Responding to Cyberbullying Incidents: An Administrator's Guide[i]

Massachusetts Aggression Reduction Center
Bridgewater State College
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The purpose of this guide is *not* to offer legal advice, but rather to assist school administrators in coping successfully with cyberbullying incidents.

The Problem

Unlike traditional bullying, much cyberbullying takes place off-campus, most typically in the child's home.

The fact that cyberbullying takes place predominantly *off-campus* means that the behavior falls into a different legal category. While behavior that takes place at school is clearly under the jurisdiction of educators, behavior that takes place at home is usually viewed as being under the jurisdiction of parents.

One important exception to this rule is off-campus behavior or speech that makes a "real threat" or "substantial disruption" upon the school climate. Exactly what a "substantial disruption" means is not clear. Different Courts have used different definitions for this term. For each cyberbullying case, school administrators must decide if the cyber-behavior is making, or will make, a substantial disruption before they decide to discipline a cyberbully.

However, even if a school decides that cyberbullying is *not* making a substantial disruption upon the school environment, there are still important steps that all schools can make to help cope with and resolve cyberbullying incidents.

7 Action Steps

Actions that can be taken *regardless* of the disruption to the school environment (or lack of it):

When to involve the police:
1. If the behavior involves criminal activity, threats, or violence.
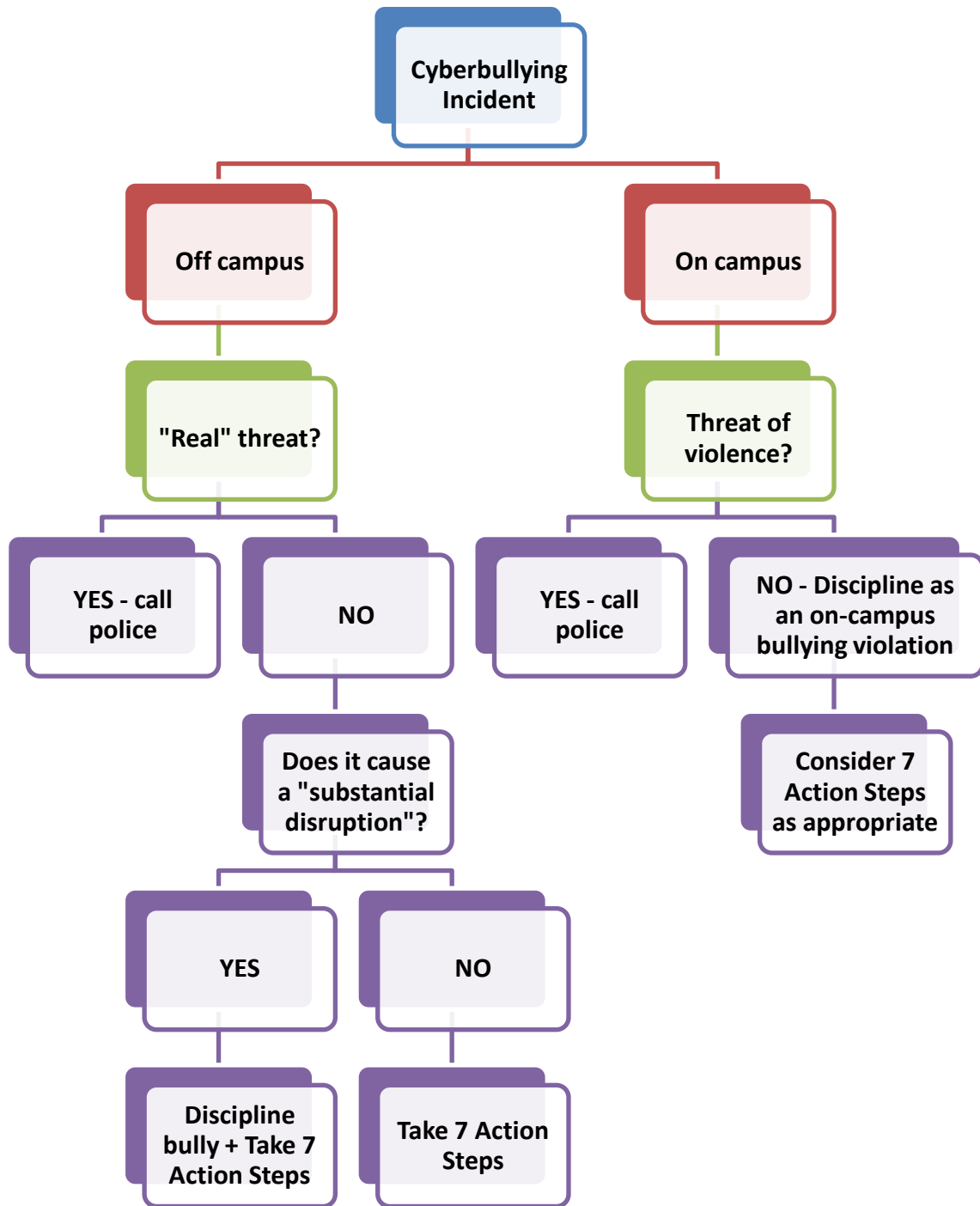2. If the behavior involves electronic or physical stalking.

