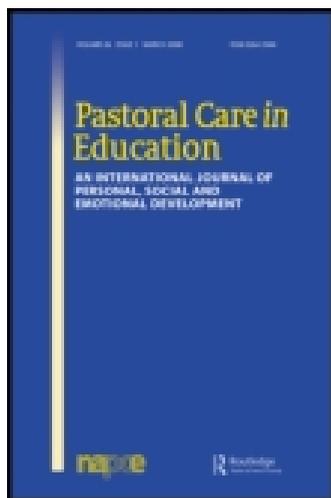


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# Cyberbullying: sanctions or sensitivity?

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This paper explores the phenomenon of cyberbullying. The argument here is that, although there is a case for sanctions, schools also have a critical role to play in preventing and reducing cyberbullying through a process of awareness-raising, the education of the emotions and active participation of children and young people themselves.

Keywords: *cyberbullying; school bullying; emotions; peer support*

## Introduction

In the past decade, there has been rapid development in young people's access to online gaming, instant messaging, broad-band connectivity and social networking sites. Ninety-nine percent of young people in the United Kingdom aged between 8 and 17 years can access the Internet either at home or at school, and over 90% of young people aged 5–16 have a computer at home and a mobile phone.

On the one hand, this offers huge opportunities for children and young people to widen their friendship groups and to gain access to knowledge and information worldwide. However, the virtual world can be a dangerous place. Campbell (2005) and Li (2007) found that many children and young people had very little understanding of cyberbullying and too often lacked awareness of basic e-safety practice. They also had little understanding that some online behaviour would be classed as illegal in the real world. Unfortunately, as Rivers and Noret (2009) point out, the virtual world represents an environment where there may be greater licence to engage in excessive behaviour because of anonymity and the ability to block one's identity. Many victims report that they do not know the identity of the person who is bullying them since cyberbullies can hide in chat rooms, behind screen names and avatars, so

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enabling anonymity. The following case studies illustrate some of the complex moral and legal issues involved.

### **Example 1**

Jason, a 15 year old, who uses a social networking site to interact with his peers was invited to be a 'friend' by a fellow student in his year that he did not know well. He accepted the invitation and his privacy settings allowed the new 'friend' access to postings of other friends. The new 'friend' began to post personal comments about the sexual orientation of some of the people on the Jason's friends list. These comments were visible to all the people on his friends list. There was considerable distress amongst those targeted as the comments were very unpleasant. The situation spread out into the friendship group in the real world as Jason was accused of 'letting it happen'. Luckily he confided in his parents who worked with him to remove the 'friend' from his list and to deny access to Jason's account. They also facilitated a meeting amongst the real-world friends to work out how the situation had developed and what could be done to prevent it happening in the future.

### **Example 2**

Gemma did not tell anybody that she was being bullied online. But Dee, her older sister, happened to be in her room one time when an attack actually happened. Dee alerted their parents who in turn informed the school which has a well-established anti-bullying policy and a system of mediation in place. The girls who posted the attacks were identified. The Head Teacher then initiated mediation between the cyberbullies and Gemma in the presence of their respective families. To date, no further incidents have come to light. This does not, of course, mean that there have been no further attacks, but the school is actively monitoring the social networking sites involved.

### **Example 3**

Mrs Brown, a teacher, was publically accused online of having favourites among the girls in her classes. Anonymous messages also spread the rumour that Mrs Brown was gay and made suggestive comments about her lifestyle and relationships. The gossip following from these postings was quickly disseminated throughout the whole school, making Mrs Brown's life unbearable. An investigation revealed the identities of the students who had started the false rumours. These students were excluded from school for a week. During that period, the Head Teacher called an Assembly. There he pointed out that Mrs Brown had actually been libelled and had the right to sue. He also pointed out that the students may have thought that they were having a private one-to-one conversation, but that the social networking format precludes privacy. A letter outlining the two incidents and the actions taken was sent to parents of all the students.

## **Research findings**

In the research literature, cyberbullying is defined as a form of covert psychological bullying using electronic devices such as e-mail, mobile phones, text messages, video clips, instant messaging, photographs and personal websites in order to engage in repeated hostile behaviour intended to harm another person or persons (Smith *et al.*, 2008). It includes cyber-stalking, harassment, denigration and exclusion, making unpleasant comments about another, posting threats and embarrassing material about a person, and circulating menacing chain messages (Katz, 2002; Department

for Children, Schools and Families, 2007; Wolak et al., 2007; Smith et al., 2008; Rivers & Noret, 2009).

It is difficult to be precise in documenting actual rates of cyberbullying, depending on the ways in which the questions are asked and the actual definition of the behaviours and media used. As a result, rates of cyberbullying have been reported internationally as ranging from 4% (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004) to 36% (Hinduja & Patchin, 2008). Without being more precise about the nature and extent of bullying online, it is impossible to get a clear picture of the issue in order to plan effective interventions.

