

Episode 63 - Dr. Faye Mishna: Bullying in the Cyber Yard: Old Problems, New Contexts

[00:00:08] Welcome to living proof a podcast series of the University at Buffalo School of Social Work at www.socialwork.buffalo.edu. We're glad you could join us today. The series Living Proof examines social work research and practice that makes a difference in people's lives. The University at Buffalo School of Social Work is making a difference every day through the generation and transmission of knowledge promotion of social justice and service to humanity. We offer MSW and PHD programs continuing education programs and credits online courses licensure exam preparation professional seminars and certificates and much much more. To learn more about the UB School of Social Work please visit www.socialwork.buffalo.edu the issue of cyberbullying gained national attention with the suicide death of 13 year old Megan Meier who killed herself after being cyber bullied by an adult and two minors on the popular social networking site MySpace. The story about the sequence of events that led to Megan's death were unfamiliar to those of us who are more acquainted with traditional bullying that consists of schoolyard taunts and physical aggression. That might be avoided by limiting physical proximity to the bully. But what if that bully were able to reach you whenever he wanted as often as he wanted in their usual places of safety including your home. Youth are a particular risk as they according to some estimates spend as many as two to four hours daily online. Today's guest Dr. Faye Mishna identifies 24 hour access as one of the characteristics that distinguishes traditional bullying from cyber bullying thus requiring a different approach by practitioners and policy makers.

[00:02:14] Dr. Mishna is dean and professor at the Factor Inwentash Faculty of Social Work University of Toronto where her program of research focuses on traditional bullying cyber abuse and bullying and cyber counselling as well as school based interventions for students with learning disabilities. Today Dr Mishna discusses her research on cyberbullying among youth its prevalence its effects and what social workers can do to begin to address this growing problem. Nancy Smyth professor and dean of the University at Buffalo School of Social Work interviews Dr. Mishna by telephone so let's just start from here that if you could tell me a little bit about cyberbullying what it is how much of a problem it is. I think people would agree that it's a problem. What it means is hard to say there's different definitions of it but because it's fairly new I think researchers would agree that there's not a clear definition and database of how much of a problem it is because if you look at the research the range in terms of the way it's been done regarding the prevalence of us some would say it's 15 percent out of my researchers found 50 percent as did others. So some of it depends on how you define it and how you use it. But regardless of that people would agree that it's a problem when it is it's really aggression it's intent to hurt somebody. Using electronic forms of communication technology. Most bullying traditional bullying definitions include repetition. When you talk about repetition for cyberbullying it's a bit more complicated because it might not be the same kind of repetition.

[00:04:08] And yet if I sent an email about you because I can see it somebody else might send it. Many other people might find it so there's a lot of issue about repetition and what that looks like. There's also an issue about power imbalance. People talk about the power imbalance in traditional bullying. They talk about somebody who is older or bigger or smarter more people from higher social status in cyberbullying. The power imbalance is harder to tell. One might be that you're not proficient in the technology the other is just the power having this potentially large audience. So some of the pieces of the definition that we have today sorted out and I think that recognise that generally it's the intent to cause harm in particular. Do you see this as being similar to traditional bullying different. You've talked a little bit about that in terms of this way of thinking about it but my guess is the similarities differences are broader than that in terms of the similarity similarity of

course is that there's an intent to hurt and there's some kind of power imbalance although even with traditional volunteers who are questioning about that. When there's an intent to hurt the thing that is similar it even though originally there was this thought that it was anonymous the research that we have done recently that others have done to show that it often is not anonymous and that it's actually happening within the social group.

