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Why cybersafety tips don't work for cyberbullying

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Research into cyberbullying in Australia has been slow. This is partly because rigorous research takes time, both to conduct, to analyse and to publish. In addition, Australian governments and other decision makers did not realise that cyberbullying was happening until there was greater media attention to the problem in the last few years. This meant that there was no serious research money allocated to cyberbullying research in Australia until about two years ago.

In addition, initial research has mainly looked at how many students have been cyberbullied and what were the consequences. As far as I know there is only one large research project which is looking at what programs actually work to prevent and/or intervene in cyberbullying in Australia and that will take time to ascertain. However, our society wants quick fixes and they want a quick fix for cyberbullying.

I think that is why "what to do" about cyberbullying is now the agenda of cybersafety experts and not bullying experts. This is unfortunate because while cybersafety experts are very knowledgeable about giving advice about safety aspects such as how to protect one's self from paedophiles and not accessing pornography, their expertise does not usually extend to Internet addiction and bullying, which is usually more the domain of psychologists.

I suppose that because there is a dearth of information, people are amazingly eager to give advice or to promote programs which lack any formal evaluation or research. This often leads to "agony aunt" advice which in the long term might cause more harm than good. For instance:

On the Cybersmart website (set up by the Australian Communications for Media and Technology) the first tip on cyberbullying for children is:

"Ignore it. If they don't get a response they may get bored and go away."

This is simplistic advice. Yes, if someone is mean to you, one does not retaliate by being mean to them. However, if you are bullied, because of the imbalance of power in your relationship with that person (either they are older or stronger or have positional power) then you cannot defend yourself because by definition you are disempowered. You are afraid of the bully or bullies.

This advice also seems to assume that it is one mean message and not the repetition that is involved in bullying. Bullying is fear producing because it is relentless; and cyberbullying even more so. Do you ignore the text messages on your mobile at 11pm and again at 12pm and then 1am and 2am?

The only criteria that could even recognise that this advice was meant to be about bullying is that it was mean. If the three tenets of bullying have not been met - imbalance of power, intent to hurt and repetition - then it is not bullying. Bullying is a social relationship problem that is deeply embedded in our culture. Bullying hurts.

Why are people telling children to ignore being hurt? Is it because that was the advice given to these people when they were children? "If someone is bullying you, don't let them see you are afraid, ignore them, don't fight them." "Ignore the big boy who is demanding your tuckshop money" - at your peril! Ignore being hurt by the cyberbully? The underlying message here for a victim is, don't do anything, don't tell anyone. I know the tip is meaning to say don't fight back. But if you are really bullied and are scared of the person because of the imbalance of power, hardly anyone fights back.

The next tip is "**Block the person. This will stop you seeing messages from a particular person.**"

This is the same as saying, if the bullies are in the toilet block, don't go to the toilet. Yes, it might give you some temporary abatement from the bullying but usually if someone is intent on hurting you they will find other ways, either to overcome the block or to "get" you by other mediums.

"**Keep the evidence**". In a litigious society we want evidence - proof. What this does is tell the person who is being cyberbullied, we don't believe you, so prove it. I know people think they are "proving" the bully is bullying but what does it also do to the victim? If someone says something nasty to you, you remember how you feel but you usually can't remember the exact words. When however, you are keeping all the texts, emails, online conversations what do you do? You re-read them. That's the power of the written word. Is this really what we want?

The last tips are virtually the same: "**Tell someone and report it.**"

However, we know from research that most victims of bullying do not tell someone about it, or if they do it is their friends. Why don't they? Because they are embarrassed and humiliated by the bullying but mostly because they fear retaliation from the bully when adults are involved.

As adults we are often not sensitive enough when children do tell us about bullying. Most adults react by taking the situation into their own hands, taking power away from the already disempowered victim. To be fair, the adults think they are helping. But if an angry parent goes to the bully's parents and complains, often things do not improve. If a teacher quizzes the victim, investigates the situation, decides the bully needs punishing, suspends them for two days from school and nothing else, there is likely to be retaliation against the victim, even if it is in more subtle ways.

The added complication with cyberbullying is that the children fear that the technology will be taken from them: that mum or dad will not let them have their mobile phone or they will not be able to use MSN. They think that adults will punish them for having been the victim.

Reporting by the child victim is unlikely because in Australia we have a culture of "don't dob". Unfortunately, we don't teach children from an early age the difference between "dobbing" where you tell an adult another child is doing something wrong to get them into trouble, and "reporting" where you tell an adult when there is harm to yourself or others.

Cyberbullying is a complex problem which will not be solved by easy tips, however much we might want that. We need programs which have been thoroughly evaluated and which work.

We need adults who are sensitive to children and who model good relationships, and do not use their power over others.