

**Can the peer group help to counteract cyberbullying?
How research can inform practice**

University of Lancaster, 25th January 2012

Helen Cowie
h.cowie@surrey.ac.uk

COST action against cyberbullying

- Working group investigating coping strategies
- Systematic literature review
- Report in autumn 2012

PEER RELATIONSHIPS A MAJOR SOURCE OF CONCERN

- Thousands of children each year ring ChildLine about bullying
- UK Children's Commissioner cited bullying as a main issue
- Bullies and victims at higher risk of social and emotional difficulties

WHAT IS BULLYING?

- Intention to hurt;
- Repetition of aggressive acts;
- Imbalance of power
- Victim feels powerless and defenceless.

(Smith & Brain, 2000)

TRADITIONAL BULLYING

Physical bullying: e.g. hitting, punching, kicking;

Verbal bullying: e.g. calling nasty names;

Relational bullying: e.g. social exclusion.

(Olweus, 1993)

CYBERBULLYING

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)

TYPES OF CYBERBULLYING

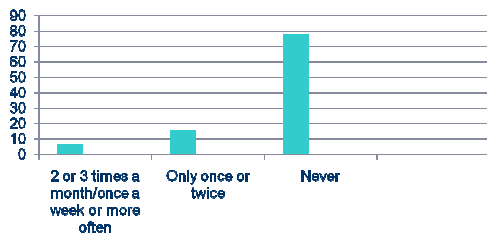
- **Harassment:** e.g. sending insulting or threatening messages;
- **Denigration:** spreading rumours on the internet;
- **Outing and trickery:** revealing personal information about a person which was shared in confidence;
- **Exclusion:** preventing a person from taking part in online social activities, such as games or chats.

(Willard, 2006)

TRADITIONAL AND CYBER BULLYING

- Many studies indicate a significant overlap (e.g. Kowalski & Limber, 2008; Perren et al., 2010; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004)
- Riebel et al. (2009) found that more than 80% of cyber bullies are also traditional bullies

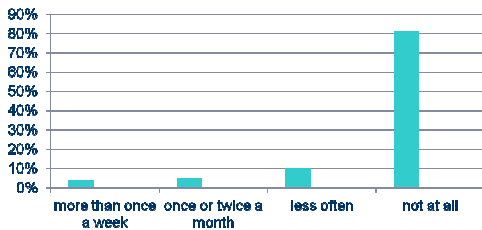
Incidence of cyberbullying (Smith et al, 2008)



Livingstone et al. (2010) EU Kids Online

- 23,420 European children aged 9-16 years;
- 5% report being cyberbullied once a week or more often; 4% once or twice a month; 10% less often; 81% never;
- Cyberbullying less prevalent than traditional bullying or victimisation
- Few gender differences.

Incidence of cyberbullying (EU Kids Online, Livingstone et al., 2010)



Sourander et al (2010)

- 2215 Finnish adolescents aged 13-16 years
- 4.8% cybervictims only, 7.4% cyberbullies only, 5.4% cyberbully-victims
- Cyberbullying less prevalent than traditional bullying or victimisation
- Traditional victims tended to be cybervictims; traditional bullies to be cyberbullies; traditional bully-victim status was associated with all cyberbully and cybervictim groups.

Causes of cyberbullying: retrospective study (351 undergraduates)

- Emerges from relationship difficulties, e.g. break-ups, envy, intolerance and ganging up;
- Victims experience powerfully negative emotional effects;
- Reactive behaviour from schools commonly absent or ineffective (Hoff & Mitchell, 2008)

Break-ups (Hoff & Mitchell, 2008)

- 'An ex-boyfriend used his website to post details about our relationship and break-up...Most was degrading and very embarrassing.'

Envy (Hoff & Mitchell, 2008)

- 'Older girls were threatening to hurt me and my friends for talking to their boyfriends...'
- 'In ninth grade, I was elected class president and some girls who were jealous and upset that their friends didn't win kept calling me names and told me I had bad teeth, and that I should just die.'

Intolerance (Hoff & Mitchell, 2008)

- 'People threatened me and said I was going to die because I'm a Muslim.'
- 'In high school, some juniors taped a mentally challenged child with their cell phones. While taping, they were making fun of him. Then they posted the video on the internet.'
- 'Boys always message me about how tall I am...'
- 'I have a friend who everyone said was gay. Kids made a website about him and he gets hate messages. In high school he was threatened all the time.'

Ganging-up (Hoff & Mitchell, 2008)

- 'It started as teasing when I was 11 from classmates. I got worse as I got older. They would send me hundreds of messages saying that everyone hated me.'
- 'I received messages degrading my soccer abilities, saying "I'm the worst player ever", "You suck", "You are worthless!"'

Two main categories of attack, whatever the cause

- **Outgroup abuse:** cruelty to anyone not 'in the group'; usually based on outgroup member's lack of friends, physical appearance, athletic ability, gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation or disability;
- **Object abuse:** directed at an individual independent of group membership; victim 'objectified' in abusive messages and treated as a thing worthy of contempt, e.g. as an object or tool for sex. In extreme cases, this can become **cyberstalking** where the perpetrator is 'watching' the target and using technology to communicate with that person.

Consequences of victimization

- Lack of acceptance in the peer group;
- Loneliness;
- Social withdrawal;
- Greater likelihood of depression;
- Low self-esteem.

Consequences of bullying behaviour

- Maladaptive social behaviour;
- Risk of injury;
- Risk of alcohol/drugs dependency;
- Increased risk of depression;
- Increased risk of suicidal ideation;
- Anti-social behaviour.