[00:05:36] So it's often buy in with either friends or kids they know some school or their peers that they know start off a similar age to traditional bullying or one of the real harmonics of traditional bullying that researchers found is that it often happens in front of witnesses. So we're finding that cyber bullying often does. The other similarity has an effect even though out in both of them behaviors, aggressive behaviors that are considered bullying that might look minor quote minor like calling somebody names things like that actually over time can really have quite an impact on kids. It can really affect their social emotional academic functioning in terms of differences. One big difference of course is that traditional bullying can be direct or indirect direct would be physically hurting somebody in cyber bullying. The actual cyber bullying cannot be direct only indirect it can be direct in terms of names and threats that can't be physical. But the thing that research has shown here and again depending on who's done the research is quite a variation. Some research shows that there's a high overlap between kids who are involved in cyber bullying kids who are involved in traditional bullying. Other research finds there is some overlap but not as high. So in that sense it can go back and forth. Bullying might not be that unique to cyber bullying from cyber bullying victim or as aggressor might offer the involvement traditional bullying and that's another factor in that they have a similar if I think those are the main ways and that there may be a power imbalance can involve similar if there is an intent to hurt.

[00:07:21] One of the things that I've found interesting as I was listening to some of the work that you published is some of the qualitative studies that show where you really captured I think more of the understanding and meaning about what might be going on here. This idea of anonymity I thought was fascinating because as you mentioned the Research talks about cyber bullying as being anonymous yet that's really not what your research and others are uncovering now it's often happening with the context of social networks of friends and just curious about you had a wonderful quote that if you don't mind I'd like to read that I thought raise some of the issues here about this issue of anonymity it was reading that the following statement by a 12 year old girl captures the confusion that whether the identity of the cyber aggressors as the victimized child in quotes they think cyberbullying so horrible because nobody really knows like you're being bullied nobody knows you don't know who's doing it and it's just so silence even if you do know who's doing it. You're really bad you can't see her. Can't really tell her face how you feel. I thought that was a wonderful quote because it really captured some of the obvious pain for this but also this idea of anonymity. What do you make of these mixed findings on anonymity. I find it very fascinating because the kids on the one hand homeless sex in groups like that. They thought it was anonymous as a fluke and even in her own statement she said that even if he did know there's nothing you can do by it.

[00:08:54] So it makes me wonder if part of that part of what they are talking about isn't even anonymity it's that lack of visual skewing the feeling on of the kids other kids who were aggressively said something very similar from the other side they said well you know when you're writing or texting and you just have to press that button you don't see what you're doing to the other person is not as real and virtual. So it makes me think about whether there is something about what happens in the relationship and what how that the actual technology deviates that. And I think that's one of the reasons we really have to find out what the motivating factors contribute to it. You know we know some of the things that contribute to bullying any kind of bullying anyone is different in some way marginalized groups. But the other question is Is there anything that happens because of the fact of the Internet or cell phone or Web cam that there is disconnect and even on the one hand

it's very real because I don't mean to it's not real. And I think for kids it's incredibly real but they're not seeing the impact of what they're doing where it to recess out in the schoolyard if they're taunting kids they see the effects right there doesn't stop them from doing it if they see it. So from the perpetrators point of view it's sort of a consequence free I don't get any of the immediate ques that show me the impact from the victim's point of view. It's the reverse. I don't get to show them what I feel. So there's this real silence and lack of a voice and almost be depersonalized. Exactly. I think that's the word depersonalized.

[00:10:34] And I think we really need more research not to see how that impacts yet because it does give this sense of anonymity and the sense of its anonymity and I know it is but it's out of the context of a personal connection. Exactly and that's why we call that precede anonymity. It's interesting because as you said it's out of the context of a personal connection on one hand and yet on the other hand they are so connected. And one of our findings and I've seen that in other ways too is that because these kids are in a digital natives as opposed to us adults to many adults still say I don't think it's not real. It's not it's real was barking on the phone or think people in person. You say that kids say they just feel like adults don't understand so ships very interesting kind of contradiction because on the one hand it's very real. On the other hand given the personalisation in the contact and yet the other hand it's a very real contact we don't really know the effects in fact. Well that part of it is that is if you're the person having the interaction what you might not see the consequences of what you're doing you do feel something about that connection and other connection is very much a self connection between the people involved and I would say based on what little I know about some brain research that's happening that the brain would not be distinguishing between my emotional reactions and that sort of cyber situation versus a close real life situation. I think that's a really good point. The difficulty wouldn't be right. The same thing would the firing. It's all about perception. It's all about how I'm perceiving and thinking and the meanings of it yes yes.

