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## **Coping with the emotional impact of bullying and cyberbullying: How research can inform practice**

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Despite more than two decades of anti-bullying initiatives in schools, children and young people regularly mention relationships within the peer group as the major factor that causes them to feel unsafe at school. The situation is complicated by the fact that these interpersonal safety issues are actually generated by the peer group and often in contexts that are difficult for adults to control. The recent upsurge of cyberbullying is a case in point. Teachers and parents often feel powerless to intervene in the private world that children and young people create for themselves. This article explores the strategies that are commonly recommended for dealing with cyberbullying and examines what research tells us about their effectiveness. The conclusion is that, whatever the value of technological tools for tackling cyberbullying, we cannot avoid the fact that this is also an interpersonal problem. The implication for practice is that we already know many approaches for preventing and reducing cyberbullying and should build on this knowledge rather than treating the issue as something completely new.

**Keywords:** bullying, cyberbullying, school, strategies, coping

### **The nature of bullying and cyberbullying**

Some children have always engaged in bullying behaviour and it is something that teachers, school nurses, social workers, care workers and psychologists have learned to be vigilant about, especially with regard to particularly vulnerable groups, such as looked-after children or children with emotional and behavioural difficulties. Thousands of children ring ChildLine each year to talk about bullying, either for themselves or on the part of a friend. The former UK Children's Commissioner cited bullying as a major issue (Aynsley-Green, 2006) and emphasised the heightened risk for social and emotional difficulties of both targets and perpetrators. Research consistently identifies the devastating consequences of being bullied by peers. 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

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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.

However, with over 65% of 11-16-year-olds now having a profile on a social networking site, cyberbullying is presenting parents/carers and professionals with its own unique challenge. Cyber bullying has been described as the use of e-mail, mobile phones, text messages, video clips, instant messaging and photos on personal websites in order to engage in repeated hostile behaviour intended to harm another person or persons (Smith et al., 2008). So the bullying is no longer confined to school and the journey home, but can extend into the target's home at all times of the day and night. It takes a number of forms, including:

- harassment: e.g. sending insulting or threatening messages;
- denigration: spreading rumours on the internet;
- outing and trickery: revealing personal information about a person which was shared in confidence;
- exclusion: preventing a person from taking part in online social activities, such as games or chats (Willard, 2006).

A survey of 23,420 children and young people across Europe (Livingstone et al., 2010) found that 5% were being cyberbullied more than once a week, 4% once or twice a month and 10% less often; the vast majority were never cyberbullied. These figures indicate that rates of cyberbullying are lower than those for traditional face-to-face bullying, and many studies indicate a significant overlap between traditional bullying and cyberbullying (Ybarra and Mitchell, 2004; Kowalski and Limber, 2008; Perren et al., 2010; Sourander et al., 2010). For example, Sourander et al. (2010), in their survey of 2215 Finnish adolescents aged from 13-16 years, found that 4.8% were cybervictims only, 7.4% were cyberbullies only, and 5.4% were cyberbully-victims. In this study, they found that cybervictims tended also to be traditional victims and cyberbullies tended to be traditional bullies; traditional bully-victim status was associated with all cyberbully and cybervictim groups. Similarly, Riebel et al. (2009) found that more than 80% of cyberbullies were also traditional bullies.

As found in studies of face-to-face bullying, cybervictims report feeling unsafe and isolated, both at school and at home, and experience psychosomatic problems, such as headaches, recurring abdominal pain and sleeplessness. Similarly, cyberbullies report a range of social and emotional difficulties, including feelings of unsafety 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 (Sourander et al., 2010).

