

## Submission to Joint Select Committee on Cyber-Safety

The Australian Clearinghouse for Youth Studies (ACYS) is a Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations-funded project that provides comprehensive and up-to-date information about key issues and practices in the youth field to people concerned about or working with young people, including researchers, youth workers and policymakers.

ACYS produces a range of products and services including:

- the journal *Youth Studies Australia*, an interdisciplinary peer-reviewed journal, issued quarterly to subscribers in both hard copy and online format;
- the newsletter *Youth Field Xpress*, issued monthly, via email and online, free of charge;
- the ACYS website of resources about youth studies ([www.acys.info](http://www.acys.info));
- help desk services for those looking for more information about the youth sector or specific details about a particular issue; and
- books and other publications on contemporary youth issues.

The ACYS website provides easy access to comprehensive information on matters related to youth. For example, the Topics section is arranged so that on each topic page the viewer can see a range of resources. The list of nearly 50 topics includes 'Bullying' and 'Technology', which both contain information and resources on cyberbullying.

*Youth Studies Australia* has published a number of papers on cybersafety and cyberbullying (see below). ACYS is happy

to provide members of the Committee with copies of any YSA papers and/or information from the ACYS website that they might require.

### **Youth Studies Australia papers on cyberbullying**

- Price, M. & Dalgleish, J. 2010, 'Cyberbullying: Experiences, impacts and coping strategies as described by Australian young people', *Youth Studies Australia*, v.29, n.2, pp.51-59.
- Reeckman, B. & Cannard, L. 2009, 'Cyberbullying: A TAFE perspective', *Youth Studies Australia*, v.28, n.2, pp.41-49.
- Maher, D. 2008, 'Cyberbullying: An ethnographic case study of one Australian upper primary school class', *Youth Studies Australia*, v.27, n.4, pp.50-57.
- Yoneyama, S. & Rigby, K. 2006, 'Bully/victim students and classroom climate', *Youth Studies Australia*, v.25, n.3, pp.34-41.
- Fleming, M. & Rickwood, D. 2004, 'Teens in cyberspace: Do they encounter friend or foe?', *Youth Studies Australia*, v.23, n.3, pp.46-50.

ACYS felt that a submission that summarised the Price and Dalgleish 2010 research paper might be of the most use to the Committee. Megan Price and John Dalgleish are both researchers at BoysTown, the organisation behind the national phone service called Kids Helpline, which provides a counselling service for Australian children and young people aged between five and 25 years, and also regularly produces research and reports on topical issues.

### **Background**

In the introduction to the paper, the authors provide background information on the phenomenon of cyberbullying:

'Cyberbullying' is the collective label used to define forms of bullying that use electronic means such as the internet and mobile phones to aggressively and intentionally harm someone. Like 'traditional' bullying, cyberbullying typically involves repeated behaviour and a power imbalance between aggressor and victim. It extends beyond hurtful messages sent via email or text messaging to include forms such as threats, social exclusion tactics, spreading rumours and circulating defamatory images of the victim. One of the key attractions of cyberbullying is reported to be the perceived anonymity that the internet and other communication technologies can provide. Researchers suggest that the 'virtual' environment in which cyberbullying occurs allows bullies to feel less inhibited and less accountable for their actions (Joinson 1998; Keith & Martin 2005; Sparling 2004).

The results of research on the prevalence of cyberbullying among young people vary considerably. Reports of prevalence in the literature range from 9% to 49% within a school year (Juvonen & Gross 2008), with the wide variance attributed to differences in research design and the types of technology examined. Although rates are not as high as for traditional bullying (with prevalence up to 70%) (Juvonen & Gross 2008), the spread in recent years of technology-mediated communication suggests an increased potential for this form of bullying in the future. International research has found that cyberbullying is often used in tandem with traditional bullying (Li 2005; Smith et al. 2008).

## Research methodology

The Kids Helpline research involved:

... 548 self-identified cyberbully victims aged under 25 years (male=101). Participants were sourced in 2009 primarily from the Kids Helpline website and email counselling service, as well as the ABC's

*Behind the news* television and web audience. The sample's female bias is the likely result of Kids Helpline's involvement in recruitment; it is representative of national help-seeking trends (Kids Helpline 2009).

The majority of participants were aged 10–14 years (50%) or 15–18 years (42%), a bias also reflective of Kids Helpline contacts. The remainder were aged 19–25 years (6%) and 5–9 years (2%). With regard to the geographic distribution of Australian youth (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006), a representative spread was achieved across the sample including all six Australian states and two territories, with highest proportions representing New South Wales (35%) and Victoria (21%). With the exception of the Northern Territory, all other locations contributed more than 13 participants.

A mixed-method online approach was used to collect data on the cyberbullying experiences of participants:

The survey consisted of 18 web-based questions, including 16 quantitative and two qualitative questions ... Specifically, the qualitative component provided an in-depth description of the experience, while the quantitative component measured its nature and level.

## Findings

- Cyberbullying occurred frequently and was varied:

... many adolescents repeatedly fall victim to cyberbullying through name calling, abuse, harassment, exclusion, impersonation, threats of physical harm, defamation and public humiliation.