[00:12:16] So I suspect that that's really what what kids are saying when they say there's a real relationship this is a real connection I have a real affect of charged with this person and of course many cases they do actually know the person and in their physical life as well. But I do think you know you hit on something I think there's a there's a generation gap here but I would say it's more in some context than others. One of my concerns as a social worker has been the lack of knowledge and understanding of technology that social workers have and a lot of my colleagues immediately sort of dismiss these connections that are made through technology as unreal not legitimate and just not relevant to human connection and that if you started that place you're going to be in a very difficult place to try to help a teenager sort any of this stuff out. I agree completely that one of your finding that our articles are always aware of a conclusion that dogs need to understand that it's real and if they don't. Teenagers discount them because they say they don't get it. They don't understand and by definition that's true. So even for example one of the things that you know when adults say if somebody is being bullied turn it off they're not understanding if not the computer you can turn on a computer that has an interaction. Turning off the computer does not turn off that interaction. It does cut you off from your social life. But I agree with you about social workers. And it's interesting because I mean this is not what we're talking about.

[00:13:52] But another professor here we are looking at how we're calling it the creep that we're looking at how technology even creeps into interactions with social workers and clients because often it kind of just creeps in and social workers are not prepared for it. But I do agree that one of the big issues that adults and social workers and educators don't recognize enough that this is real that is a real it is really a generation gap and they need we need to understand that the reason we need to understand this because we need to learn the world right now in the world because we have a paradox where we're saying they don't post to protect their kids. How can we help protect kids in this world that they don't know anything about. So they really need to take it seriously. I think it's

very important to them I think what happens to cyberbullying when we didn't hear about it that something dramatic happens like that. we often hear the extreme and the negative. And what happens next is that this tremendous amount of research really talks about the great benefit of the Internet and communication technology for kids those academic information but not for their social relationships. That there are many benefits and we can't just ignore it. I think that's really critical and what that's what happens when we just discount that and to talk about the negatives. I've thought a little bit about this it seems like every new technology gets demonized to be you know have only negative impacts and we don't challenge the telephone anymore because that's very accepted in our culture. But there was a time when the telephone was challenged about bringing about negative things that we certainly could see that there were positive benefits to that.

[00:15:36] And you don't hear enough about the positive parts of the way technology can help these kids connect and other people. And that of course I think that really interferes and I really need to understand this but I was struck as I read through one of your articles that that reviewed the interventions for either prevention or intervention cyberbullying. I was struck by how narrow some of the interventions are in terms of the behaviors that you're addressing and as I was thinking about this from a young person's perspective they see so many benefits and they're getting so many benefits from the technologies and of course they like them not to be victims of bullying or perpetrators of bullying. I think some of the issues to them is sorting out when the technologies are helpful to their relationships when they're not what's appropriate for what sorts of settings what behaviors are not appropriate in any any type of setting. I wondered if anybody's even doing trying to develop interventions that are a little broader than that that really start to sort out some of those issues that I think are probably trying to sort out in their lives. I think the researchers involved in this are all recognizing that this needs to be done because I think researchers do realize that there are many positive benefits for example. David Finkelhor and his group have been doing research on not so much cyberbullying but the effects of the Internet are frequent used as image hosting two waves of that but they really stress that there are many positive benefits and that we need to kind of really look at that. The other point that goes along with that too.

