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Patti Agatston: If you can have it, these conversations on the front end, asking them about what they're seeing and experiencing online, being willing to have those courageous conversations up front for any risky area online, is really important. If we wait till after the fact, it is much more reactive and our kids need those critical conversations throughout.

Sam Fuqua: That's Patti Agatston, and this is, Well, That Went Sideways! We're a podcast that serves as a resource to help people have healthy, respectful communication. We present ideas, tools, and techniques to help you transform conflict in relationships of all kinds. On this episode, we talk about cyber bullying with Dr. Patti Agatston. She's a licensed professional counselor, an anti-bullying trainer and co-author of the book, *Cyberbullying: Bullying in the Digital Age*.

I'm Sam Fuqua, co-host of the program with Jes Rau. Hi Jes.

Jes Rau: Hey Sam.

Sam Fuqua: And we're so pleased to be joined by Dr. Patti Agatston. Thank you for speaking with us today.

Patti Agatston: Thanks. It's great to be here.

Sam Fuqua: To start with, can you give our listeners, some of whom might not be familiar with what cyberbullying is and how it may be different from other types of bullying, can you paint a picture for us of what cyberbullying involves and the impact on young people?

Patti Agatston: Sure. So, I think it is helpful to understand what bullying is to understand what cyberbullying is, and so we talk about bullying as an active aggression that's typically repeated over time where there's an imbalance of power between the individuals involved. So maybe there's someone who's stronger, older, bigger, stronger, has more friends. Um, and then of course that can happen online. So with cyberbullying, we're talking about the use of information and communication technologies to bully others. You know, there's a debate in the field, whether it's just a different location for bullying or a totally different phenomena. There are some unique features to cyberbullying that we do, you know, recognize that um, it is easier to, obviously to hide your identity online. And so in traditional or in-person bullying, you see typically who's targeting you, but not always. There's always been the bathroom wall that people can, you know, write on. So, um, and then there's also that opportunity to have access to a person outside of, um, being in person with them.

So students, for example, will talk about maybe having, um, bullying happen at school, but then they can go home and not have a break from it when cyberbullying occurs as well. So they can be targeted, um, very frequently, around the clock, if you will. Um, so, uh, and then of course the opportunity to have such a wide audience for the bullying. So, 'cause often for, um, when, when cyberbullying occurs, if it's, if it's in a viral situation or a large audience, it can create even more shame and humiliation for the person being targeted. And so the effects are, are, you know, similar to what we see with, um, in-person bullying, higher rates of anxiety, depression. The

person who's being targeted often will end up with lower self-esteem. Um, it can affect their academic performance. And then we also see, uh, higher rates of suicidal ideation. So all of these factors we need to take very seriously and so certainly need to, um, address it when we see cyberbullying occurring.

Sam Fuqua: Can you give us any data that shows, uh, what is the scope of the problem and what age children are particularly impacted?

Patti Agatston: The newest Youth Risk Behavior survey data indicates from, and that's from 2019, it is pre-COVID, shows that, for example, with high school students, 19.5% of students reported that they, um, experienced in-person bullying and 15.7% reported that they experienced cyberbullying. And I bring that up to shed, to illustrate that, um, even though kids tend to be online a lot, we still typically see higher rates of in-person bullying than cyberbullying. But, you know, that's still a significant amount, 15.7% in two nine, 2019 reporting that they were cyberbullied. We don't know yet if that has shifted with the pandemic. Um, and then if we look at lifetime prevalence rates, that was among high school students, the Cyberbullying Research Center, they, uh, survey based on middle and high school because typically it is higher among the middle and high school ages, and what they have is the lifetime prevalence, um, from 2019 data is 36.5% of youth reporting being cyberbullied, and then 15% of youth reporting that they have cyberbullied others. Different time periods can affect the prevalence rates, but it's certainly a, a consistent issue and concern, and it does tend to peak in the, in the middle school age and stay high in high school, whereas with in-person bullying, that typically drops off some in high school. We don't see as much of a dropout, drop off with cyberbullying.

