

Briefing Report

‘The Prevalence and Impact of Bullying linked to Social Media on the Mental Health and Suicidal Behaviour Among Young People’

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**Commissioned by Dept. of Education and Skills
and HSE National Office for Suicide Prevention**



The Department of Education and Skills (DES) and the HSE National Office for Suicide Prevention commissioned a literature review to be completed in fulfilment of Action 11 of the *Action Plan on Bullying* (Dept. of Education and Skills, 2013). The following briefing report is a summary of the literature review.

Both briefing report and literature review are available to download from the DES website at www.education.ie and HSE National Office for Suicide Prevention website at www.nosp.ie.

The *Action Plan on Bullying* is available to download from the DES website at www.education.ie.

Action 11:

11. Research on prevalence and impact of bullying linked to social media on the mental health and suicidal behaviour among young people

The working group welcomes the agreement of the National Office for Suicide Prevention to facilitate a literature review to examine the prevalence and impact of bullying linked to social media on the mental health and suicidal behaviour among young people.

Briefing Report: The prevalence and impact of bullying linked to social media on the mental health and suicidal behaviour among young people.

Cyberbullying has attracted the attention of young people, their parents, school staff, policy makers and the media over the last number of years. Within the research literature, however, there is inconsistency in both the levels of cyberbullying reported and details on those involved. Cyberbullying is a complex social phenomenon that likely requires a number of different approaches to be tackled effectively. The primary objectives of the current literature review were to determine the risk factors and impacts of cyberbullying in school aged children and to investigate the most effective means of intervening in cases of cyberbullying and ways to prevent it.

What is Cyberbullying?

In its most general terms cyberbullying can be defined as repetitive, intentional targeting of another through social media or other electronic technologies, although definitions vary across research studies and languages. Cyberbullying is generally found to be less prevalent than traditional forms of bullying, but most young people involved in cyberbullying also tend to have experience of traditional bullying. In Ireland, approximately 23% of children report experiencing traditional bullying whereas just 4% of this group report experiencing cyberbullying, although this rises to 9 or 10% for mid adolescents (Livingstone & Haddon, 2009).

What are the Risk Factors for Young People?

Those most at risk of being cyberbullied appear to be the same young people who are involved in traditional bullying, either as victims or as bullies. Risk factors identified in the literature for being cyber victimised include;

- Having poor peer relationships
- Having both emotional and behavioural difficulties
- Spending more time online unsupervised
- Bullying others face to face

Risk factors found to be associated with bullying others via social media include;

- Those with low levels of empathy or high levels of moral disengagement
- Those who are bullied face to face
- Holding pro aggressive or pro bullying attitudes
- Those who seek popularity among peers through aggression

A small but significant number of young people may be involved in cyberbullying as both victims and bullies. The largest group of young people involved in cyberbullying are classed as 'bystanders' or witnesses to bullying. The majority of bystanders report that they do not intervene when they witness cyberbullying even though many state that they are upset by it.

There is no consistent research evidence to suggest that there are gender differences among the groups involved in cyberbullying. Some evidence shows that older teenagers are more at risk of involvement than younger children but this finding is likely to be due to differences in online activities as much as a difference in risk factors.

What are the Impacts of Cyberbullying?

Most research that investigates the potential impacts of cyberbullying tends to group young people involved by the different roles that they play, as victims, bullies, bully-victims or bystanders.

Most young people who are cyber victimised are also often subject to traditional types of bullying it is difficult to determine whether negative impacts result from cyber or traditional victimisation. Co-occurring life events, including family dynamics, may also play a role in either exacerbating or buffering the potential impacts of involvement in cyberbullying. When we talk of the impacts of cyberbullying, therefore, it is important to note that they may not necessarily be caused by involvement in cyberbullying but rather have been found to be features of those involved. Most research suggests that the bullying experience is likely to exacerbate already existing mental health difficulties such as anxiety or depression which in turn may increase the risk of self harm or suicidal ideation.

- The major impacts for cyber bullies appears to be the longer term links to substance misuse, criminal activity and poor physical health outcomes.
- For victims there is an association between being cyberbullied and experiencing higher levels of depression and suicidal ideation and social isolation. However, research has not found any direct causal link between cyber victimisation and

suicidal ideation. Experiencing cyberbullying is most likely to be one of a complex range of factors that contribute to poor mental health and self harm or suicidal ideation in young people.

- Bully-victims are most at risk of experiencing poor peer relationships which impacts generally on their social lives and development and may be more likely to exacerbate their victimisation by responding in aggressive ways.
- In terms of gender differences it appears that girls are at greater risk of negative impacts of being cyberbullied but may be more likely to seek support than boys which can help to buffer these impacts.
- There is insufficient research with younger children and older adolescents to determine whether there are age differences in intensity of impacts or not.

Factors that Influence Cyberbullying

Positive peer and family relationships have been shown to help buffer the more negative impacts of involvement in cyberbullying. In contrast young people who experience violence, harsh discipline or neglect are at an elevated risk of being involved as both bullies and victims.

A positive school climate where students feel they can trust teachers and other school authorities has been linked to lower incidence of cyberbullying and a higher rate of students reporting cases whether they are victims or bystanders of cyberbullying.

Media reporting on cyberbullying is seen by some researchers as having a detrimental effect on attitudes and beliefs. More responsible reporting, where the complexity of the cyberbullying experience is taken account of can help to inform the public about the issues surrounding it and to develop more effective means to prevent it.

How can Cyberbullying be prevented?

Research has suggested a number of strategies that can be used to prevent cyberbullying or to intervene to stop it when it occurs that may be aimed at the individual, the family, the school or the wider community.

- At an individual level, developing effective coping strategies can help to reduce the negative impacts of cyberbullying. Technological strategies, such as keeping passwords private and greater use of reporting facilities on social media sites are also often recommended, there is little evidence to show that these are ultimately effective however.

- Strategies aimed at parents are focused around parents educating themselves on the warning signs that their children may be involved in cyberbullying and becoming more technologically knowledgeable. In addition it is recommended that parents talk openly with children about cyberbullying and what to do in the event that they encounter it.
- For schools, the most consistent strategy is to create a positive, caring atmosphere within the school where students feel that they can trust teachers and staff. Having clear procedures that both staff and students are aware of has been found to be related to greater reporting of cyberbullying and a decrease in incidence over time.
- The school curriculum can also be used to foster a sense of positive and pro social behaviour among students and to help to instil an anti-bullying ethos across the school.
- Cross collaboration between students, parents, schools and the wider community appears to have the most potential to make an impact on cyberbullying although it is not always possible to create this type of cooperation due to time and cost constraints.

Conclusions

Much of the research to date has concentrated on establishing a clear definition of cyberbullying and rates of prevalence in different countries. There has been less focus on understanding why young people become engaged in cyberbullying in the first place or what the longer term impacts may be. Research on interventions for cyberbullying have tended to be based on school based strategies and there is a need for more research on the effects of family interventions, the role of the media and peer support strategies. As cyberbullying appears to be closely tied to traditional bullying it is likely that already established anti-bullying interventions will also impact on cyberbullying and that entirely new programmes are not necessary. Cyberbullying is likely to add to the distress felt by young people who are experiencing mental health difficulties and who may need help and support from family, school and community stakeholders. However, it should be remembered that not all young people in need of support are involved in cyberbullying and not all of those involved in cyberbullying will show signs of distress.