[00:17:05] If we start to read some of the negative effects of is bullying or abuse that happens we often talk about it as so it only happens online and forgetting that as I said before there's often a connection from somebody who is vulnerable to being bullied or bullying online might also be vulnerable offline famous abuse that happens often. It's not just happening online. It might be relationships that are current online that are taking advantage of the online to conducting something that's abusive towards children but we tend to focus on it as though it's separate disconnected from their life and that's really not the other thing is when there's real concern about the stranger. And I think there was a sense it was all stranger. And now research is showing it's really not. If these people and both adults and kids in there in the room that are often the ones to worry about. Yeah it reminds me of what happened around sexual abuse in this country there's so much work out. Stranger Danger and we know from the statistics that it's most likely to happen at the hands of somebody. Now it's exactly the same thing. So when we talk about cyber bullying events first there is the sense that students are supposed to be safe in their homes which they are and they have to pull and bring danger into their homes which it does. They can't you know traditional interaction of the different traditional bullying tends to happen in set place from school.

[00:18:30] So when you go home you know it's not going to happen as much whereas cyberbullying one of the kids research experienced nonstop bullying because it can start at school continue on cybering go back. But it's important we have to remember that one of the issues that kids have to do what we need to address is the society and the social workers and so many kids who are not safe in their homes not just in cyberbullyin and not just because of technology but because the traditional ways of abuse and neglect. So we really need to be aware of that. Yes and I was thinking that a force for a kid who's experienced cyber bullying was safe because of something happened. Sadly

they're left with no safe place. Exactly. And the other groups and this applies to whether it's traducing point or cyberbully. When we talk about bullying I mean why I think it's very helpful and talked about bullying because it brings hateful behaviors and says we need to deal with them and that even though they may not look major they actually are have different effects on the other hand it can kind of talk about bullying in general cyberbullying in general we forget about the underlying motivation. So for example homophobia racism sexism sexual harassment that happens the homophobia happens so we need to address that because it's not just about kids bullying it's of our kids bullying and being aggressive with hurting each other but many of these ways that they're doing it really reflect our society and it needs to get addressed in those larger ways. Because these kids are not safe for example with a traditional cyber bullying. If a child or teenager is gay or lesbian and they're being bully for that even though we always say oh go tell an adult.

[00:20:17] Well they might not be up to tell their parents or teachers because they don't know what the response is going to be. So we really can't. Often we come up with strategies that are very simplistic and might work for some kids but there is a lot of kids it's not going to work for us it's a lot more complexity to the problem of any social work issue right like any human life is it's complex. Yeah that makes a lot of sense. You know I think one of the things I was thinking as I was reading about how invasive this type of bullying could be in terms of you know the computer if my at that and that's where the bullying is happening here with my phone is that for kids who have trauma exposure in other ways other types of victimization this really could exacerbate things to a level that I mean it's one thing if I know I'm going to be bullied when I walk by certain parts of the school. I know at this time what I'm going to be anxious but if I'm going to be encountering this my entire life there's reasons that the anxiety in every situation and if I have a prior exposure to seems to be that cyberbullying could actually have an impact for vulnerable populations that would be more extreme in terms of psychiatric symptoms and health symptoms than the traditional bullying might. Is there any work that's been done on that. There's a little bit of work to be done that has shown exactly that has an effect on the person over and above work on that. Yes. And I think for those reasons.

[00:21:52] The other aspect of cyber bullying is that if somebody is bullied in a schoolyard or in a classroom the episode ends think we live in and we know post trauma and you know that that has a huge effect but with cyber bullying of any kind it stays on. So it's interesting on the Internet for girls for example in the effort to engage in a dramatic example that have happened very often who might end up being coerced or without thinking they send a picture of themselves to a boyfriend and then say they break up and then he sends them all over. Well that's the only internet forever. And even if and we've never said that they've got a lot of calls begging them to take it off and course they can't. So the effect of that on them to be that every time they turn the computer or look at this household they the fear of it might show up and they don't know who's seen it. They don't know who will see it and when we have kids whether they are aware of that of course before before they do it they don't think about that many of them think that you can photos or e-mail they don't realize that just because its been deleted off the computer you can't delete it off cyberspace. Yes that has very different impact on someone a situation like that episode that has you know at the beginning and I can see why there'd be a lot of layers to this and I guess the other thing that struck by is depending on the type of technology is so out there just text messaging Web webcams and obviously they are all very different.