Sam Fuqua: Clearly impacting millions of kids around the country and around the world, I imagine.

Jes Rau: Yeah, so I, uh, I work with youth. That's my core, um, job is working in youth development. And I heard from some students as I was getting ready for this, uh, conversation that they experienced cyberbullying in such unique ways that I never even thought of. So for example, they talked about in the chat section of Google Docs, when they're doing their school work, the, in that chat site. And so I didn't even think about that. Where there are places that cyberbullying occurs, are there surprising places that we as adults may not have thought of, um, that we're seeing emerge more and more?

Patti Agatston: Well, we've heard stories of, you know, photos being embarrassingly sent out, like through the airdrop features of phones, you know, so, you know, being able to send things out that, that a lot of students see that way. I'm sure it can be in the chat sections of Google Docs. Most commonly, it still is students saying that it occurs, um, through being, you know, posted online in comments and through text messages. So those are typically the most common. Um, so when we say online, often it is through the social media sites like Instagram or Snapchat. Um, however, uh, it can happen on gaming platforms as well. So, um, I think the other piece we have to keep in mind is that just like in person, there's a difference between conflict and being rude and bullying. We have to keep that in mind online too. So one of the things that happens, I think, a little bit with, um, cyberbullying is that any negative, aggressive behavior, uh, even if it's more of a conflict, can seem, you know, it gets labeled as cyberbullying.

So sometimes we have to do a little bit of education around, okay, what's the difference between being rude and maybe just saying, you know, that's, that's an unflattering picture of you versus, you know, having a disagreement that gets hostile. You know, we both are arguing back and forth, and then we engage in a little bit of putting each other down as part of that, versus a true experience of a power differential where, you know, maybe I've asked the person to stop and he or she continues, or they get their friends involved and gang up on me. So that's another piece. It's a little bit harder to tease out the differences between, um, different forms of aggressive behavior and what, what would meet more of a bullying or cyberbullying definition. But the important thing is that, um, we always wanna treat others with respect and, and kindness. And so, um, we wanna make sure that that message is out there as well. But we do have to recognize that sometimes there's, you know, trash talking between teams and they're not handling it well. Sports teams, our fans. And of course we see among the adults right now so much hostile disagreement online that can become very aggressive in nature and some may fit the definition of cyberbullying, and some may, people may just be people disagreeing vehemently.

Jes Rau: That's so interesting, and that made me think about some articles that I'd read recently about cyber racism and so how conflict can be different from cyberbullying, uh, online conflict, and how cyber racism may also be different from cyberbullying specifically, and just wondering if you have any thoughts about that or if you've looked into that at all. Uh, when, when it's not just a power differential, but there's also, um, identity and privilege involved.

Patti Agatston: Yeah. Well, I think there's some research that says when the, when it is identity-based, that it has a more significant harmful effect. And so I think we have to be mindful of that as well. I'm not an expert in that area, but I, I do know that identity-based harassment and bullying has, has a greater effect. And so it, yeah, certainly something we wanna address.

Sam Fuqua: We try to teach young people to speak up for others. If you see someone being bullied on the, on the playground or in the lunchroom, it's hard, but you wanna support a young person in backing their friends, or even just backing someone who they don't know well, who they see being bullied by calling that out. Is it easier, harder, different to encourage that behavior in kids online?

Patti Agatston: I think it's, it's certainly still pos, possible to do that. It may start with the conversations happening in person about values and everyone deserving respect and how important that moral engagement is with youth. Because we know that's a protective factor that if they, um, do have, um, some moral beliefs in, um, the idea that the importance that we are all human and deserve respect, that they're less likely to engage in, um, bullying behavior. They see the value of humanity in everyone's intrinsic worth. So we wanna help cultivate that moral engagement. It is true that our research suggests when, when we're online, we don't see the person and are not looking in the other person's eyes, it can be easier to objectify and to not see the humanness. And we also have that factor of disinhibition too, because we can't, if we're not getting the, the social cues that show that our, um, our behavior is impacting someone, we don't see their reaction right away, we are less likely to back off. So for those reasons, it can be more challenging online, um, with, with that opportunity to objectify or to have the disinhibition.