More recent studies attempt to make distinctions by taking account of the frequency with which cyberbullying occurs and the forms that it takes. Smith *et al.* (2008) report results from a survey of 533 secondary school students. In this study there was a definition of bullying, followed by a statement about cyberbullying as including at least one of seven media: text messaging, pictures/ photographs or video clips, phone calls, email, chat rooms, instant messaging and websites. Two general questions asked whether the student had experienced bullying of any kind, and then specifically cyberbullying, in the past couple of months on a five-point scale: never; only once or twice; two or three times a month; about once a week; several times a week.

The incidence figures for being cyberbullied were as follows: 6.6% often (two or three times a month, once a week or several times a week); 15.6% only once or twice; 77.8% (never). In this survey, students were asked about who had done the cyberbullying. Some were reported to be in the same class (20.7%) or a different class in the same year group (28.0%) and a few from higher years (6.1%) or a different year (2.4%). Some were from different schools (22.0%) and some did not know the identity of the bully (20.7%). Girls were more likely to be the victims of cyberbullying than boys.

Rivers and Noret (2009) included analysis of longitudinal data in their five-year study of a cohort of around 2500 pupils in 13 UK schools. The study charted reports of nasty and threatening text and email messages received by students in Years Seven and eight (11–13 years of age). Results indicated that the number of students receiving one or more offensive messages per term increased significantly, especially amongst girls, from 13% in 2002 to 15.5% in 2006. Across all years, girls were significantly more likely to receive nasty or threatening messages at least once a term than boys ( $p < 0.05$ ) with rates for girls increasing from 18.8% to 20.8% while rates for boys decreased from 13.8% to 10.3% over the five-year period. However, reports of *frequent* (once a week or more) receipt of such messages remained stable over the same time period at 1.00–1.08% with no significant differences between boys and girls. Girls were twice as likely as boys to be cyberbullied (20.8% as opposed to 10.3%) once a term. But there were no gender differences for *frequent* cyberbullying and very little change across time.

Ybarra and Mitchell (2004) and Ybarra *et al.* (2007) note disturbing links between offline externalising behaviour, such as drug and alcohol abuse, and involvement in cyberbullying. Especially of concern are those who spend excessive amounts of time online at the expense of their real-world relationships, with serious health consequences in particular for aggressor-victims. In other words, cyberbullying may be a symptom of a wider set of interpersonal difficulties. Smith *et al.* (2008) found

that many cybervictims were traditional victims, and many cyberbullies were also traditional bullies. Additionally, a proportion of cyberbullies were bully-victims in real life. Of the 42 traditional victims in their survey who were also cyberbullies, 30 were also traditional bully-victims. Similarly, Rivers and Noret (2009) found that boys who were being bullied offline were more likely to report being cyberbullied, and unpopular girls were more likely to report being cyberbullied. In the case of boys, Rivers and Noret suggest that male bullies extend existing threats of direct physical attack to online forms of bullying. In the case of girls, the sending of nasty or threatening online messages is an extension of existing manipulation of peer relationships in order to ensure that unpopular girls remain unpopular and are further excluded from the peer group.

### **Cyberbullying and the law**

Cyberbullying is not a specific criminal offence, although there are laws that apply to related adult behaviour, such as harassment. In the United Kingdom, head teachers are advised to contact the police if they feel that the law has been broken. The UK Education and Inspections Act 2006 includes legal powers that head teachers have to regulate the conduct of pupils when they are off-site, including the right to confiscate mobile phones and other items. As the examples indicate, the problem of cyberbullying can usually be resolved without recourse to the law—although in Mrs Brown's case the head teacher invoked her right in theory to sue. In practice, this would have been difficult since the perpetrators were all minors. In Japan, some education authorities employ private agencies to monitor student Internet activity and to scrutinise sites for cyberbullying. For example, in one Japanese school where there had been a spate of anonymous derogatory chain emails, all students were informed that the problem was being investigated externally by the police and internally by the school. By invoking the law in this way the school identified the individual who had started the first offensive email in the chain and then applied sanctions (Cowie, 2009).

But this approach in itself has ethical implications concerning intrusion into young people's social networks, and raises many questions about the boundaries between private and public spaces. Of relevance here is the controversial Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace written by John Perry Barlow (1996). In this paper, Perry stated that no government had the right to apply laws in cyberspace. He proposed that the Internet is outside any country's borders and so has the right to develop its own laws and social contracts.

The emergence of cyberbullying in the social networks of children and young people only adds to the complexity of the legal issues involved, as a recent report from the USA suggests.