- There was a high proportion of female victims compared to males:

This may be a reflection of national help-seeking trends and related sampling bias; however, past research has shown a similar female bias (Beale & Hall 2007). That is, where boys tend to be

the primary perpetrators and victims of traditional bullying, online it is girls who dominate the statistics on both victims and bullies.

- Cyberbullying most commonly occurs within the transitional years between primary and secondary school:

Parents, community and schools would do well to recognise this finding and ensure support and guidance is given during these critical years.

- The research provided support to a number of international findings:

- 1 ... the findings support the claim that ICTs (information and communication technologies) do not necessarily protect a perpetrator's identity (Juvonen & Gross 2008). Indeed in many cases the bully is known to the victim and technological environments are just one of multiple environments they may be using to bully their victim (Katzer, Fetchenhauer & Belschak 2009).
- 2 ... this research further confirmed that young people are often not exclusively classifiable as 'bully' or 'victim', but rather at various times they may be bullied, be the bully or act as a bystander to bullying (Espelage & Swearer 2003; Haynie et al. 2001; Kulig, Hall & Kalischuk 2008; Veenstra et al. 2007). Such strong interrelatedness between the various forms of bullying and also the dynamics between the role of bully and victim suggest to the authors that school and government interventions need to focus not only on cybersafety but also on the quality of peer relationships.

- Short-term impacts were serious:

... the high number of victims reporting negative effects on their self-confidence, esteem, relationships, school grades and attendance highlight the fact that cyberbullying should not be ignored. The levels of extreme sadness and anger reported, and associations made

to self-harming and suicide ideation, undoubtedly support this finding. Moreover, they reinforce the importance of ensuring that cyberbullying complaints are not minimised, and that strengths-based support and guidance is provided to young people.

## Challenges to supporting cyberbullying victims

... only a minority of victims are choosing to speak out to either adults or peers about their experience. This is in spite of the reportedly high efficacy of this strategy and the fact that many claim it is the advice they would give others. Although not explored in this research, one could assume, based on previous research (Campbell 2007), that reluctance to talk with adults may be due to barriers discussed earlier in this report, including the fear and perceived ineffectiveness of speaking out. It may also be that young people need further information regarding the benefits of seeking help, how to seek help and who they can safely turn to for support. Peers, parents and schools can all play a role in encouraging this behaviour. Further research may do well to investigate what strategies are currently in place to encourage victims to speak out, and how to engender this behaviour. Consideration should also be given to young people who are using retaliation as a coping strategy. Although only a minority of the participants reported trying this measure, their reports of high efficacy raise alarm bells around the message this may send and the impact its use may have on breeding further bullying behaviour.

... with regard to online strategies, the majority of young people were found to be familiar with, and active users of, online intervention tools, which is a finding that echoes earlier research (Juvonen & Gross 2008; Li 2005). Of the various online tools, the high use and efficacy of blocking

techniques suggest that reinforcement of this response is likely to be a fruitful strategy for parents and schools, particularly as it is less disruptive and “punishing” for the victims than some other alternatives. Additionally, given the major role that social networking sites were shown to play in the lives of participants aged over 13 years, it is suggested that specific strategies need to be given to this age group around how to protect themselves on this medium.

## Conclusions

- The findings suggest that, to effectively address cyberbullying, a critical response must increase the help-seeking behaviour of victimised young people and improve the efficacy of those they speak to.
- Cyberbullying is strongly interrelated with traditional bullying, which suggests a need for interventions that focus on improving peer relations in general.
- Future research may do well to qualitatively explore the current coping strategies used by young people – what they are, reasons for their efficacy (or lack thereof), and how inadequacies can be overcome.
- Effective response strategies for government, schools, parents and peers need to be developed.

## Summary

### Definition

Cyberbullying is bullying involving the use of the internet or mobile phones.

### Background

Cyberbullying often used in tandem with traditional bullying.

### Research

A large mixed-methods (qualitative and quantitative) study of cyberbullying among Australian young people was conducted in 2009 (Price & Dalgleish 2010).

## Results

- Cyberbullying involved name calling, abuse, harassment, exclusion, impersonation, threats of physical harm, defamation and public humiliation.
- More than half the participants reported victimisation during the period associated with the transition from primary school to high school.
- Victims were more likely to be female than male.
- Bullies were often not anonymous and used multiple environments to harass their victims.
- Participants could be bully, victim or bystander at various times.

## Impacts of bullying

- negative effects on self-confidence, esteem, relationships, school grades and attendance
- extreme sadness and anger
- self-harming and suicide ideation.

## Recommendations

- Do not ignore or minimise cyberbullying.
- Focus interventions not only on cybersafety but also on the quality of peer relationships.
- Provide young people with strengths-based support and guidance.
- Provide young people with further information on the benefits of seeking help, how to seek help and who they can safely turn to for support. Peers, parents and schools to play a role in encouraging this behaviour.
- Conduct further research to investigate what strategies are currently in place to encourage victims to speak out, and how to engender this behaviour.
- Discourage the use of retaliation as a coping strategy.
- Reinforce ‘blocking’ as a technique for dealing with cyberbullying.
- Provide this age group with strategies for protecting themselves on social networking sites.

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