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LIVING IT

CHILDREN, YOUNG PEOPLE AND JUSTICE

Edited by **Claire Lightowler, Susie Cameron and Brian Rogers**



CYBERBULLYING

children, young people and experiences of online harm



The impact of cyberbullying on young people by Helen Cowie

What is cyberbullying?

Face to face bullying is a well-known risk factor for the well-being of children and young people. The recent emergence of cyberbullying indicates that perpetrators have turned their attention to technology as a powerful means of exerting their power and control over others.

Cyberbullying takes a number of forms, including:

- ❖ **flaming:** electronic transmission of angry or rude messages;
- ❖ **harassment:** repeatedly sending insulting or threatening messages;
- ❖ **cyberstalking:** threats of harm or intimidation;
- ❖ **denigration:** put-downs; spreading cruel rumours;
- ❖ **masquerading:** pretending to be someone else and sharing information to damage a person's reputation;
- ❖ **outing:** revealing personal information about a person which was shared in confidence;
- ❖ **exclusion:** maliciously leaving a person out of a group online, such as a chatline or a game; ganging up on one individual.

Cyberbullying often occurs in the context of the break-up of a friendship or romance, envy of a peer's success, or through prejudiced intolerance on the grounds of gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation or disability.

The Europe-wide EU Kids Online survey of 23,420 children and young people found that, although the vast majority were never cyberbullied, 5% were being cyberbullied more than once a week, 4% once or twice a month and 10% less often (EU Kids Online).

How does cyberbullying impact on young people?

Research consistently identifies negative consequences of bullying for young people's health. Victims experience lack of acceptance, loneliness and social isolation, with additional risk of psychosomatic symptoms like headaches, abdominal pain and sleeplessness. The young person's consequent social withdrawal is likely to lead to low self-esteem and depression.

What can be done?

Technological solutions

There exist whole-school e-safety policies and informative websites (such as UK Council for Child Internet Safety (UKCCIS) <http://www.education.gov.uk/ukccis/> and ChildLine www.childline.org.uk/). Many schools now train pupils in e-safety and 'netiquette' in order to equip them with the critical tools that they will need in order to understand the complexity of the digital world and become aware of its risks as well as its benefits. Techniques include blocking bullying behaviour online or creating panic buttons for victims to use when under threat.

Asking adults for help

Poor parental monitoring is consistently associated with a higher risk for young people to be involved in both cyberbullying, whether as perpetrator and/or target. Some students report that they *would* ask their parents for help in dealing with a cyberbullying incident. However, others recommend *not* consulting adults because they fear loss of privileges (for example, removal of mobile phones and their own internet access), and because they consider that adults are not accustomed to cyberspace. Many consider telling a teacher as ineffective, on the grounds that often no action is taken by schools.

Involving peers

Young people are more likely to find it helpful to confide in peers. Peer supporters offer understanding and can express empathy for the victim's situation. They can also have an influence on the bystanders. Cybermentors can offer online support to victims and challenge offensive behaviour when it happens. Peer supporters can heighten awareness by facilitating bystanders to behave proactively when they encounter cyberbullying.

If we are to solve the problem of cyberbullying, we must also understand the networks and social groups where this type of abuse occurs, including the importance that digital worlds play in the emotional and social lives of young people today, and the disturbing fact that cybervictims can be targeted at any time and wherever they are, so increasing their vulnerability.

Zero-tolerance approaches are more likely to criminalise young people and add a burden to the criminal justice system. Interventions that work with peer group relationships and with young people's value systems have a greater likelihood of success. The ethos of the schools where children and young people spend so much of their time is critical. Engagement with school is strongly linked to the development of positive relationships with adults and peers in an environment where care, respect and support are valued and where there is an emphasis on community.

It is important to tackle bullying early before it escalates into something much more serious. This affirms the need for whole-school approaches with a range of systems and interventions in place for addressing all forms of bullying and social exclusion. External controls have their place, but we also need to remember the interpersonal nature of cyberbullying. This suggests that action against cyberbullying should be part of a much wider concern within schools about the creation of a climate where relationships are valued and where conflicts are seen to be resolved in the spirit of justice and fairness.

Helen Cowie is emeritus professor in the Faculty of Health and Medical Sciences, University of Surrey

EU Kids Online: <http://www.lse.ac.uk/media@lse/research/EUKidsOnline/Home.aspx>

Claire and Brian, two of our guest editors, interviewed two 16 year old boys from Glasgow about their experiences of cyber-bullying.

THE BOYS identified the main channels for online bully as social networking sites and online gaming primarily through sites accessed via the Xbox and PSP3. They both had experiences of being a victim of bullying and one had experience of being a perpetrator, and identified a clear link between these:

"I felt really cheated off with it (being bullied on-line) cause it just got a bit out of hand. But I sorted it ... I gave it back to him and he kept his mouth shut and apologised."

The boys explained that if it was just a bit of name calling they were able to ignore it but they found it hard not to retaliate if the bullying got more extreme.

In their experience online bullying involved both people they knew and strangers, but was most common amongst strangers, and was perpetrated by gamers from different countries. The bullying tended to involve nasty comments about family members (particularly their mum or sisters), and football (usually related to Celtic and Rangers). It also involved criticising the way people talk, act or look, with racist abuse common.

