

# The impact of cyberbullying on young people's emotional health and well-being

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## **Abstract**

**Aims and method** The recent upsurge of cyberbullying is a frequent cause of emotional disturbance in children and young people. The situation is complicated by the fact that these interpersonal safety issues are actually generated by the peer group and in contexts that are difficult for adults to control. This review article examines the effectiveness of common responses to cyberbullying.

**Results** Whatever the value of technological tools for tackling cyberbullying, we cannot avoid the fact that this is an interpersonal problem grounded in a social context.

**Clinical implications** Practitioners should build on existing knowledge about preventing and reducing face to face bullying while taking account of the distinctive nature of cyberbullying. Furthermore, it is essential to take account of the values that young people are learning in society and at school.

**Keywords:** cyberbullying, bullying, children and young people, emotional health, values

### **The nature of cyberbullying**

Traditional face to face bullying has long been identified as a risk factor for the social and emotional adjustment of perpetrators, targets and bully-victims during childhood and adolescence (Almeida et al., 2006; Escobar et al., 2011; Hawker & Boulton, 2000; Kaltiala-Heino et al., 2000; Perren et al., 2010; Sourander et al., 2010); bystanders are also known to be negatively affected (Ahmed, 2006; Nishina & Juvonen, 2005; Salmivalli, 2010). The recent emergence of cyberbullying indicates that perpetrators have turned their attention to technology (including mobile phones and the internet) as a powerful means of exerting their power and control over others (Smith et al. 2008).

Cyberbullying takes a number of forms, to include:

- 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. (Schenk & Fremouw, 2012).

Cyberbullying often occurs in the context of relationship difficulties, such as the break-up of a friendship or romance, envy of a peer's success, or in the context of prejudiced intolerance of particular groups on the grounds of gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation or disability (Hoff & Mitchell, 2008).

A survey of 23,420 children and young people across Europe (Livingstone et al., 2010) 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.

Many studies indicate a significant overlap between traditional bullying and cyberbullying (Kowalski & Limber, 2008; Perren et al., 2010; Sourander et al., 2010; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004).

### **The impact on emotional health and well-being**

Research consistently identifies the consequences of bullying for the emotional health of children and young people. Victims experience lack of acceptance in the peer groups which results in loneliness and social isolation. The young person's consequent social withdrawal is likely to lead to low self-esteem and depression. Bullies too are at risk. They are more likely than non-bullies to engage in a range of maladaptive and anti-social behaviours, and they are at risk of alcohol and drugs dependency; like victims, they have an increased risk of depression and suicidal ideation. Studies among children (e.g. Salmivalli et al., 1998) and adolescents (e.g. Kumpulainen et al., 1999; Sourander et al., 2000), indicate moderate to strong relationships between being nominated by peers as a bully or a victim at different time points, suggesting a process of continuity. The effects of being bullied at school can persist into young adulthood (Isaacs et al., 2008). In one large survey of 2805 Finnish university students, Lappalainen et al. (2011) found that around 5% reported being bullied either by a fellow student or by a member of staff. Around half of the bullies and half of the victims in this survey reported that they had been involved in bullying incidents before they left school.

Recent studies demonstrate that most young people who are cyber-bullied are already being bullied by traditional, face-to-face methods (Dooley et al. 2009; Gradinger et al., 2009; Riebel et al., 2009; Sourander et al., 2010). Cyber bullying can extend into the target's life at all times of the day and night and there is evidence for additional risks to the targets of cyberbullying, including damage to self-esteem, academic achievement and emotional well-being. For example, Schenk and Fremouw (2012) found that college student victims of cyberbullying scored higher than matched controls on measures of depression, anxiety, phobic anxiety and paranoia. Studies of school-age cybervictims indicate heightened risk of depression (Perren et al. 2010; Gradinger et al 2009; Juvonen and Gross 2008), of psychosomatic symptoms like headaches, abdominal pain and sleeplessness (Sourander et al., 2010) and of behavioural difficulties including alcohol consumption (Mitchell et al. 2007). As

found in studies of face-to-face bullying, cybervictims report feeling unsafe and isolated, both at school and at home. Similarly, cyberbullies report a range of social and emotional difficulties, including feeling unsafe at school, perceptions of being unsupported by school staff and a high incidence of headaches. Like traditional bullies, they too are engaged in a range of other anti-social behaviours, conduct disorders, and alcohol and drug abuse (Hinduja & Patchin 2008; Sourander et al., 2010).

