



# *The International Journal of Emotional Education*

ISSN: 2073-7629

**Volume 1, Number 2, November 2009 pp 3 - 13**[www.enseceurope.org/journal](http://www.enseceurope.org/journal)

## **Tackling cyberbullying: A cross-cultural comparison**

**Helen Cowie<sup>1</sup>***University of Surrey, UK*

This article examines cyberbullying in the UK and Japan<sup>2</sup> and compares the steps that each country is taking to address the issue by exploring the general principles through which central government, parents, charities, teachers, students and ICT providers in each country are working together. It also suggests that peer support schemes have a unique contribution to make and that an emphasis on peer group relationships and processes of collaboration with young people offer useful ways forward. It is essential to acknowledge that the problem is multi-dimensional and without a full understanding of the complex ways in which young people relate to one another it is unlikely that cyberbullying will be reduced.

**Keywords:** cyberbullying peer support e-safety whole-school approach young people

### **Introduction**

Since the millennium, there has been a huge technological growth in the ways in which young people have been able to interact with one another, with rapid developments in online gaming, instant messaging, broad-band connectivity and social networking sites. At the time of writing, in both the UK and Japan, the majority of young people between 8-17 years can access the Internet either at home or at school, and of these a very large proportion (over 90% in each country) have a computer at home and own a cell phone. Younger children are more likely to use the Internet for games while 12-15-year-olds are more likely to use it for downloading music and films, or watching video clips. Older adolescents use the Internet for communicating with friends on social networking sites, uploading files or photographs, and using blogs (Byron 2008). The Internet is widely perceived as a valuable resource in young people's lives for accessing social networks, and offering a means of social engagement for

<sup>1</sup> Corresponding address. Email: [H.Cowie@surrey.ac.uk](mailto:H.Cowie@surrey.ac.uk)

<sup>2</sup> This paper was written during the author's one-year Visiting Professorship at Hiroshima University Graduate School of Education, Department of Learning Science, Japan.

adolescents who may face difficulties in making friends, for example those who are school refusals. The widespread ownership of mobile phones has enhanced the personal safety of children.

However, as responsible adults, we need to recognise potential risks and be ready to safeguard young people in the virtual, as in the real, world. Although ICT has opened up new avenues of communication and enhanced opportunities, it is also an arena where violence and bullying can happen. There is widespread concern in both Japan and the UK about the dangers that are emerging in the virtual world of ICT, some of them caused by the young users themselves, and anxiety that many children and adults lack awareness of basic e-safety. In the present article, we focus on the phenomenon of cyberbullying which has recently become a topic of interest in each country. First we define cyberbullying. Then we examine its incidence in each country. Finally we compare and contrast the interventions that are being developed to counteract it.

### **What is cyberbullying?**

Cyberbullying has been defined as the use of e-mail, mobile phones, text messages, video clips, instant messaging, photos and personal websites, in order to engage in repeated hostile behaviour intended to harm another person or persons (Smith et al 2008). It varies in the forms it takes but can include cyber-stalking, harassment, denigration and exclusion, teasing or making fun of or making unpleasant comments about another person. Internet bullying can also involve threats of physical violence or death to a person or their family, or psychological bullying such as posting offensive and embarrassing material about a person on a website, or menacing chain messages (Rivers and Noret, 2009 in press). Many young people do not know who is bullying them since cyberbullies can hide, for example in chat rooms, behind screen names and avatars enabling anonymity. We illustrate the nature of cyberbullying and its potential for serious emotional damage to its targets in two case studies, one involving bullying by a group and the other involving bullying of one individual by his 'friend'. A great deal of cyber bullying is conducted through mobile phones with Internet and e-mailing (text messaging) capabilities, as shown in Case Study 1 where the target was Hozumi (a pseudonym).

### Case Study 1 Anonymous messages by cell phone and the Internet

For Hozumi, a high school student, his cell phone became an instrument of mental torture that nearly drove him to suicide.

"Even when I stopped going to school and stayed at home, my cell phone kept ringing with harassing e-mails," he said.

Subsequently, Hozumi became anorexic and rarely emerged from his room for nearly six months. Eventually he returned to school. Although he graduated from high school and has just started his first job as a hairdresser, Hozumi is still haunted by the fact that classmates regularly posted photos of him along with insults on a website and sent cell phone messages to him even during the night telling him to die. He was so distraught that he attempted suicide twice.

"When people tell you your life is not worth living, you start to think that way," he said. "I couldn't believe in human beings anymore."

