts (stopbullying.gov):
    https://www.stopbullying.gov/sites/default/files/2017-09/hrsa_guide_mental-health-professionals_508.pdf

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# RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MENTAL HEALTH CLINICIANS: ASSESSMENT

- Add a measure of cyberbullying to your screening/assessment battery – only 11% of youth report cyberbullying to a trusted adult on their own
  - Review of cyberbullying measures:
    https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4703330/#!po=34.3750
- Consider distressed emotional states that are common following cyberbullying:
  - Down mood
  - Fear
  - Worry
  - Loneliness
  - Hopelessness
  - Self-blame
  - Lack of belongingness
  - Feeling like a burden to others

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RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MENTAL HEALTH CLINICIANS: INTERVENTION

- Intervene to reduce suicidal risk:
  - Support coping with cyberbullying with distress tolerance/emotion regulation techniques
  - Brief problem-solving skills could aid youth in responding to cyberbullying
  - Self-compassion can combat feelings of self-blame & hopelessness
  - Facilitate connections to beneficial social supports
  - Address barriers to motivation in help-seeking
- Recognize options for reporting of cyberbullying
  - PA Bullying Prevention Consultation Line: 1-866-716-0424
  - Additional resources:
    https://www.education.pa.gov/Schools/safeschools/bullying/Pages/default.aspx
- Liaison with schools & parents

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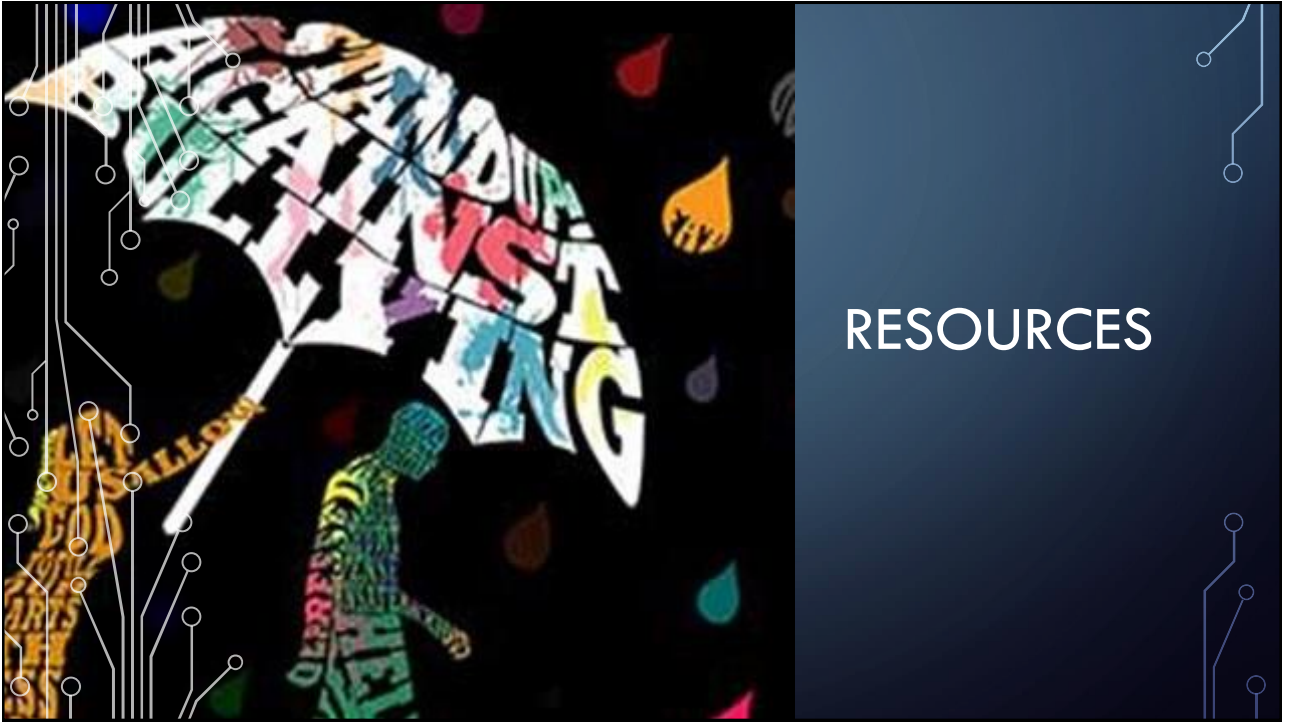
RESOURCES

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RESOURCES

- Cyberbullying Resource Center: (Resources for teens/youth, parents and educators) www.cyberbullying.org

- StopBullying.gov: (Tips and resources for teens, parents and educators) www.stopbullying.gov/cyberbullying

- GLSEN: (Resources for teachers and allies to create safe learning environments for LGBTQ students) Homepage | GLSEN

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RESOURCES

- The Trevor Project: (Crisis intervention and suicide prevention resources for LGBTQ young people) www.thetrevorproject.org

- PACER's National Bullying Prevention Center: (Resources and support for parents of children with disabilities, as well as, information regarding bullying and cyberbullying) www.pacer.org/bullying/info/cyberbullying/

- Anti-Defamation League: (Resources, education and support to combat anti-Semitism, bigotry, discrimination and injustice, includes resources for bullying and cyberbullying) www.adl.org

- Safe2SaySomething: (Youth violence prevention program run by PA Attorney General. Support, resources and anonymous tip/reporting line) www.safe2saypa.org 1(844)saf2say/723-2729

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RESOURCES

- ACLU: (Bullying and protected class issues): www.aclu.org

- Education Law Center: www.elc-pa.org

- Center for Safe Schools PA: (Bullying prevention resources and education/trainings) www.safeschools.info

- PA Bullying Prevention Consultation Line: (Support and resources for student, parents and school personnel) 1(866)716-0424

- American Association of Suicidology: https://suicidology.org/

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RESOURCES

- OnGuardOnline: (FTC's free online tips and resources for parents and educators) www.consumer.ftc.gov
- Bark: (App that monitors text messages, YouTube, emails and 30 social networking apps) www.bark.us
- Common Sense Media's Ultimate Guide to Parental Controls: https://www.commonsensemedia.org/blog/parents-ultimate-guide-to-parental-controls
- AT&T Secure Family: (App that tracks location, limits screen time and filters web and app use) www.att.com

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THANK YOU FOR LISTENING!

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