### **Technological solutions**

The most fundamental way of dealing with cyberbullying is to attempt to prevent it in the first place through whole-school e-safety policies (Campbell 2005; Mason, 2008; Stacey, 2009) and through exposure to the wide range of informative websites that abound (e.g. UK Council for Child Internet Safety (UKCCIS) <http://www.education.gov.uk/ukccis/> and ChildLine [www.childline.org.uk/](http://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 cybervictims to use when under threat. Price and Dalgleish (2010) found that blocking was considered as a most helpful online action by cybervictims and a number of other studies have additionally found that deleting nasty messages and stopping use of the Internet were effective strategies (Juvonen & Gross, 2008; Kowalski et al., 2008; Livingstone et al., 2011). However, recent research by Kumazaki et al. (2011) found that training young people in netiquette did not significantly reduce or prevent cyberbullying. Clearly there is a need for further research to evaluate the effectiveness of different types of technological intervention.

### **Asking adults for help**

Parents play an important role in prevention by banning websites and making age appropriate limits of using the computer and internet set by parents (Kowalski et al. 2008). Poor parental monitoring is consistently associated with a higher risk for young people to be involved in both traditional and cyberbullying, whether as perpetrator and/or target (Wang et al., 2009; Ybarra & Mitchell 2004). However, adults may be less effective in dealing with

cyberbullying once it has occurred. Most studies confirm that it is essential to tell someone about the cyberbullying rather than suffer in silence and many students report that they would ask their parents for help in dealing with a cyberbullying incident (Arıcak et al. 2008; Smith et al. 2008; Stacey 2009; Topcu, Erdur-Baker, & Capa-Aydin 2008). However, some adolescents recommend not consulting adults because they fear loss of privileges (e.g., having and using mobile phones and their own internet access), and because they fear that their parents would simply advise them to ignore the situation or that they would not be able to help them as they are not accustomed to cyberspace (Hoff & Mitchell 2009; Kowalski et al., 2007; Smith et al. 2008; Stacey 2009). In a web-based survey of 12-17-year olds, of whom most had experienced at least one cyberbullying incident in the last year, Juvonen and Gross (2008) found that 90% of the victims did not tell their parents about their experiences and 50% of them justified it with “I need to learn to deal with it myself”.

Students also have a rather negative and critical attitude to teachers’ support and a large percentage consider telling a teacher or the school principal as rather ineffective (Arıcak et al. 2008; DiBasilio 2008). Although 17% of students reported a teacher after a cyberbullying incident, in 70% of the cases the school did not react to it (Hoff & Mitchell 2009).

### **Involving peers**

Young people are more likely to find it helpful to confide in peers (DiBasilio, 2008; Livingstone et al., 2011; Price & Dalgleish, 2010). Additionally, it is essential to take account of the bystanders who usually play a critical role as audience to the cyberbullying in a range of participant roles, and who have the potential to be mobilized to take action against cyberbullying (Cowie, 2011; Salmivalli, 2010). For example, a system of young cybermentors, trained to monitor websites and offer emotional support to cybervictims, was positively evaluated by adolescents (Banerjee et al., 2010). Similarly, DiBasilio (2008) showed that peer leaders in school played a part in prevention of cyberbullying by creating bullying awareness in the school, developing leadership skills among students, developing bullying intervention practices and team-building initiatives in the student community, and facilitating students to behave actively as bystanders. This intervention successfully led to a decline in cyberbullying, in that the number of students who participated in electronic bullying decreased, while students’ understanding of bullying widened.

### **Discussion**

Although there exist many strategies for coping with cyberbullying, there remains a lack of evidence about what works best and in what circumstances in counteracting its negative effects. However, it would appear that, 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 lives of young people today.

There are some implications for professionals working with children and young people. Punitive methods tend on the whole not to be effective in reducing cyberbullying. In fact, as Shariff and Strong-Wilson (2005) found, 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. Professionals also need to focus on the values that are held within their organisations, in particular with regard to tolerance, acceptance and compassion for those in distress. 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. As Batson et al. (2002) argue, empathy-based socialisation practices encourage perspective-taking and enhance pro-social behaviour, leading to more satisfying relationships and greater tolerance of stigmatised outsider groups.

Finally, research indicates the importance of tackling bullying early before it escalates into something much more serious. This affirms the need for schools to establish a whole-school approach with a range of systems and interventions in place for tackling 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.

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