#### **Example 4**

A 14 year old from New Jersey was arrested and charged with possession and distribution of child pornography after posting dozens of sexually explicit photographs of herself on MySpace. 'The child pornography law was about protecting children from paedophiles'

said Amy Adler, a law professor at New York University. ‘While “sexting” (the sending of sexually explicit pictures or texts by cellphone or computer) is bad judgement, it’s simply not what the Supreme Court had in mind when it drafted the child pornography laws. It just doesn’t make sense that in a lot of the sexting situations, the pornographer and the victim are one and the same person.’ (Mabrey & Perozzi, 2010)

The Byron Review in the UK recommended that a priority focus of the Child Internet Safety Strategy (currently being developed and implemented by the UK Government) should be the development of a more effective regulation framework that will build on best practice, promote transparency and provide families with the tools and reassurance they need for their children (Byron, 2008). To this end, there should be an independently monitored voluntary code of practice on the moderation of user-generated content, and sites should sign up to public commitments on ‘take down’ times. Byron also called for moves to clarify the law on certain types of offensive online material, advocated that the Internet industry actively promote responsible advertising to children online, called for a New Kitemark for parental control software, and asked that search providers should give users the option to lock safe search settings and provide clear links to child safety information from search pages, review good practice on age verification and take account of changing risks to children from mobile Internet access.

Following the recommendations of the Byron Review (Byron, 2008), the UK Government set up a number of committees and councils to guide national policies. Even before the Byron Review, there was a considerable amount of activity in the United Kingdom to address the issue of cyberbullying. Government departments, including the Department for Children, Schools and Families, the Home Office and the Department of Health, worked in partnership with non-governmental organisations, local authorities, industry and the voluntary sector, including such charities as the National Children’s Bureau, the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children and ChildLine.

While sanctions have their place, it is also essential to provide students with training on how to stay safe in the virtual world. The mass media play an important role in raising awareness about cyberbullying. For example, the Media Literacy Task Force (2009) produced a useful Charter for Media Literacy in which it proposed that the United Kingdom must embrace the opportunities of the digital world that we live in, with a much greater emphasis on media literacy and creative empowerment for all generations. The Charter argues that the most effective way of ensuring e-safety is to equip adults and children with the critical tools that they need to understand the varied facets of the ever-changing digital world. The emphasis is on working positively to develop media literacy by placing more emphasis on *engagement* and *empowerment*. The central point of this argument is that the digital world is an extension of the world that we already know.

### **The critical role of schools**

Of course, educators are only too aware of their statutory responsibility to ensure that they have in place an anti-bullying policy and behaviour management practices that

satisfy current UK legislation on children's rights, but they also have here the opportunity to address the issue through existing educational approaches, such as the Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning curriculum.

Schools play a critical role in working with individuals directly involved in cyberbullying; for example, by taking steps to change the perpetrator's attitudes and behaviour (Sharif, 2005, 2008). The adoption of a whole-school approach can create opportunities for bystanders to be proactive in challenging cyberbullying when they observe it (Cowie & Jennifer, 2007, 2008; BeatBullying, 2009; Cowie, 2009). Peer support can play a part in this process by monitoring social networking sites to support individuals who are being targeted and to be vigilant in reporting abusive behaviour. Peer supporters can also contribute to the creation of a climate in which bystanders refuse to collude with negative behaviour, whether offline or online. Schools are in an ideal position to help children and young people understand the dangers in cyberspace and to provide strategies for addressing bullying when they encounter it. If bullying in general is to be challenged, all members of a school community must learn about it. The school can play a very significant part in addressing cyberbullying in particular by focusing on relationships between pupils, between pupils and staff, between staff and other colleagues. It is important for the school to encourage open, genuine communication at all times, as part of a wider strategy to challenge racism, homophobia and other forms of prejudice. It is essential to develop a climate that offers emotional and social support to all members of the school community.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, while it is tempting to think that tighter regulation and stricter sanctions will have an impact on rates of cyberbullying, it may be more productive to work holistically with the relationships in the peer group and at school in order to develop heightened awareness of the consequences of cyberbullying as well as empathy towards those who are badly affected. As Rivers and Noret (2009) point out, virtual interactions should not be considered fantasy since they are real to the young people engaged with them. We need to understand more about the communities in which these interactions take place.

As we have seen, researchers indicate the importance of distinguishing between minor and serious incidents of cyberbullying. Probably most of the minor instances can be tackled routinely before they escalate into something more serious. But the research also shows that cyberbullying is often an extension of real-world bullying with some young people, such as bully-victims, being especially at risk. When it becomes serious and when its frequency is high, it may be appropriate to involve mental health specialists to contribute to training and awareness-raising for the whole school as well as specific therapeutic interventions for victims and perpetrators.

Noret and Rivers (2009) argue the case for some degree of censorship, as was recommended by the Byron Review, but also acknowledge the need for educators to provide children and young people with the skill to manage risk effectively, to

know how to protect themselves and to support vulnerable peers who are being mistreated online. In other words, while sanctions will always have a place, these will not be effective without the counteracting force of working with the emotions that are at the heart of all people's social interactions. Being connected online to a community is an essential part of young people's social reality. Its importance cannot be underestimated as a significant aspect of all young people's daily activity. As Almeida *et al.* (in press) point out, the virtual world combines intimacy and distance in a unique way that raises new questions about young people's social and personal development.

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