Case Study 1 indicates the acute emotional distress to a peer that cyberbullying by an anonymous group of peers can cause. Hozumi became a 'school refusal' so an additional outcome appears to be that, since he spent so much time away from school, he failed to gain the qualifications that might have enabled him to apply for further study, for example at university.

Case study 2, reported by Stayton (2008), shows how the Internet can exacerbate anxieties over sexual orientation and fears about 'coming out' in front of peers. In this case, the cyberbullying took place between two apparent friends but the betrayal of confidential material led to deep shaming in front of the whole peer group. Seventeen year-old Andy (a pseudonym), who had misused the Internet in a similar way previously, wanted to get revenge on his friend, Ben (a pseudonym), aged 16, who had divulged some of Andy's personal secrets to other students. He did this by creating a fictitious character, Callum, with the deliberate intent to hurt Ben by luring him into an intimate relationship with Callum.

The outcome for Ben was far more serious than Andy ever imagined it would be. He said he had no idea that Ben had tried to kill himself until other people told him. This case was widely publicised in the media. Andy was fined and his computer was confiscated.

## Case Study 2 Creating a fictitious character on the Internet as an act of revenge

Andy created a fictitious character, Callum, on Bebo and then tricked Ben into forming a relationship with Callum over a number of months by exchanging e-mails containing explicit sexual material. Andy then revealed the e-mails between Ben and Callum to friends and teachers. The outcome was that Ben felt so embarrassed that he could no longer face going to school. When Ben discovered that Callum had been invented by Andy - a person that he considered to be a close friend – the betrayal was too much to bear. He then tried to commit suicide by overdosing on a cocktail of 30 paracetamol, 15 Buscopan and 15 ibuprofen tablets. Fortunately, Ben was discovered in time to save his life. Andy was genuinely repentant. He sobbed uncontrollably during his appearance at the Youth Court: "I wish I never done it. I feel 100 per cent sorry for the pain I have caused your family. I can't contemplate what I have done to your family. To think I have caused someone that pain to take their life, it's just really hard to think I have done something like that, especially when I have been working with the victims of bullying. To think I am one of those people. I am ashamed of what I have done. I can't explain what came over me. All I can say is that I don't recognise that person and I don't like who I was. I am wholeheartedly unconditionally sorry. If you ever find me doing this again, lock me up and throw away the key".

### The incidence of cyberbullying

Rivers and Noret (2009, in press) point out that, in contrast to the longstanding agreement amongst researchers of traditional forms of bullying about the repeated nature of the behaviour, researchers of cyberbullying have been less restrictive in applying a definition that requires a persistent and meaningful interaction between the perpetrator and the victim, mainly because of the anonymity offered to the perpetrator. They often fail to take account of advances in technology with the result that we do not know whether apparent increases in incidence are simply the outcome of greater availability of new forms of ICT. This makes it difficult to be precise in documenting actual rates of cyberbullying, depending on the ways in which the questions are asked and the actual definition of the behaviours and media used. As a result, rates of cyberbullying have been reported internationally as ranging from 4% (Ybarra and Mitchell 2004) to 36% (Hinduja and Patchin 2008).

Recent nationwide surveys of bullying in general by the Japanese Ministry of Education (2007; 2008) found a 20% increase in reported cases of online bullying from 2006 to 2007. According to this survey, while some of the bullying took place through cell phones and personal computers, the most extensive cyberbullying took place on school bulletin boards, or *gakko ura-saito*, which are sites run by students in elementary, junior high and senior high schools to disseminate information to the whole school community (Kyodo News 2008). The Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology acknowledged that there remained difficulties in recognizing bullying cases at schools

but reported that it had asked local boards of education to urge schools to hold interviews and home visits in an effort to prevent it. In a smaller-scale survey, Hyogo Prefectural Board of Education found that 10% of high school students said they had been harassed through e-mails, websites or blogs (Yomiuri Shimbun 2009).

Although some media reports claim that Japan has an exceptionally bad problem with cyberbullying, there are broad parallels with findings in other countries (Livingston and Bober 2005). For example, Microsoft Service Network (MSN) (2006) found that 11% of children in their survey reported being the victims of some form of cyberbullying and that girls (14%) thought that cyberbullying was worse than face-to-face bullying. 22% of this sample of young people reported that the worst aspect of cyberbullying, in comparison with face-to-face bullying, was that more people would know about it.