So, you know, really taking time to, um, teach empathy, you know, involve our kids with the importance of social emotional learning. Also, the importance of self-regulation, because part of it too is it's so easy to react quickly when everything happens so fast online. So, taking time to work with kids around, what are those skills when we get upset, to take a deep breath and calm down. Um, recognize the feelings that we're having right now, and just acknowledge them. You know, those are self-regulation skills. When we can name it, we can tame it, and then we can maybe see some choices, options. We might be able to call on our empathy to put ourselves in someone else's shoes or think about someone else's perspective. And allowing, um, different perspectives is also a protective factor against, you know, being able to see different perspectives is a protective factor against bullying as well. So all of these are, are skills they can be taught. You know, parents can have these conversations with their kids around the dinner table, and we can have these conversations in the classroom settings and in the com, our community organizations. Um, and then it also, you know, there's adult role models online, or, or, or those who are mentors, you know, that heroes, that young people look out, up to, who can kind of model that, that importance of recognizing, um, everyone's value and worth and different perspectives. And that can help too for kids, uh, to, to see that with their mentors, 'cause mentors really do make a big difference in, in young people's lives. So all of those factors can help. Um, but yeah, sometimes it is, is challenging if they're just, um, online without a lot of guidance and it becomes fast paced and reactive very quickly.

Jes Rau: As adults, we like to, to think that we're immune from these things, but we aren't.

Patti Agatston: Exactly. Yeah. It's such an important skill right now to be able to calm down and take a break. Uh, and yeah, so, and that's actually, yeah, we talk about that with educators too, that, you know, if we're stressed out, our kids are stressed out, and if we're, you know, and we're the supposed to be the role model. So...

Jes Rau: Yeah. And that made me wonder too about the adults' reactions to cyberbullying and how they handle a situation if their, uh, child or another, um, young person that's in their care in some ways, experiencing that. Uh, what are the ways that adults can handle that or intervene, um, that isn't reactionary necessarily, even though they may feel protective of the young person.

Patti Agatston: Yeah, that's such an important question for, and, um, for adults to really reflect on that before they get into the situation. Um, that we need to stay calm when we become aware of a cyberbullying incident or if our child comes to us or a young person, um, first of all, to take, you know, take a deep breath. And, I know it's easy as a parent or guardian to go into that protective stance where you do want to kind of go on the attack against the other person, and yet that's, that's not so helpful. And our kids are watching us to see that they've come to make this disclosure and they're watching to see, okay, can this person handle this information that I've just shared? And can they be a calming support for me? If we become reactive and lose our cool, um, it escalates the child, they tend to blame themselves. Okay, now, on top of being cyberbullied, I've now upset my mom or my dad, or my teacher, or my adult mentor. And so I, you know, I wish I hadn't said this because now this person's upset. And so they tend to blame themselves and take the responsibility for that overreaction. So if we can take a deep breath, um, and let the young person know, um, first of all, to thank, thank the person, "Thank you for having come to me." "You did the right thing." "I really appreciate that you shared this with me, and I want you to

know I'm here to support you." "No one deserves to experience cyberbullying or bullying or any form of, you know, harassment like that. And so let's talk through, you know, um, how are you feeling right now? What are some actions that, have you tried anything so far, and did that help? Was it helpful?"