## Current advice on preventing or reducing cyberbullying

Much of the advice on intervention to prevent and reduce cyberbullying concerns training children and their parents in e-safety and the development of technological tools to counteract the behaviour, such as blocking bullying behaviour online or creating panic buttons for cybervictims to use when under threat. The Council for Child Internet Safety (UKCCIS) ([www.dcsf.gov.uk/ukccis/](http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/ukccis/)) has devised a range of interventions and policies to improve the e-safety knowledge and skills of children, young people and parents, through guidance to teacher training providers and schools on e-safety, as well as an e-safety element in the ICT skills test for new teachers. It also promotes a National Acceptable Use Policy toolkit for all schools, referencing responsible use of school IT networks and equipment, Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) and mobile phones. Campaigns like the Safer Internet Day ([www.saferinternet.org/web/guest/safer-internet-day](http://www.saferinternet.org/web/guest/safer-internet-day)) organised by Insafe, co-funded by the European Union promote safer and more responsible use of online technology and mobile phones, especially amongst children and young people across the world.

The major providers have taken some steps to make cyberspace safer for children and young people. For example, Bebo ([www.bebo.com](http://www.bebo.com)) has installed a 'panic button', provided by the UK Child Exploitation and Online Protection (CEOP) ([www.ceop.gov.uk](http://www.ceop.gov.uk)) for children to press if they suspect that they are being abused or bullied on a social networking site. Moderators also 'patrol' the chat rooms and will intervene if necessary. Major mobile phone service providers train staff to help customers deal with *nuisance calls*, including cyberbullying, and provide teams to trace the source of offensive calls. They will change the child or young person's mobile phone number if requested to do so, and in very serious cases, they recommend contacting the police.

Throughout Europe, both government and the voluntary sector are active in designing informative websites, useful leaflets, campaigns and initiatives to address the issue of cyberbullying. The materials that are currently in existence are attractively-produced to appeal to children and young people. In some instances, training is provided on how to tackle cyberbullying. For example, BeatBullying (2009) trains 'cybermentors,' young people who are vigilant on the internet and who agree to work in shifts offering help to victims and coming to the aid of people on the spot. In many European countries, the government has taken positive action to mount awareness-raising campaigns and to provide guidance for educators, parents and children to deal with cyberbullying. Such action affirms public awareness of particular groups of children and young people who are vulnerable to attack.

In the UK ChildLine ([www.childline.org.uk](http://www.childline.org.uk)) launched a series of TV and online awareness programmes specifically related to cyberbullying, with children and young people actively involved in the production. In Ireland, the educational theatre group Team developed a three-part DVD drama, described on Webwise ([www.webwise.ie/article.aspx?id=9674](http://www.webwise.ie/article.aspx?id=9674)), to highlight the dangers of social networking sites. In Spain, Pantallas Amigas (Friendly Screens) ([www.pantallasamigas.net](http://www.pantallasamigas.net)) mounted campaigns, produced

publications and training materials, held conferences and workshops in order to raise awareness through the media. Concerted action amongst NGOs has focused on children's rights and data protection.

This activity has an important part to play in safeguarding children and young people, and in raising general awareness about the threat of cyberbullying. At its best, it equips young people 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.

### **Working with the relationship**

Less frequently, however, does the guidance focus on the actual relationship between perpetrators and targets in the context of the wider peer group network. This is despite the evidence that cyberbullying is often an extension of existing face-to-face bullying. Furthermore, research indicates that the most disturbed of all are the young people who are both targets and perpetrators – the cyberbully-victims.

In one of the few studies that asked young people directly how they coped with cyberbullying, Riebel et al. (2009) identified four major strategies:

- social coping: seeking help from family, friends, teachers, peer supporters;
- aggressive coping: retaliation, physical attacks, verbal threats;
- helpless coping: hopelessness, passive reactions, such as avoidance; displays of emotion;
- cognitive coping: responding assertively, using reason; analysing the bullying episode and the bully's behaviour.