In the UK, Smith et al (2008) report results from a survey of 533 secondary school students. Cyberbullying increased with age, from 14% at age 11-12 years to 23% at age 15-16 years, with the most reported types being instant messaging (10%), telephone calls (10%) and text messages (7%). In this survey, students were asked about who had done the cyberbullying. Some were reported to be in the same class (21%) or a different class in the same year group (28%) and a few from higher years (6%) or a different year (2%). Some were from different schools (22%) and some did not know the identity of the bully (21%). Girls were more likely to be the victims of cyberbullying than boys.

Rivers and Noret (2009 in press) included an analysis of longitudinal data in their 5-year study of a cohort of around 2,500 pupils in 13 UK schools. The study charted reports of nasty and threatening text and e-mail messages received by students aged between 11 and 13 years. Results indicated an increase in the incidence of offensive material, especially amongst girls, from 13% in 2002 to 16% in 2006.

However, reports of *frequent* (once a week or more) receipt of such messages remained stable over the same time period at 1.00% - 1.08%, with no significant differences between boys and girls. Girls were twice as likely as boys to be cyberbullied (21% as opposed to 10%) once a term. But there were no gender differences for *frequent* cyberbullying and very little change across time.

A proportion of cybervictims are traditional victims too. Of the 42 traditional victims who were also cyberbullies in the study by Smith et al. (2008), 30 were traditional bully-victims. In this study, the researchers found that boys who were being bullied offline were more likely to report being cyberbullied. Unpopular girls were more likely to report being cyberbullied. These findings confirm other studies (e.g. Ybarra and Mitchell 2004) that indicate links between online and offline bullying. In

the case of boys, Rivers and Noret (2009 in press) suggest that male bullies extend existing threats of direct physical attack to on-line forms of bullying. In the case of girls, the sending of nasty or threatening online messages is an extension of existing manipulation of peer relationships in order to ensure that unpopular girls remain unpopular and are further excluded from the peer group.

It is clear from the brief summary of surveys in different countries that it is difficult to gain a precise figure with regard to incidence. However, there is consistent agreement that the problem exists and that action needs to be taken to address it. In the next section, we explore some of the interventions that have been most frequently implemented.

### **What can be done to prevent cyberbullying?**

Cyberbullying is far harder for parents and teachers to tackle than face-to-face bullying because of the anonymity of cyber space and a lack of technical knowledge on the part of adults. However, there is already a wealth of expert advice and guidance available (for example, Shariff 2008). In the next section, we examine different aspects to the solution, to include recourse to the law, monitoring websites, education for e-safety, provision of guidance, the use of peer supporters and the emotional education of the whole peer group.

*Recourse to the law:* Cyberbullying is not a specific offence but there are criminal laws that can apply in terms of harassment, and threatening or menacing communications. In the UK, for example, head teachers are advised to contact the police if they feel that the law has been broken and to become aware of the legal support available to them when applying sanctions. Schools have some power to regulate the conduct of pupils when they are off-site, including the right to confiscate mobile phones and other items. In Japan, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology guidance reports on the specific issue of chain e-mails, in which a person sends a derogatory e-mail and urges the recipient to forward the message to a number of others. One school reported the problem to the police and told its students the police were investigating the case while at the same time conducting its own investigation. The school was able to identify the student who sent the first e-mail in the chain. As each of these examples indicates, schools have a critical role to play in the protection of children by invoking the law where appropriate.

*Monitoring websites:* In Japan, many private schools have been using commercial companies to monitor student Internet activity and to scrutinise sites for cyberbullying since 2007. Recently, an increasing number of local governments, including the Tokyo Metropolitan Government, the Koto Ward

Office in Tokyo, and the Sapporo Municipal Government, are setting aside large sums of money for private companies to do the same. Other local governments will follow suit later on this year. For example, The Tokyo Metropolitan Government is paying an IT company 19 million yen this year to monitor *gakko ura-saito* bulletin boards in 2,200 public high, middle and primary schools. Typically, the company will check all messages posted on the bulletin boards for abusive and threatening remarks. Such messages are deleted and reported to the Board of Education.

*Educating for e-safety:* However, schools also have the power to create as safe an e-learning environment as possible by providing training on how to stay safe in virtual worlds. Many educators, in both the UK and Japan, consider that training students and teachers in e-safety is a more constructive approach than relying only on sanctions. For example, the Ishikawa Prefectural Board of Education has dedicated two computers and two cell phones at its office in Kanazawa and launched a special team that includes eight teachers to monitor *gakko ura-saito* bulletin boards. A spokesman of the Board of Education said: "Compared with private companies that monitor the *gakko ura-saito* bulletin boards, our skills and work efficiency might be inferior. However, it's important for students to feel they're watched over by teachers. We can't just throw all this work to the private sector."

