

**Submission to the
Joint Select Committee
on Cyber-Safety**

from the Australian Institute of Family Studies

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The Australian Institute of Family Studies (the Institute) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Joint Select Committee on Cyber-Safety.

The Institute is an Australian Government statutory agency in the portfolio of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. Our role is to conduct research and communicate findings that affect family wellbeing to policy-makers, service providers and the broader community.

Although the cyber-safety of children and young people has not been the sole focus of any specific research projects conducted by the Institute, there is a range of studies and other sources of relevant information to which we wish to draw the Committee's attention.

The Institute's submission has focused on the following research relevant for the Inquiry:

- online environments used by Australian children;
- the abuse of children online, particularly cyberbullying;
- the impact of cyberbullying on children; and
- the role that families and schools can play in both preventing and responding to cyberbullying of children and young people.

1 Children's access to and use of computers and the Internet

Information on media use by two cohorts of children (aged 3–4 years and 7–8 years) is provided in research from *Growing Up in Australia: The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC)* (see <http://www.aifs.gov.au/growingup>).¹

Findings from LSAC contributed to a comprehensive report by the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA, 2009) on young people's use of electronic media and communications.² In sum, this research suggested that children and young people's access to and use of computers and the Internet increases with age:

- Computers were available in more than 71% of households with 3–4 year olds, increasing to more than 90% of homes with 7–8 year olds, and in almost all households with 8–17 year olds (98%).
- Internet access was available in more than 65% of households with 3–4 year olds, increasing to more than 72% of homes with 7–8 year olds, 87% of homes with 8–11 year olds, and more than 90% of households with 12–17 year olds.
- Eighty-four per cent of 7–8 year olds sometimes used the Internet at home to find information for school, send emails, chat online, surf the internet, play games, or to access/download music or movies.
- Among 8 to 17-year-olds, use of the Internet for homework and leisure activities increased with age, from 61% of 8–11 year olds, to 83% of 12–14 year olds and 88% of 15–17 year olds.
- Some 74% of parents of 7–8 year olds in the study were happy with their child's media use.

Understanding the interplay between children's access to and use of information and communication technologies—in particular, new platforms such as social media (e.g., Facebook, YouTube)—is key to understanding children's online behaviour and safety. There is a significant gap in Australian research examining the use of new platforms and young people's online behaviour.

2 Children and cyberbullying

Cyberbullying is a particularly invasive form of bullying and one from which it can be difficult to escape. The growth of information and communication technologies (ICTs) has provided a platform

¹ *Growing Up in Australia: The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC)* is conducted in partnership between the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA), the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) and the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS).

² Data on young people aged 8–17 years is from the Australian Communications and Media Authority research.

within which cyberbullying can operate, potentially, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, which allows bullying to continue into the home without respite. In addition, ICTs allow dissemination of bullying to much larger audiences and the potential for bullying to occur between people who may have never met face-to-face. The prospect of cyberbullies remaining anonymous in online settings may be one of the key factors why online harassment is expanding so rapidly.

An increased use of social media has encouraged a communication culture within which cyberbullying can operate. The portability of mobile phones and personal laptops also means that young people now have wide-ranging access to ICTs, both in and out of school.

Messages can be sent directly to a single target, or to a group of people to encourage them to become part of the bullying. Hurtful material can be widely and rapidly disseminated to a large audience. Public forums and websites can also be used to post rumours and images.

Cyberbullying behaviour and technologies

Common types of cyberbullying behaviour include:

- text-based name-calling, use of coarse language, profanity and personal attacks (many examples involve racism, sexism, as well as other types of prejudice);
- “flaming” (overt attacks on a person), harassment or denigration (put-downs);
- cyber-stalking (use of the Internet to “stalk” or threaten);
- using masquerade, trickery and exclusion;
- “outing” (publicising that someone is gay); and
- sending out humiliating photo or video messages, including visual pornography and sharing videos of physical attacks on individuals (sometimes called “happy slapping”).

Cyberbullying can be conducted through many different media, including:

- the Internet—via personal websites or weblogs (blogs), email messages, discussion groups, message boards, online personal polling sites, chat services, instant messaging (IM), or social networking websites such as MySpace, Facebook and Bebo;
- mobile phones—using short message service (SMS) or multimedia messaging service (MMS); and
- online games—used to abuse or threaten other players, or to lock victims out of games.

Prevalence of cyberbullying

- Research in Australia suggests that one in five school-aged children experience or participate in cyberbullying (Cross et al., 2009; Lodge & Frydenberg, 2007). Prevalence rates reported in the United States, Britain and Canada typically range between 17% and 43% of school-aged children (Hinduja & Patchin, 2007; Li, 2007; Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2007).
- Young people experiencing cyberbullying report higher levels of face-to-face bullying, including physical, social and verbal bullying (Beran & Li, 2007; Lodge & Frydenberg, 2007).
- The relationship between age and engaging in cyberbullying behaviours has also been consistently reported (Smith, et al., 2008).

Harmful effects

- Cyberbullying is often very serious, and young people who are victims can experience severe suffering that interferes with their social and emotional development.
- The detrimental effects of cyberbullying include depression, self-harm, guilt and shame. Victims of cyberbullying may also withdraw from peers and family.