[00:23:32] Absolutely. And the fact and everything that's one of the challenges about cyber bullying is that it's hard when people talk about how to intervene it's important to try to find ways to intervene to come up with recommendations that transcendence of technology to kids. A lot of times and still is often what you read as the major tip is to make sure you keep the Internet in a public space supervised. And while most kids now don't even go onto the internet don't use e-mail on their cell phones. There's no way to monitor that. So it's really important to make sure that it's

about communication interventions that aren't aren't really dependent on that particular technology because by the time people start following the recommendation that it's no longer relevant because that technology is not used and it's a big challenge and I think it's a hard challenge. We know that social workers people often want kind of a quick tip. And with this it's not a quick tip. The main tip is communication. Yes. Which sounds simple as we know is a quote from a policy perspective it seems that people all over the map about this particular issue are in terms of cyberbully in terms of whose responsibility is saying anything about what you know about that. Well what I know is I think schools recognize it. It's a community problem that typically happens out of a school that doesn't mean they are not responsible. And part of that is I think the recognition now that even though it's happening it's outside of school it is often happening with school peers and it's related. So again it's a community problem.

[00:25:12] And that's one of the is the of inhabitants of somebody's home. It can't just be up to their parents with the child and the parents because it's happening. It relates to school and relates to their peers. So it's a large issue. And I think that's exactly how politics dealt with that. The other issue that often comes up is zero tolerance. And we know zero tolerance I mean when is it true that that does not work. That becomes a knee jerk reaction when something extreme happens. I would say most schools make it a priority at this point. And I would definitely agree that part of their problem. But I think it's important I think also there's more recognition too that it can't be just the because of the larger community problem. So if you had a community that was that came to you to say you know what should we do to really address this problem in our community given research. So you want all this people so want to take some action. What would your recommendations be. I still think that the idea that ultimately we would intervene with the problem in terms of the bullying. I still think it's the recommendation of traditional bullying that talks about how to behave properly building even they call it netiquette how to behave on the Internet and to learn and to have scenarios that how the walking fantasy conceal impacted things and see the consequence of your behavior. I'm somebody out there you can actually be aware of that interaction I think that's one piece of it. I think the other piece is the importance of being dealt with on all levels and how people deal with each other in the classroom.

[00:26:53] How the teachers deal with them and parents involvement. And I think the hard part is it that is more sensitive it's more complicated that I think that just dealing with the bullying itself in a way is just after the fact in terms of the bullying behavior and I think it's really important to just like traditional bullying to help kids be able to be positive witnesses who can not just be passive but tell somebody trying to get somebody involved to do something about it and that often does happen in front of witnesses. But that means parents and the teachers need to know how to deal with it so that they will take it seriously without just saying turn off the computer but don't actually address that. I think it needs to be dealt with in all those kinds of levels. Lots of mentions to it but starting with a prevention approach around social skills social skills as it relates to all of these technology mediated interactions and end up with problem solving. You know in a way groups that I've spoken to know one of the things we often talk about with cyber is there's lots of do's and don'ts and kids and adults particularly kid I think they're very helpful. But what we do know though even if you do all of those things you might run into trouble you still might get bullied. You still might turn on the computer and find pornography. Everything we know is that you give kids or adults that give them tips they might not follow them all the time so that they might run into trouble for that. So I hate the term harm reduction kids and more to do with addiction.

[00:28:27] But a similar price I think about drinking and driving when we growing up the message is don't drink if you're going to drive period. Now the message to kids is don't drink we should drive that if you drink but if you do drink phobia parents and parents go pick them up don't get mad at them pick them up. We need to add that onto this. So when we give tips I really do think we need to say but if you do get into trouble whether it's just because it can happen even if you're doing

everything you're supposed to do or if you did something you weren't supposed to do because some of the kids in our research would say that they didn't tell parents partly because the parents had done their homework they had done with their foot and they told them about the dangers of the Internet. They told you this don't do that. So the kids if they are not supposed to do this my parents will be disgustedly mad at me. So the second message to the kids that a parent says that if you do do it from your parents and to the left is that the parents have to be there to help them. Problem solved. And that means two things that parents need to change their mindset to not just say don't do it. They often need to learn how to deal with it how to problem solve. The same as educators and it goes back to communication and problem solving.

