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Topic: Social Media Safety and Cyberbullying

Internet, specifically social media, use has increased exponentially over the recent years. Its use presents both opportunities and challenges. On one hand, it provides a place to connect, learning opportunities, and enrichment. On the other hand, it contains personal information and provides an outlet for anger and abuse. As an increasing amount of time and communications are being played out in an online world, it is imperative to teach adolescents how to mitigate the risks this online world poses.

There are several risks to adolescents associated with online activities. These include, but are not limited, to becoming a target for predators, providing access to personal information (address, pictures, age), cyberbullying, and jeopardizing opportunities such as getting into college.^{1,2} Other safety risks include performing online activities while walking or driving, which can lead to personal injury and even death.³ Body image portrayals in social media pose concern in that they provide additional pressures to those already portrayed by television and other sources.³ O’Keeffe highlights the importance of educating children about these impacts in order to provide guidance and assist them to make safe choices.³

Having been born in the 1980’s, I was not exposed to the internet until I was an adolescent. It was not until many years later that the evolution of social media presented. Because of this, I did not grow up with this level of technology available, nor did many of the parents and teachers of today’s middle-schoolers. It is because of this shared perspective that I became interested in addressing this topic. I wanted to learn about the new challenges facing

adolescents today, and use this knowledge to help prepare them to make safer, more informed decisions.

The focus of this project will be to provide the middle school students at St. Rose School the information and tools to make safe choices when using social media and dealing with cyberbullying. Due to the limited time, the topic of social media safety will focus on what students post and how they portray themselves, rather than on the full scope of online safety. After this presentation, the students will remember to pause before posting online, recognize inappropriate posts, understand that information online cannot be deleted, and understand the effects and consequences of cyberbullying.

According to Harvard University's newspaper, *The Harvard Crimson*, students previously accepted for admission in the fall of 2017 had offers rescinded due to information they had posted on Facebook.⁴ The students were given a chance to submit a letter of explanation to the administration, and the offers for admission were rescinded to at least 10 of those applicants.⁴ An effort must be made to teach adolescents about the risks associated with social media use before their choices and behaviors result in any devastating consequences similar to the one experienced by these Harvard applicants.

A study published by BMC Public Health surveyed adolescents, parents, teachers and clinicians about when and by whom internet safety education should be addressed. Adolescents deemed it should be taught at age 8.7 years while the parents, teachers, and clinicians recommended educating children at age 7.2 years.¹ All parties agreed that the primary role of education falls to parents. Unfortunately, many parents report they do not feel adequately informed to provide this information. More than one-quarter (27.5%) of adolescents reported they learned internet safety by themselves.¹ If parents feel unprepared to provide information

about internet safety, how can adolescents be expected to learn this level of information on their own? Although this study suggests this information should be taught at ages 7 or 8, it also notes that this is often not occurring. Rather than only focusing on the younger populations, it is important also to address the current gap in information experienced by adolescents.

Children's use of social media is influenced by what they observe in the adults around them.³ As part of internet safety education, parents and teachers must remember they can help adolescents make safe decisions by acting as role models. Due to lack of understanding and concerns about safety, many parents turn to restrictions as a primary approach to concerns about social media safety.³ Although understandable, this does not address the basic issue of teaching safety. Instead, children are learning to hide what they are doing and misinform parents about the safety of apps they are using.³ Instead of a blanket restrictions, O'Keeffe suggests that parents and children would be better served by finding a way to communicate about online activities and remaining safe during these activities.³ This communication will support a trusting relationship, teach children how to make decisions in the future, and also help parents learn about various social media platforms.

The Federal Trade Commission supports OnGuardOnline.gov's publication called *Net Cetera*, which is designed to help adults talk to children about online safety.⁵ It covers topics such as how to set rules for online use, set parental controls for various devices, talk with kids about making thoughtful decisions about what to post online, deal with bullying, and use tools to monitor what children are doing online. The packet explains that even deleted information can be saved or shared by other users.⁵ These packets can be ordered online at no charge. As part of this presentation, they will be provided to the school to disseminate to teachers and parents as desired by the administration.

Kaplan Inc. is an organization that provides services including exam preparation, certifications, and degrees to current and future students. On the site, they have a page dedicated to making college applicants aware that the information they post online can have both beneficial and devastating consequences. The page, titled *College Admission: The Complete Guide to Social Media*, provides suggestions for how to evaluate posts before submitting them. Kaplan suggests using the following questions to assess appropriateness before posting online: “Would I say this on television?,” “Is it offensive?,” and “Does it require too much explanation?”² These suggestions highlight the importance of understanding that once posted, photos and information are no longer in one’s control. This point is further demonstrated by NetSmartz Workshop’s adolescent video, *Your Photo Fate*, which demonstrates this phenomenon with an example of a picture originally sent via text and eventually shared with the entire school and online.⁶ Kaplan also reminds students that the online environment lacks context.² What might be a harmless inside joke with friends, may come across differently online. The questions above can be used to guide and teach adolescents how to evaluate information they post online so they can ensure it will not pose a risk for their future.

