SPECIAL ARTICLES

Cyberbullying and its impact on young people's emotional health and well-being

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Aims and method   The 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 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.

Declaration of interest   None.

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;[1–6] bystanders are also known to be negatively affected.[7–9] The emergence of cyberbullying indicates that perpetrators have turned their attention to technology (including mobile telephones and the internet) as a powerful means of exerting their power and control over others.[10] Cyberbullies have the power to reach their targets at any time of the day or night.

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 chat line or a game, ganging up on one individual.[11]

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.[12]

A survey of 23 420 children and young people across Europe 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.[13] Many studies indicate a significant overlap between traditional bullying and cyberbullying.[5,6,14,15] However, a note of caution is needed when interpreting the frequency and prevalence of cyberbullying. As yet, there is no uniform agreement on its definition and researchers differ in the ways they gather their data, with some, for example, asking participants whether they have 'ever' been cyberbullied and others being more specific, for example, 'in the past 30 days'.

The impact of cyberbullying 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 their 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 antisocial 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[2–4,16] and adolescents[17,18] 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.[19,20]

Studies demonstrate that most young people who are cyberbullied are already being bullied by traditional, face-to-face methods.[6,21–23] Cyberbullying 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 & Fremouw[11] 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 cyber victims indicate heightened risk of depression,[5,22,24] of psychosomatic symptoms such as headaches, abdominal pain and sleeplessness[6] and of behavioural difficulties including alcohol consumption.[25] As found in studies of face-to-face bullying, cyber victims 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 antisocial behaviours, conduct disorders, and alcohol and drug misuse.[6,26]

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[27–29] and through exposure to the wide range of informative websites that abound (e.g. UK Council for Child Internet Safety (UKCCIS; www.education.gov.uk/ukccis), ChildLine (www.childline.org.uk)). Many schools now train pupils in e-safety and 'netiquette' to equip them with the critical tools that they will need 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 cyber victims to use when under threat. Price & Dalgleish[30] found that blocking was considered as a most helpful online action by cyber victims and a number of other studies have additionally found that deleting nasty messages and stopping use of the internet were effective strategies.[13,14,24] However, recent research by Kumazaki et al[31] found that training young people in netiquette did not significantly reduce or prevent cyber-bullying. 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 setting age-appropriate limits of using the computer and internet.[14] Poor parental monitoring is consistently associated with a higher risk for young people to be involved in both traditional and cyberbullying, whether as perpetrator or target.[15] 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.[10,29,32] On the other hand, some adolescents recommend not consulting adults because they fear loss of privileges (e.g. having and using mobile telephones 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.[10,12,14,29] In a web-based survey of 12- to 17-year-olds, of whom most had experienced at least one cyberbullying incident in the past year, Juvonen & Gross[24] 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.[32,33] Although 17% of students reported to a teacher after a cyberbullying incident, in 70% of the cases the school did not react to it.[12]

Involving peers

Young people are more likely to find it helpful to confide in peers.[13,30,33] 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 mobilised to take action against cyberbullying.[9,34] For example, a system of young cyber mentors, trained to monitor websites and offer emotional support to cyber victims, was positively evaluated by adolescents.[35] Similarly, DiBasilio[33] showed that peer leaders in school played a part in prevention of cyber-bullying by creating bullying awareness in the school, developing leadership skills among students, establishing bullying intervention practices and team-building initiatives in the student community, and encouraging students to behave proactively 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 recommended strategies for coping with cyber-bullying abound, there remains a lack of evidence about what works best and in what circumstances in counter-acting 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, and the disturbing fact that cyber victims can be targeted at any time and wherever they are, so increasing their vulnerability.

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 & Strong-Wilson[36] found, zero-tolerance

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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[37] argue, empathy-based socialisation practices encourage perspective-taking and enhance prosocial behaviour, leading to more satisfying relationships and greater tolerance of stigmatised outsider groups. This is particularly relevant to the discussion since researchers have consistently found that high-quality friendship is a protective factor against mental health difficulties among bullied children.[38]

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 dealing with 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 an environment where relationships are valued and where conflicts are seen to be resolved in the spirit of justice and fairness.

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About the author

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