So really slowing down first and thanking them for telling, and then talking through if they've taken any actions that were positive, affirm them. Okay, so you went ahead and used some of the features to report them or restrict, that's a great step. How did that work for you? So we wanna be affirming of their problem solving behaviors, and if they haven't done anything yet, that's okay. Let's talk through what are your options? What could we do? Um, but yeah, having that calm, um, manner with them, if you need to, you know, take a break first and, and a few breaths and then come back, that's fine. Um, so that they don't end up feeling, um, worse that they came to you and have even more anxiety or self-blame. The other thing that typically young people fear is that if they go, particularly with their parents, if a child goes to a parent, um, and explains that something has happened on an app that they're using, or social network, one of the popular social networking sites, they fear that their technology will be taken away. So it can be a, a gut reaction to say, okay, that's happening on Instagram or Snapchat. Okay, we're done with that. You're gonna shut your account down. Well, okay, so now we are actually kind of punishing them, the person, the child, for coming to us.

And because they still have a world, they may still have a world of social connection there that they need. They may have some support that they, that they wanna still have, even though they're experiencing this cyberbullying. So, um, again, to let them know you're not gonna take their technol, their devices away, or their apps, that you're gonna solve together. It can sometimes be helpful, some young people have made that decision through conversation that, you know what, maybe I will take a break from Instagram for a while, or whatever the platform is. I'll make it inactive for a while till this blows over and calms down, and then I'll come back to it. Um, so that can be an option. But if we are just forcing them to disconnect when that social connection is so important to them, we're actually, can often make it worse and we can be pretty sure that they won't come to us next time when they're concerned about cyberbullying. And of course, right now with everything going on, trying to find ways to socially connect, um, we need that, that online, uh, connection.

Sam Fuqua: Those are, uh, really good reactive strategies when an adult is made aware of cyberbullying. But, coming back to your point about a kid not wanting to necessarily let their parents know because they fear, uh, they'll be mad at them or they'll take away their access to social media. Short of spying on your kid's social media, uh, how do you be proactive to let them know you trust them and you empathize with them, et cetera?

Patti Agatston: Yeah, great question too. Um, yeah, so I often recommend you tell them on the front end that you, you know, you have some agreed upon guidelines about, you know, based on your family's values, what's okay to do and what's not, online. So having them clarify what their values are, and you're clarifying as a parent or you know, that what yours are, and then talk about if things go south online, you know, so how will we handle this if things come up when you're, um, on your different apps or, or games and to, you know, to let 'em know from the front end, I, I wanna have conversations with you about this as we go along. I want you to feel like you can

come to me and I also want you to know that, you know, if something goes wrong, I'm not gonna take your devices away. Automatically we're gonna have conversation about it and, and solve the problem together. So letting them know on the front end is important. But the other piece is when we look at what works best for parents versus like restriction of screen time, and I kind of feel like the screen time debate is over now 'cause it's like obviously they're gonna have screen time. I mean, we do wanna have a balance here, but they need their screen time. But to have conversations about, you know, what, what's important, what our values are around that, and then have regular conversations about it. But first, when I said, you know, the restriction is not the way, but co-use and active mediation has been shown to be the most effective for parents, which means I sit down with you occasionally and I say, what are you playing? Can you show me? Let's play that game together. Or show me how Snapchat works. Why do you like this so much? What's important about this?

And then you can have, as you learn more about what they're doing and what they're using, you can ask questions. So, have you ever seen anyone, I've, I've heard sometimes that there's some cyberbullying on Instagram. Has that ever happened? Have you seen that occur? Um, what have, what do people do? Did anyone report it? What would you do if it happened to you? You know, if you can have it, these conversations on the front end, um, asking them about what they're seeing and experiencing online, um, being willing to have those courageous conversations up front for any risky area online, is really important. If we wait till after the fact, as you're saying, Sam, it is much more reactive and our kids need those critical conversations throughout. Um, it's just like with, with anything, we don't, you know, we don't have one conversation with our kids about, you know, drug use and assume that, okay, they're good. You know, we wanna revisit it. But we don't wanna revisit in a way that we're lecturing. So asking them about what's going on in their life. What they've seen. News stories can help too. You know, when something hits the media. Um, so if there's an example of a sex theme, you know, where somebody's photos were shared without their permission. Wow, did you see that story? Does that ever happen at your school? What would you do if someone forwarded it to you? Let's talk about that. So, if we can prepare them ahead of time and bring up that moral engagement, that is the value we want them to have and the empathy, um, and perspective taking, um, ahead of time, that's really gonna, I think, help them to feel like they're comfortable with you and can come to you and also will be less likely to engage in that behavior themselves.

