

PARLIAMENT OF AUSTRALIA

# Joint Select Committee on Cyber-Safety

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## Inquiry into Cyber-Safety

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(Alphabetized)

This submission reports on findings from two Canadian studies on cyber-bullying in elementary and secondary schools, the roles of parents and educators, and ways schools and parents can change their culture to prevent cyber-bullying and to encourage a positive, kinder online world. This submission concludes with suggestions for policy-makers to enter into a dialogue with key stakeholders (including youth), to quickly address the increasingly growing problem of cyber-bullying and its negative impact on the lives of youth.

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**Cyber-bullying includes language that can defame, threaten, harass, bully, exclude, discriminate, disclose personal information, or contain offensive, vulgar or derogatory comments. It includes tactics such as flaming (sending derogatory messages), masquerading, harassing and denigrating (put-downs) (racial, sexual, homophobic), outing, excluding and threatening.**

### **KEY POINTS:**

- Boys and girls equally use the Internet daily, are equally likely to be victims, but more girls than boys engage in cyber-bullying.
- Cyber-bullying behaviour typically escalates between ages 13 and 14 and then diminishes as youth grow older.
- Some of the reasons for engaging in cyber-bullying are: the perpetrator did not like the victim; the victim upset the perpetrator so cyber-bullying ensued; the victim was cyber-bullied, so decided to cyber-bully back; friends had engaged in cyber-bullying behaviour, so it was acceptable behaviour; and some youth cyber-bully for fun.
- Cyber-bullying is more likely to start at school and then continue at home. This means that some incident occurs at school that prompts a youth to cyber-bully on the home computer after school in the evening.
- There is a strong link between the home and school life vis-à-vis the Internet, and cyber-bullying that starts at home negatively impacts the school milieu, and vice versa.
- Some girls and boys are frightened by electronic messages they have received. Some messages threaten lives or safety or threaten reputations; other messages affect youths' ability to concentrate on schoolwork while some communications affect students' abilities to make friends at school. Some messages make victims want to bully back and at the extreme end, some communications induce suicidal thoughts in youth.
- Most cyber-bullying occurs through social networking sites (Facebook, MySpace), email and MSN, not through text messaging.
- Victims of cyber-bullying are targeted because of specific attributes such as special needs, academic abilities, un-popularity, physical appearances, physical and/or mental disabilities, unfashionable clothing and ethnicity.
- Reasons for not reporting cyber-bullying to principals, teachers or school counselors: it is the youth's problem and not the school's mandate; the school staff could not stop the bullying anyway; reporting the incident could get their friends in trouble; their parents would restrict

their access to the Internet; other students would label them as “informers” or “rats”. The most common reason is the fear of retribution from the cyber-bully if he/she found out.

- Students’ suggestions to school officials as solutions to cyber-bullying: set up anonymous phone lines where students can report cyber-bullying; set up a program to teach students about cyber-bullying and its effects, and work on creating positive self-esteem in students.
- It is important that educators and policymakers listen to youth. Students should be given a voice to understand their perspectives of what they believe are the causes, consequences and possible solutions to cyber-bullying.
- Most educators deem it extremely important to prevent cyber-bullying. They stress the need for teachers to learn new technology and propose the primary method for preventing cyber-bullying is education.
- There is a growing propensity for teachers and principals to be targets of cyber-bullies.
- Parents need to be more involved in their children’s online activities, particularly as many parents are not very knowledgeable about various forms of technology.
- Parents are key to preventing cyber-bullying and to addressing it when their children are victims or perpetrators. Many parents miscalculate the amount of time their child spends on the Internet, or are simply unaware of their child’s computer usage
- With regard to school policies on cyber-bullying, although it is important for adults to understand what youth are saying online, they also need to frame this understanding within youth culture and their styles of communication. Communication among youth is very different than that of the older generation.
- Cyber-bullying is a form of relational aggression, and an important component of any solution must lie in changing the trajectory of relational aggression to relational support and care for one another. The ethics of care must be embedded into school policies and practices in re-directing negative behaviour. Consistent with the relational aggression framework, girls are more likely than boys to participate in cyber-bullying behaviours. Thus, intervention strategies should consider gender differences and also aim at changing the trajectory of relational aggression to providing relational support and care.
- Electronic arenas are not all negative and can be a haven for positive discourse where youth seek a safe, nurturing environment for behaviours that promote social responsibility and encourage caring and respectful interactions.
- Suggestions from educators and parents for ways to encourage a kinder online world include educating teachers about social networking sites; engaging parents and teachers in collaborative solutions; designing effective curriculum; modeling appropriate values and behaviours in the school and home, and building trusting relationships with youth so that open and respectful dialogue can occur.