Other actions:
1. ***Have an educational discussion with the cyberbully and with cyber-bystanders***. Ideally, this should take place in the Principal's Office. It may be important to point out that this discussion is *not* discipline; it is educational, about the dangers of cyberbullying and the

fact that everyone is now aware of the situation. If relevant, discuss future legal problems the child may incur if they continue with these behaviors. You can involve an SRO or other police officer in the discussion, and the child's parents, if possible.

2. ***Immediately inform cyberbullies and cyber-bystanders about the consequences for bullying or cyberbullying in school.*** If the cyberbully or cyber-bystanders engage in any bullying or cyberbullying in school, follow through on consequences immediately.

3. ***Be sure that a victim has a Safety & Comfort Plan***. This should include a Safe Person in school – someone who the child likes and can go to, and the child's teachers must be told that this child has the freedom to go see their Safe Person at any time. Initially, do not be concerned if a victim appears to exploit their Safe Person as a way to avoid schoolwork. Focus instead on the child's sense of safety and comfort. Eventually, when the situation appears to be resolved, you can address a child who exploits the situation (if necessary).

4. ***Inform all relevant adults*** – teachers, coaches, counselors, and bus drivers – about the situation between the two children. Ensure that they are aware of the potential for bullying and that they keep a very sharp eye open. Have a checklist of relevant people and check off each adult as they are informed.

5. ***Have a plan for less structured areas***, such as buses and lunchroom. The victim should never be left to hope that they find a safe seat. A seat should be reserved in advance near friends.

6. ***Follow up with parents, especially parents of victims***. Do not wait for them to call you; call them to let them know that the above actions are being taken. Many parents want to know what disciplinary actions are being taken against a cyberbully and you may need to educate them about confidentiality laws. Be sure that they know you are not merely refusing to furnish information because you personally wish to protect a bully.

7. ***Consider creating a Response Team to implement all these responses***. The Response Team should consist of counselors, SROs, administrators, and teachers. The Response Team can also handle communications with parents and document that all above steps have been taken. Response Teams are valuable for tracking children who are frequently involved as either bullies or victims.

QUESTIONS? COMMENTS? Contact the Massachusetts Aggression Reduction Center at Bridgewater State College at 508-531-1784 or at marc@bridgew.edu. Our website is www.MARCcenter.org.

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                        ┌─────────────────┐
                        │  Cyberbullying  │
                        │    Incident     │
                        └────────┬────────┘
              ┌──────────────────┴──────────────────┐
        ┌───────────┐                          ┌───────────┐
        │ Off campus│                          │ On campus │
        └─────┬─────┘                          └─────┬─────┘
        ┌───────────┐                          ┌───────────┐
        │ "Real"    │                          │ Threat of │
        │ threat?   │                          │ violence? │
        └─────┬─────┘                          └─────┬─────┘
     ┌────────┴────────┐                  ┌──────────┴──────────┐
┌──────────┐      ┌─────────┐        ┌──────────┐    ┌──────────────────┐
│ YES -    │      │   NO    │        │ YES -    │    │ NO - Discipline  │
│ call     │      │         │        │ call     │    │ as an on-campus  │
│ police   │      │         │        │ police   │    │ bullying         │
└──────────┘      └────┬────┘        └──────────┘    │ violation        │
                  ┌──────────┐                       └────────┬─────────┘
                  │ Does it  │                          ┌──────────────┐
                  │ cause a  │                          │ Consider 7   │
                  │"substantial"│                       │ Action Steps │
                  │disruption?│                         │ as           │
                  └────┬─────┘                          │ appropriate  │
            ┌──────────┴──────────┐                     └──────────────┘
        ┌───────┐            ┌───────┐
        │  YES  │            │  NO   │
        └───┬───┘            └───┬───┘
    ┌──────────────┐      ┌──────────────┐
    │ Discipline   │      │ Take 7 Action│
    │ bully + Take 7│     │ Steps        │
    │ Action Steps │      │              │
    └──────────────┘      └──────────────┘
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