In the UK, Becta (2005 p. 4) proposes that the creation of a safe ICT environment has four elements:

- An infrastructure of whole-site awareness, responsibilities, policies and procedures;
- An effective range of technological tools;
- A comprehensive e-safety education programme;
- A review process that monitors effectiveness of the first three elements.

Becta (2008) also proposes a co-ordinated approach to reduce the risks by drawing together a package of policies and practices, education and training, infrastructure and technology to address the issue.

*Guidance to parents, students and teachers:* In the UK as in Japan, the government has delivered guidance for teachers, parents and students to address the issue by regularly updating and monitoring existing anti-bullying policies, advising target students on appropriate action and actively promoting e-safety throughout the school,. With regard to perpetrators, schools are advised on ways of identifying cyberbullies, taking steps to change their attitudes and behaviour, and, where appropriate, applying technology-specific sanctions such as limiting Internet access for a period of time or removing the right to use a cell phone on the school site.

Additionally, NGOs have also initiated campaigns and have developed their own sets of guidance. For example, Beatbullying, a leading UK bullying prevention charity has developed easily

accessible materials for children and parents to download. The website [www.digitalparents.org/cyberbullying/](http://www.digitalparents.org/cyberbullying/) highlights short educational videos for stimulating debate and discussion. Parents are recommended to keep a close eye on their children's activity on the web and to be alert to changes in behaviour that might indicate some emotional distress. Parallel advice to children suggests that they should be aware of risky behaviour, such as disclosing passwords and personal information, engaging in risky sexual behaviour and violent gaming. They are also advised to keep evidence if they suspect that cyberbullying is taking place, whether to themselves or to another peer.

Another resource for parents and children is provided by the Dizigen website [www.dizigen.org/cyberbullying/](http://www.dizigen.org/cyberbullying/) which provides similar advice and reminds children never to retaliate to cyberbullying but instead to report it to an adult, a helpline, such as ChildLine, or to the service provider. If it is very serious, Dizigen advises parents to consider contacting the police.

*Cybermentors:* In the UK, the BeatBullying website <http://www.cybermentors.org.uk/> offers training to young people who would like to take action against cyberbullying by becoming Cybermentors, that is, young people who help peers who are being bullied on the Internet. CyberMentors are given training by BeatBullying experts and then typically log on for around 30 minutes every day to offer active listening and practical tips to peers who are experiencing cyberbullying.

## **Conclusion – a collaborative whole-school approach**

The previous section indicates a range of ways in which cyberbullying is currently being tackled in both the UK and Japan. It would appear that sanctions have an important role to play in addressing the problem once it has occurred, but punishment alone is not the most effective way of preventing cyberbullying. Nor is it necessarily helpful to respond to media-induced moral panic only through external control of websites, without ongoing consultation with representatives of all members of the school and its community. Real account needs to be taken of the complex social dynamics of the peer group when considering how to address this issue (Cowie and Jennifer 2008).

In the two case studies that we quote earlier in this paper, there were a number of interventions that could have prevented the bullying from escalating to the serious levels that it reached. The schools in each case could have created opportunities for e-safety education for all students and held awareness-raising events on the dangers from ICT as well as the benefits. The schools could have taken much more positive action when it was observed that a student like Hozumi was refusing to come to school.



Andy, in case study 2, claimed to be a person who “worked with the victims of bullying”, so presumably there existed a peer support system in his school. Regular supervision of peer supporters would have brought to light issues relating to misuse of the Internet. The teacher in charge of the peer support scheme at this school could then facilitate in-depth reflection during supervision in order to identify key training needs for peer supporters with regard to cyberbullying. Peer supporters, for example, could be trained to act as cybermentors to maintain on-line vigilance and to provide immediate support and advice for victims.

The pastoral care teams in the school as well as the systems of peer support should have created confidential systems to which Ben could have been given access to information and guidance. The adults whom he contacted would have urgently referred his case on to specialists trained to deal with acute emotional distress and suicidal tendencies. The humiliation of Ben could have been greatly reduced if at least some of the students in the peer group had refused to laugh at the embarrassing e-mails and had instead shown some empathy for him. Development of empathy for a peer in distress would be an integral part of the school’s pastoral care system and personal and social education curriculum. The school could have promoted a campaign to challenge cruel homophobic prejudice and linked the campaign to wider education on sexual behaviour and common sexual fears and anxieties. This would include promotion of the right of students to have clear information about sexual orientation issues.