## **Introduction**

It is imperative to examine cyber-bullying and cyber-victimization from three different, but interrelated, perspectives: students, educators and parents. This submission will provide a synopsis on findings from two studies these researchers have conducted since 2005 on students, parents and teachers in British Columbia, Canada. We also explored the opposite spectrum of online behaviour - that of “cyber-kindness” (a term coined by us) – looking at whether positive, supportive or caring online exchanges are occurring among youth, and how educators, parents and policy-makers can work collaboratively to foster a kinder online world rather than simply acting to curtail cyber-bullying. Although this research takes place in Canada, we believe that Australian policy-makers will find these findings useful in considering cyber-safety in the Australian context.

Our first study involved students in Grades six to nine (ages 11-15) ( $n=365$ ) completing a fourteen-page questionnaire (192 variables), which included: closed-ended questions on cyber-bullying and open-ended questions asking respondents to provide examples of cyber-bullying; which students were most likely to be bullied online; solutions to the cyber-bullying problem; and other information on cyber-bullying they felt relevant. This study also included hour-long semi-structured interviews with fifteen teachers, vice-principals and principals.<sup>1</sup>

The second study canvassed 339 students from the same grades (6-9, ages 11-15). The survey consisted of closed-ended questions (single-response questions, categorical-response items, rating scales), as well as the open-ended questions about cyber-bullying in the students’ survey, inquired about the frequency and methods used in cyber-bullying and being cyber-bullied, the situation in which bullying took place, their reactions to being cyber-bullied, who they talked to after they were cyber-bullied, information regarding cyber-bullying teachers and principals, and

possible solutions to cyber-bullying. Further, students were also asked a number of closed-ended and open-ended questions related to “cyber-kindness”. In addition, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 17 educators from these schools, and 315 parents of students.<sup>ii</sup>

### **Where does cyber-bullying occur?**

In our first study, we discovered that the most common vehicle for cyber-bullying was chat rooms (53% of participants chose this option), while 37% said through emails or MSN, and only 7% said text messages. In our second study, social networking sites like Facebook and MySpace had gained popularity among youth, such that this vehicle was the choice venue for cyber-bullying (52% of respondents), followed by email and MSN at 32%, and text messaging at 2.5%. Chat rooms were only recorded at 12%. This trend may change, of course, as new technology emerges and youth engage in new online agencies. This underscores the importance of up-to-date research on this topic. The findings from our first study showed that 64% of youth claim that cyber-bullying is most likely to start at school and then continue at home, meaning that an incident at school precipitated the negative on-line exchange on the home computer. In this regard, findings from our second study are consistent with the first study, with 65% of respondents reporting that cyber-bullying starts at school. Schools typically place tighter controls and monitoring on computer use than do parents.

### **Cyber-bullies and Cyber-victims**

Online bullying can cause victims to experience a myriad of psychosocial effects ranging from depression, low self-esteem, anger, school absenteeism, poor grades, anxiety, and a tendency towards suicidal thoughts or suicide. The negative impact of the written word or a posted picture or video in cyberspace can be far-reaching and long-term, especially if the perpetrators are peers or someone they know. Victims often repeatedly re-visit the postings,

causing continual re-victimization. Given the negative psychosocial effects of online victimization, educators and parents must be vigilant in reviewing possible academic and personal anomalies that may occur after an incident. School attendance and performance may suddenly drop or physical/mental ailments may occur.

We also examined the cyber-bullying acquaintanceship issue through a theoretical relational aggression lens. That is, we sought to determine whether cyber-bullying could be considered a form of relational aggression among youth. Gender is an important variable to consider when examining cyber-bullying as relational aggression, given the observed preferences of girls to engage in covert gossip and rumor. Boys engage more in face-to-face bullying but girls employ covert tactics that affect social acceptance and friendships. In analyzing the relationship between cyber-bullying and relational aggression, we found that slightly more girls (29%) than boys (21%) admit to engaging in cyber-bullying practices. This is consistent with the notion that girls will engage more often than boys in an activity, which can be defined as relational aggression. Further, almost 33 percent of the girls in our study reported that they have witnessed someone cyber-bullying online or on a cellular phone, as opposed to only 22 percent of the boys.