[00:29:46] So I think all of that is all part of it's a starting from prevention and how to be but also problem solving to having to deal with things come up so that they don't just not saying anything and wait until it gets worse. Yeah. As you're saying that I'm speaking about stress accusation training which really works with people. OK so let's say you're still going to have to fronts stressors what happens when you start working on. I think that I think that's reassuring to people as you know kids other lives when they start to feel the stress or the kid runs into trouble or the parent sees her kid runs into trouble if they haven't been prepared for it they don't know how to deal with that number one number two they feel worse about himself it doesn't help. So let me ask you a question to sort of shift an angle here for final thoughts as deans of schools of social work were always worried about educating the next generation of social workers. We're working with our faculty to do that. What do you think the implications of what you know about cyberbullying are what we need to be educating social workers about. Well one thing I think we need to do both not just cyberbullying but all kinds of cyber. When you think about well we're educating social work students to go into work with child welfare or hospital for mental health. They learn about assessment to ask about kids and adults the populations who are at risk to try to determine the risk level and then ask them for teenage angst about risky behavior. And my sense of this summer asking what risky behavior online. So number one is to ask about it.

[00:31:22] The other everything we know from the research that they often don't tell you they often become aware of the kinds of clues and symptoms that indicate that they may be some that had just entered their kind of mindset of a kind and risk looking at and thinking of which is very new. I think that's one thing that they really need to do. And then the other in terms of the whole cyber world. I think they need to realize that when they're suing providing services to whether kids or adults that even if they're doing it traditionally that often a client might just e-mail them. Oh by the way I want to take this appointment again. They need to be prepared because then that's what we call the creep because at the end of. Oh by the way ... which might be something alarming. So they need to be prepared for it creeping into their traditional work because it changes the boundaries. Before the internet before cell phone technology we need you know Monday to Friday whatever your hours where you were there and then you know people may have your after hours some number but that was up to you or they could leave a message or they were told where to go. Now people contacted by e-mail and when you bought it you've got it. And we need to be prepared for that. So I would think those are two major ways we're doing focus groups and some people have said they work in agencies where the policy is that if we don't do it then we say to the practices was if all of that may say not always we see it necessarily follow up. So we're making very clear rules that may not be realistic in this day and.

[00:33:02] I don't know how feasible it is to say we just don't do e-mail because that's the way of the world. So instead people and agencies have to find out what they're going to do with it how they're going to draw the vanity around how are they going to deal with it. It has many implications and there are not easy questions. But I think we need to grapple with that. And I do also think that social work educators need to start preparing social work practitioners to be aware of the risks both benefits and the risks. So all the different forms of cyber abuse is there anything that we haven't

talked about about this topic that you think needs to be said before I let you get back to your schedule. The only other thing I would say is that it's really everybody's responsibility to keep kids safe because what we know is it's not going to school or going home and they're afraid of being bullied in any way that can affect all aspects of their lives both now and the future. So I just think we really need to recognize that not just cases but that will really have an obligation to to help these kids feel safe so they can learn because we know that when kids are in danger or frightened or very anxious they're not able to learn. Well thank you for your time. This is really I'm so excited about this podcast. Oh thank you. Those are great question. It's a topic that I'm really interested in and I'm impressed that you've been able to do this work and I hope you keep it up with all the challenges.

[00:34:31] I really hope so. Thank you so much. OK great. Take care. You've been listening to Dr. Faye Mishna discuss cyber bullying. Thanks for listening and join us again next time for more lectures and conversations on social work practice and research. Hi I'm Nancy Smyth professor and dean at the University at Buffalo School of Social Work. Thanks for listening to our podcast. For more information about who we are our history our programs and what we do we invite you to visit our website at www.socialwork.buffalo.edu. Here at UB we are living proof that social work makes a difference in people's lives.