This study does not identify which of the strategies were experienced as being most successful. But it is worth considering previous investigations into successful coping strategies for targets of traditional bullying, for example, the longitudinal study that investigated the profiles and coping strategies of bullied children over a two year period (Smith et al., 2004). In this study, the researchers asked the children how they coped with being bullied. They found that 'escaped victims' (those who were no longer being bullied after a period of two years) did not differ substantially from non-victims in terms of their personal characteristics or the type of bullying that they experienced. However, what did differentiate them was their resilience in developing effective coping strategies. The pupils who had escaped from being bullied reported a number of effective strategies, such as telling someone, actively trying to make new friends and even befriending the bully – strategies which the 'continuing victims' (those who had been bullied for more than two years) were less likely to display. The continuing victims had a significantly worse attendance rate at school in this study – a strategy that probably only served to isolate them further from their peers. They were also more likely to blame themselves. The young people who escaped had developed resilience in the face of adversity. This study indicates that some children are able to deal with bullying experiences by using their own inner resources to cope with the distress of being bullied; others try out a range of social strategies in order to escape the bullying.

Of course, these interpersonal solutions may also have their hazards. Escobar et al. (2010) found that children with low self-esteem or those who were rejected by their peers were more likely to be perceived as 'demanding' or 'needy' if they sought social support when they were bullied or socially excluded. Similarly, Mahady Wilton et al. (2000) found that if bullied children expressed their distress too openly, they were unlikely to get support; in fact, the bullying might increase.

But learning to regulate emotions and navigate relationships is an essential developmental task if children and young people are to cope with the complex array of situations, some very stressful, that they will inevitably encounter in their lives. These would certainly include the risk of being the target of cyberbullying. As children grow older, they become increasingly reliant on relationships with peers, and thus it is necessary to acquire appropriate coping strategies for dealing with difficult emotional and social situations, such as cyberbullying.

Such coping strategies will vary depending on the individuals involved and the social contexts where the cyberbullying takes place, but could take the form of self-regulation, assertiveness, seeking out supportive friends, looking out for vulnerable classmates, knowing one's rights, having information on where to find help, and an understanding of how to mobilize peers and adults. 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.

## **Conclusion**

Educating young people, their parents and professionals in e-safety is an important outcome of the awareness-raising campaigns to address the problem of cyberbullying. Tightening regulation of social networking sites certainly has its place. Some sanctions will always be necessary, though there is evidence that excessive recourse to punishment can be counterproductive, as Skiba et al. (2008) found in their analysis of zero tolerance policies to reduce school violence. However, virtual interactions are as real to young people as are face-to-face ones, so 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.

As is the case in face-to-face bullying, an important starting point for the target of cyberbullying is to tell someone. By reporting a bullying incident to someone, the young person is taking the first step towards dealing with the problem and trying to find a solution. This is not a sign of weakness, though domineering peers may say that it is. It is important for schools to promote a climate in which it is safe for young people to talk about issues that worry them.

Another effective strategy might be to develop the stance of 'nonchalance'. The escaped victims in the Smith et al. (2004) study, reported that this was a good strategy for counteracting face-to-face bullying, as was the strong belief in self and one's rights. This is quite different from passively accepting the situation.

Nonchalance does not mean ignoring cyberbullying but rather developing inner resources to deal with it, probably with the help of others.

There is also evidence from the traditional bullying literature that having at least one good friend at school is a fundamental resource. It can be a very effective strategy if the victimized pupil starts a process of getting new friends in order to cope with cyberbullying. The school can facilitate this process by establishing a peer support system in which training includes specific information on the impact of cyberbullying on individuals and on the whole climate of the school. These schemes take a number of forms but they are all designed to take an active stance against bullying. Often young people who have been helped by peer supporters want to return the benefit in some way by helping others in distress. One immediate outcome is that they gain a circle of friends who in turn will provide further protection against cyberbullying.

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. This suggests that action against cyberbullying should be part of a much wider concern within the school for the promotion of restorative practices within an emotionally literate community. External controls have their place, but we also need to remember the interpersonal nature of cyberbullying. Most of all, we need to build on our existing body of knowledge about how to reduce and prevent bullying in all its many forms.

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