Living in fear or contemplating suicide after cyber-bullying are serious problems that educators, parents and clinicians must be prepared to handle. In our first study, we found that 2.2 percent of boys and 1.6 percent of girls admit to being afraid as a result of cyber-bullying messages they had received, and another 4 percent confess to having suicidal thoughts ( $n=365$ ). In the same study, approximately 40 percent of the respondents reported being a victim of cyber-bullying. Given the seriousness of the symptoms, medical personnel and school counselors/psychologists need to play a role in educating parents on how to reduce their

children's risks for online victimization and to monitor their psychosocial health and online behaviour.

With regard to cyber-bullies, we found that cyber-bullying behaviour was far too prevalent in the population we surveyed to be only restricted to those with emotional, attachment, academic or psychosocial problems. We found that between one-quarter (first study) and one-third (second study) of students in Grades six to nine reported participating in cyber-bullying, and this behaviour crossed socio-economic status, culture, ethnicity, gender and academic success. We did not, however, specifically collect data relating to attachment, psychosocial problems, delinquency, or substance abuse issues, but it is unlikely that these characteristics would be evident even in a minority of the youth we researched, given the location of the school districts we researched.

We found that age is also an important factor with cyber-bullying. In both studies, our findings indicate that cyber-bullying behaviour typically escalates between ages 13 and 14 and then diminishes as youth grow older. In our first study, between one-quarter and one-third of students aged 12 to 14 reported bullying others online versus those students aged eleven (17%) and fifteen (19%). The findings from our second study are consistent – 9 percent (aged 12), 34 percent (aged 13) and 35 percent (aged 14) occasionally cyber-bullied, with 2 percent (aged 13) and 7 percent (aged 14) often engaging in such behaviour. Younger and older students outside of this age range engaged less often.

### **Reporting Practices**

If cyber-bullying occurs, to whom do the victims go to report the incident – parents, teachers, counselors, friends, police, or no one? Determining the answer to this question helps guide policymakers, educators and parents and sketches the possible isolation that many youth feel



when targeted online. If youth are not confiding in adults or other professionals, then schools and parents may be unaware of the extent of cyber-bullying, or downplay its impact, and victims may suffer in silence or confide only in peers who are not in a position to help with the long term effects of victimization. It also raises the important issue of bystander reporting, and how schools can work with peer groups in encouraging them to support their friends by informing adults about possible cyberspace infractions. Our research corroborated this, with 74% saying that would tell their friends, 57 percent would tell their parents, and only 47 percent would tell school officials. Almost no one would tell the police. We also found that students are more likely to report the cyber-bullying to school officials if they witnessed it than if they experienced it themselves. In our second study, approximately 27 percent of students would report cyber-bullying to school officials if they were victims as opposed to 40 percent who would report to a teacher, counselor or school administrator if they witnessed cyber-bullying taking place. For those respondents who would not tell school personnel, 30 percent fear retribution from the cyber-bully. This robust response contravenes much of the current literature, which posits that youth are reluctant to report incidents to adults primarily out of fear that parents will limit or remove online computer time.

### **Students' Opinions about Cyber-bullying**

Almost 47 percent (“strongly agree”, “agree”) that freedom of expression is a right and online speech is borderless; this is despite Canadian legislation and the Canadian *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* that clearly defines limitations to freedom of expression. Similar legislation exists in other democracies. Also of concern is that almost 50 percent (“strongly agree”, “agree”) that cyber-bullying is a normal part of the online world, and 32 percent (“strongly agree”, “agree”) that online bullying is less injurious than conventional face-to-face

bullying, as cyber-bullying is merely words in cyberspace. Also revealing is that almost three-quarters of the respondents indicate that cyber-bullying is more of a problem than prior years, suggesting that policy and practice initiatives undertaken by school districts and parents to counteract this growing problem are not working effectively to alleviate cyberspace transgressions. In this vein, more than 60 percent of respondents suggest that the solutions lie with young people who are far more familiar with technology than adults.

### **Educators – Their Views on Cyber-bullying and Cyber-kindness**

Interviewees stressed the need for teachers to learn new technology and proposed that the primary method for preventing cyber-bullying is education. It also was acknowledged that parents needed to be more involved in their children's online activities, particularly as many parents are not very knowledgeable about various forms of technology. In our second study, we found that almost 40 percent of youth have their computers in their bedrooms, thus preventing any real monitoring of behaviour. A number of educators in this study expressed concern that when parents were notified about their child's cyber-bullying adventures, several were defensive and showed surprise that their child was involved, even when it was clear that the negative behaviour occurred on the home computer.