Closely related to internet safety is the topic of bullying, which is prevalent among adolescents. Healthy People 2020 reports that in 2009, 19.9% of students in grades 9-12 report having been bullied.⁷ The Healthy People 2020 goal is to reduce this number by 10%. The Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System survey, conducted with 9th through 12th-graders across the country, found that 15.5% of high school students have been cyberbullied in the year prior to taking the survey.⁸ According to a study of the Los Angeles Unified School district middle school students, 4.98% reported being a cyberbully, 6.59% reported being a victim of cyberbullying, and 4.27% reported being both a bully and also a victim.⁹ Cyberbullying is not necessary better

or worse than bullying done in-person.¹⁰ Instead, the perceived severity of bullying is increased when the bully is anonymous and when bullying occurs in a more public situation.¹⁰ Online bullying includes a mix of known and anonymous sources, but nearly universally provides a larger audience, thus increasing the perceived severity. Therefore, it is not enough to address bullying on school grounds, administrators must also address cyberbullying.

Bullying of any kind brings about several concerns regarding the health and safety of all participants. One such concern surrounds the controversy over whether being a victim of bullying increases suicide risk. According to the CDC's Division of Violence Prevention, the potential link between suicide and bullying is a complicated topic.¹¹ Not only is the debate not settled, but making a connection between the two runs the risk of both underplaying the role of mental health while also risking copycat suicidal behavior as a coping mechanism for those involved with bullying. While everyone is concerned with the victims, a less publicized health and safety concern related to bullying is that often bullies have experienced violence in their own homes.¹¹ Moreover, bullies are at an increased risk for depression, anxiety and suicidal ideation in the future.¹¹ Although this information may not be helpful to share with adolescents, it is important for the adults around them to understand there are risks for all adolescents involved in bullying situations.

According to Farrington and Ttofi's Campbell Systematic Review conducted on school-based programs, most programs aimed at anti-bullying were effective at reducing bullying by almost 20%.¹² The Review also concluded that the most effective programs targeted older children, age 11 and older, and included long-term interventions (two or more times per month).¹² Long-term intervention is not an aspect of this project, but this information can be used to support the chosen middle-school audience.¹² The authors speculate that targeting older

children may improve outcomes because of their relatively increased cognitive abilities compared with younger children. To address the benefit of providing long-term intervention, information and resources will be provided to the school to guide and facilitate ongoing discussion and intervention, thereby increasing the effectiveness of this single presentation.

Although Farrington and Ttofi's review revealed widespread improvements as discussed above, the impact on bullying activity was less pronounced than on victimization.¹² To combat this bullying action, the review revealed the importance of parental involvement as a key aspect in decreasing both bullying and victimization.¹² Given this information, it is important to involve parents in school efforts to address bullying. This can be done either with concurrent education efforts or separately, by providing information sessions, pamphlets, and online resources.

There are several ways that adolescents can learn to protect themselves from bullying online. StopBullying.gov is a kid-friendly reference with videos and other teaching materials. Recommended internet safety and cyberbullying prevention strategies include: thinking before posting, not sharing login information, allowing parents access to accounts or at least being friends with parents online, and encouraging kids to tell an adult if they see concerning posts online.¹³ This approach can be combined with that of Net Cetera, which notes the importance of resisting the urge to engage bullies as well as taking action by unfriending or blocking those acting as bullies.⁵ Net Cetera points out that most users do not agree with bullying activities.⁵ This information helps adolescents understand they are not alone and empowers them to take the actions of ignoring or blocking bullying attempts.

In addition to addressing how to help bullying victims, it is equally important to discuss how and why to avoid becoming involved in doing the bullying. As referenced by multiple stories highlighted in the Cartoon Network's online video *Stop Bullying: Speak Up*, even those

adolescents who have been victims of bullying are at risk of being drawn in by the apparent power of acting like a bully.¹⁴ Discussing these topics and directing adolescents to these kid-friendly sources will help them develop understanding and peer support for making responsible decisions when using social media.

Internet use is increasingly common among adolescents and safety is a primary concern. Use of the internet, specifically social media, carries both current and future risks. Cyberbullying is one of the many safety concerns, carrying risks for both the bully and victim. As of this point, parents and teachers have struggled to learn and provide adequate information to adolescents about acting safely online. Importantly, there are many available resources for both adults and children to help learn this information. And research supports that particularly regarding bullying, anti-bullying programs and parental involvement significantly decrease bullying behaviors. The key factors are information and communication, both of which will be incorporated into this project.

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