Jes Rau: A slightly different topic or piece of this is the resolution piece. This is a podcast about conflict and conflict resolution. How are you seeing cyberbullying situations being, uh, remedied between the folks? Uh, or are you? Is it just not something that's advised at all?

Patti Agatston: Oh gosh. You know, if it, if it involves students at school, um, I think there is, you know, the schools do have a, a responsibility if it's affecting the, um, you know, a child's learning environment or school day to, to, you know, try to help bring about some resolution. I know, I'm sure there's a lot of things that happen, um, online that never get reported to, um, the adults in the school. Um, in terms of like if a child goes to the parent, you know, there's kind, it's kind of a mixed bag in terms of whether parents, if they know the other parent and the child, whether they reach out to them. Um, I have worked with some families where they did have a relationship and they felt like they could reach out to the other parent and have a conversation and, and deal with it that way. And they were successful. But that's not always the case 'cause there's, you know,

sometimes parents will say, it's not my, my child wouldn't do that. They'll deny it. So I, I also encourage parents to be open to the fact that all kids make mistakes. And our, and a lot of kids, a lot of children will try on bullying or cyberbullying behavior at some point in their life, but it won't necessarily become a pattern. But when it happens, it's a teachable moment.

Um, the, the, the tools with the platforms are getting better. Instagram has added a, a feature called Restrict, which I think is really great because in the past you could block somebody who was targeting you, but that person would know that you blocked them and that created a lot of issues in peer group circles too. Created some drama, and then also some, they might get other people to target you. Now there's a feature called Restrict where that, I still see what's posted and that person sees it, but nobody else sees it if I've restricted them. And, um, that person doesn't know when I'm active on the account. So there are some tools that are getting better, um, that the social media companies are implementing to help with some of this. But finally, as you guys are mentioning, we really do wanna resolve it. I am trained in restorative practices and so my work in the schools, I have facilitated some restorative conferences where cyberbullying was involved, and as long as the, you know, the person who engaged in the behavior would acknowledge that yes, in fact I did engage in this cyberbullying behavior, we have had some good outcomes, um, in some situations, uh, with, uh, being, bringing the parties together, because again, when you're online, you don't see that other person's reaction and you don't realize how much it affected him or her, or, or they, and you don't realize how much it, it affected, you know, their, their loved ones. And so bringing the parties together can be a powerful moment. Again, we have to be careful when it's bullying that it's voluntary. That we're not forcing anyone into that, um, situation. But I have seen restorative practices work well in some cyberbullying situations.

Sam Fuqua: Because the, the two individuals typically do know each other. They go to the same school.

Patti Agatston: Thank you. Thank you. Yes, because, because that's the piece that we have to realize is that the majority of kids who experience cyberbullying, it is someone that's known to them in person, and typically it's related to their peer relationships at school. Not always. So if it's someone you don't know, if it's anonymous, that's not probably going to be an option for you. You can obviously, um, you know, based on how significant it is, sometimes there are ways to find out who's behind it. Um, but yeah, typically a lot of this cyberbullying, uh, does occur among, um, peers in a school setting or some sort of community relationship. So if we are, you know, and if, if the parties are willing, um, it can be a way to, to resolve it through bringing the parties together with the idea that they, that the person who offended is gonna hear how their actions affected the other people, um, in the room. And then the goal is to come up with, you know, uh, uh, how they're gonna repair the harm of what has occurred. And so perhaps it could be that they decide to do, um, a presentation or they, they, you know, go back and clean up what they've said. You know, there could be all different things that could occur. But I've seen it be successful in some situations. Of course, adults can also intervene one-on-one with the students who've been involved or that, you know, if they're not at the same school, um, and talk with them about it that way. Um, and do, you know, more of a traditional consequence, but, um, I do, do find that that can be effective for them to see how their actions actually affected another person.