Coping techniques

- Common coping techniques used by young people experiencing cyberbullying include denying the seriousness of the experience, avoiding the perpetrator, and acting aggressively towards others online.

- Most young people are reluctant to seek help or tell an adult about their cyberbullying victimisation. One of the reasons cited for their reluctance is a fear that their access to technology will be taken from them (e.g., that their parents might confiscate their mobile phone or take away their Internet access).
- The use of problem-solving strategies, characterised by organising a plan of action to deal with the issue while remaining optimistic, may lead to de-escalation, while passive coping puts young people at risk of future victimisation (Lodge & Frydenberg, 2010).

The role of families, schools and communities

- Cyberbullying poses unique challenges for families, schools and communities. Young people are increasingly communicating in ways that are often unknown by adults and away from their supervision.
- Most parents indicate that they have rules or agreements around the use of the Internet, however studies suggest that many young people do not share with their parents what they do and where they go on the Internet.
- Adults have an important part to play in supervising the activities of young people when using technologies. In terms of monitoring the use of technologies, Lodge (2008) suggested that parents should be encouraged to:
 - keep home computers in easily viewable places, such as a family room or kitchen;
 - talk regularly with their child about online activities they are involved in;
 - talk specifically about cyberbullying and encourage young people to tell if he or she is a victim;
 - outline expectations for responsible online behaviour and the consequences for inappropriate behaviour; and
 - help young people develop skills that would enable them to identify the need to leave online situations.
- To date, anti-cyberbullying evaluations have received little attention worldwide. The development of an evidence base about children’s online behaviours is needed in order to keep abreast of trends and to inform policy and intervention.
- Research that provides a general profile of young people’s cyber-behaviours may also assist schools, allowing them to focus online user skill workshops based on specific student characteristics (e.g., victim and perpetrator).
- Raising awareness of the problem is an important first step—members of the school community often significantly underestimate the prevalence of bullying and the harm that it causes.
- Many schools have general policies on bullying that emphasise either rules-and-sanctions approaches or problem-solving approaches. These general bullying policies need to be extended to incorporate cyberbullying.
- At the school level, there is also a need for acceptable use policies that expand on online use and behaviour to include both school and home use.
- School coping programs can introduce students to proactive coping measures and can assist them to modify their cyber-behaviour or overcome other issues they may face in their personal lives.

In summary, promoting responsive parenting and monitoring of children, changing student behaviours and attitudes, and increasing the willingness of teachers to intervene, are all part of a comprehensive approach.

3 Children online: Safety and good practice

Helping children and young people to be aware of the public nature of the Internet can support Internet safety. There are resources available to support parents and carers in this role.

- The National Child Protection Clearinghouse (NCPC)³ has produced a number of resources and publications relevant to online safety. In one Resource Sheet, Horsfall (2010) outlines strategies that parents can use to help children and young people to be safe online. Strategies include the active role of parents and carers in educating children and young people to engage in safe Internet behaviours, particularly in relation to the sharing of personal information and photos on social networking websites (e.g., MySpace).
- In *Child Abuse and the Internet*, Stanley (2001) reviewed the various means by which the Internet may be a source of (or lead to) the abuse or exploitation of children and young people. The focus of this paper was on the sexual exploitation of children and their exposure to sexually explicit or offensive material. The options currently in place to prevent abuse via the Internet are reviewed, including: the monitoring and criminal prosecution of offenders; community education; the restriction of children's access to offensive material on the Internet; and the regulation of the Internet industry. Future recommendations include a research agenda to oversee national-level legislative and policy development.

While posing new challenges and issues for the safety and wellbeing of children—in terms of bullying, online predators and images of children—ICTs also offer an opportunity for children and young people to connect in productive ways. There are many examples of the positive role of ICTs for children's safety and development in Australia:

- The National Association for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (NAPCAN) are using an innovative digital campaign (SOSO) to help young people reduce the growing incidence of cyberbullying.
- Other online resources target the mental health of young people. One independent resource developed and delivered by the Australian National University is MoodGYM, an interactive web program designed to prevent depression in young people. Another example is Mobiletype, a youth-friendly, mobile phone mental health assessment and management tool developed by the Centre for Adolescent Health, Murdoch Children's Research Institute and the Royal Children's Hospital.
- There are also many online forums for young people in relation to gay/lesbian/ transgender identification that can connect young people, provide support and reduce their sense of social isolation.

4 Conclusion

In this submission, we have drawn attention to some reviews that AIFS has conducted that relate to the abuse of children online, particularly cyberbullying. The research shows that cyberbullying is often very serious, and young people who are victims can experience severe suffering that interferes with their social and emotional development. At present, there remain significant gaps in research about anti-cyberbullying evaluations. The ongoing development of an evidence base about children's online behaviours is important to keep abreast of trends and to inform the management of cyberbullying.

This submission highlights some strategies schools and families can adopt to reduce the likelihood of cyberbullying occurring (particularly in relation to the monitoring of online activities). It also points to strategies to empower young people to deal with their world in healthy productive ways.

³ The Institute operates the NCPC <www.aifs.gov.au/nch>, which collects, produces and distributes information and resources, conducts research, and offers specialist advice on the latest developments in child abuse prevention, child protection and associated violence.

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