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Report Highlights

Mothers are more likely than fathers to label actions as cyberbullying.

One in five parents believe students who post online rumors about sex should be referred to law enforcement.

Online rumors about cheating on a test are viewed by parents as less serious than online rumors about sex.

Contact us

A publication from C.S. Mott Children's Hospital, the University of Michigan Department of Pediatrics and Communicable Diseases, and the University of Michigan Child Health Evaluation and Research (CHEAR) Unit.

Parents Conflicted About How to Label, Punish Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying – using social media or electronic communication to harass or threaten another person – is viewed as a growing problem for US teens. However, it can be difficult to identify which actions constitute cyberbullying, and to determine appropriate consequences when cyberbullying occurs. In May 2015, we asked a national sample of parents of teens 13-17 years for their opinions on these topics.

Is it Cyberbullying?

In response to hypothetical situations at their teens' schools, parents vary in whether they label certain actions as cyberbullying:

- *Social media campaign to elect a certain student for homecoming court, as mean joke* – 63% say definitely cyberbullying
- *Sharing a photo altered to make a classmate appear fatter* – 45% say definitely cyberbullying
- *Posting online rumors that a student was caught cheating on a test* – 43% say definitely cyberbullying
- *Posting online rumors that a student had sex at school* – 65% say definitely cyberbullying

Between 30% and 50% of parents are unsure whether these actions are cyberbullying. However, less than 5% say they are definitely not cyberbullying. More mothers than fathers label actions as definitely cyberbullying.

Punishments for Cyberbullying

Parents differ about what would be appropriate punishment for students found responsible for possible cyberbullying (Figure). Parents recommend the most severe punishments for posting online rumors about having sex in school, for which 1 in 5 parents would refer students to law enforcement.

Figure 1. **CONSEQUENCES FOR CYBERBULLYING:**
Parent views on how schools should respond

	Refer to law enforcement	Suspension	Detention
Social media campaign to elect a certain student for homecoming court, as mean joke	8%	37%	38%
Sharing a photo altered to make a classmate appear fatter	8%	27%	35%
Posting online rumors that a student was caught cheating on a test	5%	26%	46%
Posting online rumors that a student had sex at school	21%	39%	27%

*Other responses included apologizing, no specific punishment

This report presents findings from a nationally representative household survey conducted exclusively by GfK Custom Research, LLC (GfK), for C.S. Mott Children's Hospital via a method used in many published studies. The survey was administered in May 2015 to a randomly selected, stratified group of parents age 18 and older with at least one child age 13-17 (n =611) from GfK's web-enabled KnowledgePanel® that closely resembles the U.S. population. The sample was subsequently weighted to reflect population figures from the Census Bureau. The survey completion rate was 55% among panel members contacted to participate. The margin of error is ±2 to 7 percentage points.

Implications

Teens' ubiquitous use of social media and digital communication creates near-constant opportunities to engage in, or become a victim of, actions that could be considered cyberbullying. Growing recognition of the dangers of bullying ([rated by US adults as the #2 child health concern](#)) has prompted calls for tougher laws and school sanctions for those who engage in cyberbullying. However, such penalties require clear definition of what constitutes cyberbullying. As seen in this national poll, parents do not necessarily agree on exactly what actions fall under the definition of cyberbullying.

The hypothetical situations in this poll represent a spectrum of possible cyberbullying: from sharing altered images of other students, to posting rumors online, to a public effort to embarrass another student. There is broad consensus for each situation that cyberbullying is at least a possibility, with less than 5% labelling these actions as definitely not cyberbullying. In contrast, between 43% and 65% of respondents labelled them as definitely cyberbullying. In the middle is a large group of parents who were unsure.

These poll results illustrate the challenge of establishing clear definitions and punishments for cyberbullying. For example, the action of posting online rumors about another student was viewed quite differently by parents, depending on whether the rumor pertained to cheating on a test or having sex in the school building. Over 20% of parents felt referral to law enforcement was an appropriate punishment for posting online rumors about sex – four times as many as for rumors about academic cheating. This raises questions about the criminalization of teen behavior, particularly when perceived severity varies significantly by the content of the messages. Parents' melding of action and content does not easily translate to well-defined cyberbullying policies.

Parents also appear to incorporate perceived intention into their judgments about cyberbullying. A social media campaign to elect a student for homecoming court, specified as a mean joke, was labelled as definitely cyberbullying by nearly two-thirds of parents. In contrast, less than half of parents gave the "definitely cyberbullying" label to sharing a photo altered to make a student look fat—perhaps because parents may have been unsure about the intention of the action. Again, this reflects the challenges that schools face in developing clear policies around cyberbullying.

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