Perren et al (2010)

- Cyber victimization is an additional risk factor for depressive symptoms;
- Cyber victims reported greater incidence of depression than those who were traditional victims only;
- Certain features of cyberbullying exacerbate the effects, e.g. anonymity of perpetrator, easy access to target

Sourander et al (2010)

- These findings confirm other studies (Smith et al, 2008; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004) that indicate links between online and offline bullying.

Emotional distress in victims (Sourander et al., 2010)

- 1 in 4 cybervictims reported feeling unsafe;
- Experienced psychosomatic problems, such as headaches, recurring abdominal pain and sleeplessness;
- Demonstrated peer relationship difficulties.

Emotional distress in bullies

- Cyberbullies felt unsafe at school and unsupported by their teachers;
- Reported a high incidence of headaches;
- Displayed conduct disorders, hyperactivity, frequent smoking and drunkenness and low scores for prosocial behaviour.

Emotional distress in cyber bully-victims

- Those who were both cyberbullies and cybervictims were the most troubled group;
- They scored higher on depression, feeling unsafe, abusing alcohol and exhibiting conduct disorders;
- Findings in line with studies of traditional bully-victims who tend to be most strongly at risk of a wide range of psychiatric problems, crime and suicidal thoughts

Coping strategies (Riebel et al., 2009; Hoff & Mitchell, 2008)

- **Social coping:** seeking help from friends, family, teachers, peer supporters;
- **Aggressive coping:** retaliation, physical attacks; verbal threats;
- **Helpless coping:** hopelessness; passive reactions, such as avoidance; displays of emotion;
- **Cognitive coping:** responding assertively, using reason; analyzing the bullying episode and the bully's behaviour.

Ineffective coping strategies

- **Passive acceptance:** failing to inform anyone, through fear or embarrassment; the cyberbullying continues;
- **Avoid the situation:** does not stop the bullying or challenge the perpetrator;
- **Retaliate:** often inappropriate and potentially very dangerous;

Effective coping strategies

- **Social coping:** seeking help from friends, family, teachers, peer supporters;
- **Cognitive coping:** responding assertively, using reason; analyzing the bullying episode and the bully's behaviour.

Reactive and preventive coping (Parris et al., 2011)

- **Avoidance;**
- **Justification;**
- **Acceptance;**
- **Seeking social support;**
- **Talk in person;**
- **Increased security and awareness**

Effective strategies for escaped victims (Smith et al., 2004)

- **Tell someone:** important for schools to create a climate where it is safe to talk about issues;
- **Friendship:** having at least one friend is a fundamental resource;
- **Nonchalance:** making out you don't care is a good strategy – not passive acceptance; need an inner sense of injustice;
- **Befriend the bully:** reflect on situation and try to restore the relationship;
- **Active involvement in peer support:** immediate benefit is gaining a circle of friends

Coping strategies: asking for help

- Adverse effect on children rejected by peers when they seek help; perceived as 'needy' and demanding when they use the strategies that are successfully used by more popular children (Escobar, 2008)

Coping strategies: asking for help

- When victims show feelings – e.g. with crying or expressions of anger and distress – this can motivate the bullies to further attacks and may not evoke sympathy from bystanders. (Mahady Wilton, Craig & Pepler, 2000)
- Many young people do not report cyberbullying through perception that school will not take action (Li, 2006)

Supportive school climate

- Where school is perceived as supportive students more likely to seek out help for bullying;
- Also less discrepancy between boys and girls in help-seeking attitudes;
- Where school staff create supportive climate, students more likely to be engaged in prevention of bullying and threats of violence. (Eliot et al., 2010)

Group processes and responses to text-message bullying (Jones et al., 2011)

- Examined group membership and group norms as well as group-based emotions of **pride, shame** and **anger**;
- Group affiliation was critical in determining whether members supported or resisted others' aggressive tendencies;
- **Group affiliation** influenced members' emotions and actions; e.g. pride following a bullying episode related to affiliation with the bullying group;
- Essential to understand wider context of the peer group.

Effect of peer support: Andres (2007)

- Quantitative measures of empathy, problem-solving ability, pro-social behaviour, self-efficacy and emotional efficacy; interviews and focus groups;
- Peer support programme had positive effect on the social development of those who participated as peer helpers;
- Significant improvements in in pro-social behaviour and attitudes, self-efficacy and empathy.

COMMON SOLUTIONS

- Sanctions
- Recourse to law
- Monitoring websites and social networking sites
- E-safety advice

PREVENTION THROUGH EDUCATION FOR E-SAFETY

- Infrastructure of whole-site awareness, responsibilities, policies and procedures;
- Effective range of technological tools;
- E-safety programme;
- Review process to monitor effectiveness

RESTORATIVE APPROACHES

- Foster dialogue
- Work with relationships
- Develop peer support systems
- Encourage restorative approaches in the whole school
- Challenge group norms that condone aggressive behaviour
- Offer strategies for resisting bullying

ROLE OF PEER SUPPORT

- Having at least one friend is a fundamental resource (Boulton et al., 1999);
- School buddying systems can protect target children and also give opportunities for befrienders to find practical ways to express empathy;
- Peer support systems create a more positive ethos in the school as a whole (Cowie & Smith, 2010);
- Part of a wider emphasis on emotional literacy throughout the school

Educators and healthcare professionals need to...

- Understand relationships between victims and perpetrators;
- Offer appropriate therapeutic interventions;
- Train peer supporters in the skills of e-safety;
- Equip young people with strategies for dealing with risk when it occurs.

Future research questions?

- Should training in peer support be carried out on a wider population of young people in order to increase impact?
- Should there be greater consultation with young people, especially in addressing cyberbullying?
- Should there be more emphasis on training peer researchers to investigate the phenomenon of bullying?
- Should there be more research into the role of the bystander in bullying?
- How can we harness young people's networking skills to counteract cyberbullying?