Several educators on our second study expressed alarm at the growing propensity for teachers and principals to be the target of cyber-bullies. Indeed, in the student survey, 12 percent of the sample ( $n=334$ ) admitted to personally participating in posting a mean, nasty, rude or vulgar message about a school official online.

Educators from the schools in both our studies confirmed that there was no specific cyber-bullying policy in place, and any problems that surfaced fell under the auspices of the face-to-face bullying policy, which tend to be district wide and described in the school students'

handbook. Further, parents are often left out of the loop when it comes to developing policy involving social communication tools and Internet use. This restricts the ways in which they might help their children develop more positive ways to communicate online. In the end, parents and teachers, who are typically cyberspace foreigners, must strengthen their knowledge base when it comes to online forums and technology, as children and adolescents are fast becoming the experts in this area. In doing so, parents and teachers will be able to better understand the attitudes and philosophies that guide young people's Internet use.

Educators, though, had few examples of cyber-kindness to share, and although most agreed that they had not really thought about this aspect of technology, both parents and educators acknowledged the importance of adults modeling positive online behaviour and also providing positive examples through school curriculum.

### **Parents – knowledge, supervision and roles**

Many parents miscalculate the amount of time their child spends on the Internet, or are simply unaware of their child's computer usage. Firstly, parents seriously underestimate the amount of time their children spend on line each day. Secondly, approximately 40 percent of parents either do not or only minimally supervise their child's time on the computer. We found no significant differences in the level of supervision and the level of concern about cyber-bullying; the extent of supervision had no correlation with the level of concern parents had about cyber-bullying. Thirdly, parents' familiarity with technology fluctuates widely. Most parents (77%) are very familiar with older technology such as email and cellular phones but are ambiguous about weblogs (69%) and Facebook (65%). We found no significant relationship between the parents' degree of technological knowledge and their level of concern about cyber-bullying. Next, we noted a disparity between what parents say about the extent to which their

children were involved in cyber-bullying, and what the youth on the surveys reported.

Approximately 10 percent of parents report their child had been involved in some form of cyber-bullying, while in the student survey, 35 percent admit to cyber-bullying and 32 percent of students report being victimized. Seemingly parents are unsuspecting of their children's cyber-bullying experiences, or their children have kept them out of the knowledge loop. Lastly, when we asked parents about cyber-bullying prevention, five themes emerged: tighten controls and restrict behaviour; focus on prevention, education and positive communication; unfamiliar with cyber-bullying and possible solutions; hold the school responsible; and cyber-bullying is inevitable. Approximately 41 percent of respondents ( $n=108$ ) said that the best way to prevent cyber-bullying was to impose strict controls and punish if breached. However, 36 percent ( $n=95$ ) offered a more holistic, contextual approach to solving cyber-bullying problems. This latter group saw the problem as indicative of a wider societal and school issue that involved young people's self-esteem, peer relationships, communication styles and interpersonal dialogue.

### **Cyber-kindness – Caring and Respectful online relationships**

While most parents use the control method as a way to monitor their children's online behaviour, and seek to restrict or punish those who cross the line, many acknowledge that schools and families need to take a preventative approach and encourage and model positive online behaviour. Indeed, students in our first study suggest that the solutions to cyber-bullying lie with addressing students' self-esteem and peer relationships and that education and modeling appropriate behaviours in the family and in the school are the most effective strategies.

Approximately 71 percent of parents ( $n=224$ ) in our second study suggested ways to cultivate a more considerate, kind, respectful and caring online environment. The following themes emerged from the analysis of their suggestions:

### Modeling

The importance of modeling was by far the most prominent suggestion (55%,  $n=124$ ). Parents were aware that all adults, including educators, needed to model acceptable behaviour in their own lives so that young people will see this behaviour and emulate it. For example, if adults are not acting kindly and respectfully in their own personal online communications, how can youth be expected to do so? Practicing and modeling the right values is a powerful moral educator; in fact, typically what is taught in the informal interactions of life are often more effective than what is said or admonished

### Home Environment

Parents emphasized that learning begins at home, and that parents had to assume more responsibility to teach and model respect for others. Problems that are inadequately addressed at home may predispose youth to vulnerable online activities. Unfortunately, parents often lack the skills and knowledge about online technology, but this should not stop parents from discussing and modeling respectful behaviours, so youth can recognize and maintain such actions in their online world.