In online gaming, the bullying is usually verbal, with comments made through headsets used during games. Some perpetrators used voice distorters, to sound, for instance, like young toddlers. This made the bullying more disturbing and means it's not always possible to tell the age or gender of the bully. That said, they thought that because online gamers tended to be males so were the bullies. Bullying was most likely to occur when the bully had lost a game and was most commonly associated with particular games: Grand Theft Auto 5, Call of Duty and FIFA.

They identified four key reasons why people engaged with cyber-bullying: reputation, difficulties in their own lives, opportunity, and fun.

"The people that are doing it, it's just to make them look wide, that they're hard guys...to be honest they must be having a hard time in their life that's why they're doing it... they've got a preconceived notion that nobody can see what they're doing so they can get away with it...(and my pal does it) to get people angry and to have a laugh."

To them, online bullying was a really serious issue and could get really out of hand. They explained there's a lot going on online that "exposes children to things they are not ready for", particularly because gamers don't know the age of those they are engaging with. Because this bullying is usually by strangers, the bully doesn't know about the family background or circumstances of those they are talking to. Comments for some people can be really painful, can be deep and have long-term significance.

"It all depends on the person because you can say something to one person and it means nothing to them but...it can touch a nerve with another person".

Neither of the boys had reported online bullying. They questioned the value of reporting it because whilst moderators and gamers can block accounts, it's easy to set up new accounts and resume the bullying. Further, the bullying tends to be verbal and isn't recorded so it's hard to report: "it's one person's word against another's". They suggested introducing a mechanism within the console so gamers can record comments if required.

Another reason for not reporting bullying was that they had retaliated when being bullied. Despite this though, they strongly wanted someone to be watching out for them. They would like to see an online reporting function, 'a cyber-security guard', who was also watching over the lobbies of games (areas where people congregate online to meet up and wait to play a game). The boys acknowledged the difficulties here, given there are thousands of lobbies open at any particular time, but they thought it might be possible to set up alerts for certain key phrases and then for someone to intervene.

The boys had found it hard to talk to anyone about the online bullying. They particularly didn't want to worry their parents or 'let them into the same area', seeing their online world as a very private space, and concerned that if their parents heard what they were saying online they'd get into trouble.

They recommended a virtual button within the game environment which could connect them to someone to talk to. They were aware that a company existed who they could contact about online bullying but were not aware of how to contact them and thought they needed to promote their services more clearly.

The boys felt that adults didn't understand the scale or significance of the issue. They identified that schools could have a key role in raising awareness that cyberbullying is not good to do or receive, and to highlight that there are people you can talk to about it. They also thought that young people themselves have a role in talking about it, reporting it, supporting their friends, and not retaliating when they experience it.

Concluding comments by Brian Donnelly

Bullying online is all about relationships – not technology

We must focus on equipping young people with the skills to conduct themselves online in a more respectful manner; the skills to manage these environments safely, and to develop their confidence and abilities to negotiate relationships and problems. This is built on promoting and developing resilience. But we also have to equip parents with the knowledge and understanding about how these sites work; how to make them safe and, most importantly, how to talk to their children about using them.

'Cyberbullying' is bullying

It is still about relationships that are not healthy or being managed or role modelled well. It is behaviour done by someone to someone else, it is the 'where' this is taking place that is new. The behaviour appears to be migrating, as children spend more time online, the behaviour they have always exhibited and experienced comes with them. Bullying that happens face to face is still the most prevalent form of bullying: online bullying is very visible and public but it is the private stuff that others do not see that is experienced the most.

It is important to include online bullying in policies and procedures on anti-bullying and not see it as something entirely separate. Our work and international research supports our assertion that you deal effectively with bullying that happened online as part of your whole approach to bullying. Carving it off as something different dilutes the reality of bullying experienced by children and young people.

The internet is a place, not a thing

For many the internet is a tool that they use for a variety of things, buying, sending messages or research. To most children and young people it is a social space that they spend time in and use to stay in touch with their friends. Like all places children and young people go to, there are risks. Children and young people do not differentiate a great deal between friendships online and in person. Most of their interactions online or using their smart phones is with friends and people they interact with in other areas such as schools or where they live. This is not to say they do not know the difference but it is as natural for your friendships to be evident in both your day to life online and where you live or go to school.

Communication

The purpose of using smart phones, consoles or laptops is primarily about staying in-touch with friends: this is as important for young people today as it was 40 years ago. They have different means at their disposal but the principle is the same.

Adult fear and anxiety

This is the biggest hurdle in dealing with cyberbullying. For parents or adults who do not use social media or connect with their friends using the internet, this is a challenging and at times bewildering experience.

Brian Donnelly is director of Respectme, Scotland's anti bullying service and reflects on bullying at <http://briandrespectme.blogspot.co.uk/>

He will publish findings from a major research project into online bullying in Scotland in November 2014.

UK Justice Policy Review:

Volume 2

6 May 2011 to 5 May 2012

UK Justice Policy Review:

Volume 3

6 May 2012 to 5 May 2013

By Richard Garside, Arianna Silvestri
and Helen Mills

UK Justice Policy Review:

Volume 1

6 May 2010 to 5 May 2011

By Richard Garside and Helen Mills

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