The key priority area concerns whole-school collaboration between school principals and school governors, class teachers, young people, parents/carers, local authorities and internet service providers (ISPs) to identify issues of concern and to develop network security measures (Becta 2005; 2008; Shariff 2008; Media Literacy Task Force 2009). With a more sophisticated whole-school approach, education authorities and central government can develop detailed guidelines for teachers, principals and administrators regarding the extent of their obligations to prevent and reduce cyber-bullying, and inform schools on the latest strategies for networking with parents, police, technology providers and community organizations to provide support systems for victims and perpetrators of cyberbullying.

In this article, we have outlined general principles through which central government, parents, charities, teachers, students and ICT providers can collaborate to tackle the problem of cyberbullying. We also suggest that peer support schemes have a unique contribution to make. Students can learn to protect themselves against cyberbullying through e-safety guidelines. They can be vigilant online to report harassment and abuse when they observe it. They can also refuse to condone or reinforce bullying

behaviour that demeans fellow students, whether through cell phone messages, blogs or websites. Most importantly, it is essential to acknowledge that the problem is multi-dimensional and without a full understanding of the complex ways in which young people relate to one another it is unlikely that cyberbullying will be reduced.

## References

- British Educational Communications and Technology Agency (Becta) (2005) *Safeguarding Children in a Digital World: Developing a Strategic Approach to e-safety*. (Retrieved July 20, 2009, from: [www.becta.org.uk/schools/safety](http://www.becta.org.uk/schools/safety))
- British Educational Communications and Technology Agency (Becta) (2008) *Safeguarding Children Online: a Guide for School Leaders*. (Retrieved July 20, 2009, from: [www.becta.org.uk/schools/safety](http://www.becta.org.uk/schools/safety))
- Byron, T. (2008). *Safer Children in a Digital World: the Report of the Byron review*. (Retrieved July 20, 2009, from: <http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/byronreview/>)
- Hinduja, S. and Patchin, J. W. (2008). Cyberbullying: An exploratory analysis of factors. *Deviant Behavior*, 29(2): 129-156.
- Kyodo News (2008) *School bullying cases dip 19% in 2007 school year* (Retrieved July 20, 2009, from: <http://educationinjapan.wordpress.com/edu-news/school-bullying-cases-dip-19-in-2007-school-year/>)
- Livingston, S. and Bober, M. (2005). *UK Children Go Online: Final Report of Key Project Findings*. London: The London School of Economics and Political Science. (Retrieved July 20, 2009 from: [www.children-go-online.net](http://www.children-go-online.net))
- Media Literacy Task Force (2009) *Digital Britain: an Interim Report*. (Retrieved July 20, 2009, from: [www.medialiteracy.org](http://www.medialiteracy.org))
- Microsoft Service Network (MSN) (2006). *MSN cyberbullying report: Blogging, instant messaging, and email bullying amongst today's teens*. (Retrieved July 20, 2009, from: [www.msn.co.uk/cyberbullying](http://www.msn.co.uk/cyberbullying))
- Rivers, I. and Noret, N. (2009, in press) "Ih8u": Findings from a five-year study of text and e-mail bullying. *British Educational Research*
- Shariff, S. (2008) *Cyberbullying: Issues and Solutions for the School, the Classroom and the Home*. London: Routledge.

- Smith, P. K., Mahdavi, J., Carvalho, M., Fisher, S., Russell, S. and Tippett, N. (2008). Cyberbullying: its nature and impact in secondary school pupils. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 49(4), 376-385.
- Staton, J. (2008) *Cyber bully drove schoolboy to attempt suicide*. 18<sup>th</sup> Feb, 2008. (Retrieved July 20, 2009, from [http://www.theargus.co.uk/news/2053716.cyber\\_bully\\_drove\\_schoolboy\\_to\\_attempt\\_suicide/](http://www.theargus.co.uk/news/2053716.cyber_bully_drove_schoolboy_to_attempt_suicide/))
- Ybarra, M. and Mitchell, K. (2004). Online aggressor/targets, aggressors, and targets: a comparison of associated youth characteristics. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 45(7): 1308-1316.
- Yomiuri Shimbun (2008) Guidebook to help teachers prevent online bullying. Nov 15<sup>th</sup>. (Retrieved July 20, 2009, from: [www.yomiuri.co.jp/dy/national/](http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/dy/national/))