### Classroom Instruction and Resources

Parents presented the idea of schools developing homework assignments based on random acts of cyber-kindness, in collaboration with parents and peer groups at the school and at home. Other parents suggested that educators should provide examples of positive language that youth could practice online with a friend or a senior citizen such as a grandparent. Other parents suggested in-class activities such as role-playing, a cyber communication course and basic instructions on the ethics of Internet use and respect.

### Contests and Awards/Online Examples

Some parents in our study thought that if students regularly saw examples of positive messages online they might be more likely to do the same. For example, each week the school could install a new screensaver on the school computers showing examples of positive online exchanges submitted by students in the school. Others thought rewards or contests might foster positive initiatives – rewarding students with I-tune dollars or celebrate kindness through an award system at school.

### **Conclusion**

Because technology is changing so rapidly and young people are on the cutting edge of the new media, what will be the impact of this increasing gap in knowledge between the adult generation and youth? Should young people be given the responsibility for setting up their own ways of monitoring online behaviour and also play a role in developing school curriculum for addressing the deeper issues as to why they and their peers cyber-bully? If cyber-bullying is so widespread among the youth culture, then researchers need to investigate why this is so. Is it because, as our study suggests, that youth see negative online exchanges as just a regular part of the online world and something to be tolerated? If so, then how can this perception be addressed? Further investigation also needs to be undertaken with respect to gender differences in cyber-bullying, and since there are differences in how girls verses boys cyber-bully perhaps there needs to be differential approaches according to gender for curtailing cyber-bullying. Further, additional studies need to be undertaken to assess whether there are differences in perceptions and experiences depending on culture, or social-economic status or other

characteristics. Also, the new field of how to foster cyber-kindness is an area full of opportunity for further research.

It is obvious that there is a generational gap between educators and youth regarding familiarity with technology. This restricts the ways in which teachers might creatively address issues of cyber-bullying and work towards cultivating a kinder online world. Educators' priorities seem more geared to curtailing cyber-bullying than to building a positive school culture of cyber-kindness. It is apparent that few educators can provide examples of cyber-kindness and even fewer can suggest ways of fostering a more positive online world with their students. It is also apparent that schools do not provide sufficient opportunity for discussing cyber-bullying among stakeholders and for engaging youth in collaborative efforts to develop policies and practices for countering this growing problem. Nor are parents and other related professionals (medical staff, psychologists, counselors, police) invited to participate in the dialogue and to work with schools to develop effective measures and to deal with the aftermath of victimization.

It is also evident that much of the cyber-bullying activity is happening under the radar of school staff and parents. Educators who participated in our two studies were only able to provide a few examples of cyber-bullying incidents that happened in their schools, yet up to 32 percent of students in these schools had been cyber-bullied in the last year and up to 36 percent had participated in cyber-bullying activities towards others. Also, 12 percent admitted to posting mean, nasty, rude or vulgar messages about a school official online, another aspect of cyber-bullying that is worrisome. Similarly parents were generally unaware of the extent of cyber-bullying being experienced or perpetrated by their children. Only thirty-three parents (approximately 10%) were aware that their child had been involved in various types of cyber-bullying activities, either as a victim or perpetrator, indicating a glaring discrepancy between

what the parents know about and what is actually happening in their child's life. Parents, then, are generally uninformed of the extent of cyber-bullying being experienced by their children. It is apparent that concerted and attentive dialogue about cyber-bullying involving all the major players in the lives of youth should occur and that stakeholders should work collaboratively to form long-term solutions that encourage kindness and caring in the online world.

### **Impact on Policy and the Australian Context**

We acknowledge that the Australian situation may be somewhat different from what we have described through our studies in British Columbia. Our research, however, supports (and adds to) much of the research that has been undertaken elsewhere, in various jurisdictions of the world. We encourage Australian policy-makers to enter into a dialogue with key stakeholders (including youth), to quickly address the increasingly growing problem of cyber-bullying and its negative impact on the lives of youth. We suggest that policy should be developed that both attempts to curtail and prevent cyber-bullying, but that also seeks to foster (in the longer term) a kinder, more respectful and caring online world. If we can assist further in this initiative, we would be happy to do so.

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