Sam Fuqua: You've said a couple times in that answer, uh, if the parties, uh, are amenable to doing this.

Patti Agatston: Yes.

Sam Fuqua: And you know, I, I was thinking about that as you were talking, that the kid being bullied may have some fear about doing that and, and I can understand that. But if the kid doing the bullying doesn't want to do it, I want them to hear from the person they've been bullying about how this impacted them. But I think you're saying no, they have to kind of buy into that, uh, restorative practice in getting together. Is that right?

Patti Agatston: Well, yeah. We don't, you know, and, and we're, you know, protective of the, the student who was bullied. They don't have to own everything that they did. They have to acknowledge that, you know, part of what, you know, that they did have some responsibility here. And if, and yes, if they totally, um, are refusing to do it, then you might still have them hear about how their actions affected it, but you may not bring the other parties into the room. So, um, perhaps, you know, having to do some reflection, you know, on how they think their, other person might have been affected. Um, and then perhaps, you know, some sort of adult sharing with them how they were affected could be an option in the school. Sometimes we do, uh, restorative conferences with what we call secondary victims. So for example, maybe the, the person who was harmed, who was the student doesn't wanna be there, but maybe the administrator who had to deal with it is willing to be in the room or the, or a teacher who saw it or the parents. Um, you know, so sometimes we can have other parties involved for them to hear it.

Sam Fuqua: As you said, the, the digital age for kids is here to stay. Obviously, they may be spending more time online. They certainly are doing more online learning in this time of COVID. What should we keep top of mind then as, as adults in supporting kids who are feeling bullied and helping them navigate that?

Patti Agatston: Yeah. So I think, you know, keeping the, you know, the communication open, checking in with your kids about how they're, how, how they're doing. And you know what, enjoy the, um, celebrate the ways that technology allow for connection. Um, and then, you know, make sure to, you know, check in about, you know, the challenges as well. Um, and I think also, um, being as the adults recognizing that we are the role model for civility is really important. So what we model makes a difference. Um, there's also research that says that, um, treating others well, uh, is actually protective. Treating others with respect online is re, protective. So we need to keep that in mind for ourselves as well as our kids. Those who harass and, um, taught others are twice as likely to experience some form of online victimization themselves. So, keeping in mind, it really is a protective factor to treat others with respect, um, and, and kindness, and to model that and talk about it with our kids on a regular basis as we're spending more time online.

Sam Fuqua: Patti Agatston, thank you for speaking with us.

Patti Agatston: Thank you so much. It was my pleasure.



PODCAST TRANSCRIPT

S1E10: CYBERBULLYING WITH DR. PATRICIA AGATSTON

Sam Fuqua: Patti Agatston is a licensed professional counselor, an anti-bullying trainer, and the co-author of the book, *Cyberbullying: Bullying in the Digital Age*.

Our podcast is called, Well, That Went Sideways! We produce new episodes twice a month. You can find them wherever you get your podcasts, and on our website, sidewayspod.org. We also have information on our guests and links to more conflict resolution resources at the website. That's sidewayspod.org. Our program is produced by Mary Zinn, Jes Rau, and me, Sam Fuqua. Our theme music is by Mike Stewart. And this podcast is a partnership with The Conflict Center, a Denver-based nonprofit that provides practical skills and training for addressing everyday conflict. Find out more at conflictcenter.org.