

Keeping Myself eSafe

Information for Teachers

Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying

While the rapid growth of digital technologies has enriched the lives of young people, it has also given rise to a new and worrying phenomenon – cyberbullying.

Cyberbullying occurs when someone uses the internet or a mobile phone to deliberately upset, threaten or abuse another person. There are two significant characteristics of this type of bullying:

- the effects are usually psychological, rather than physical; and
- bullying can affect victims at home as well as at school.

Cyberbullying

Mobile phones

Mobile phones play a significant role in the day-to-day lives of young people. Research shows that in the UK more than 75% of children own a mobile phone. This offers bullies direct access to victims even at home and, by withholding caller-identity, they are able to remain anonymous. Many pay-as-you-go mobile phones do not require proof of identity, and calls made from these types of mobile phone are virtually untraceable.

Camera and video

The latest mobile phones have camera and video technology, with which bullies record images of their victim. These photographs or videos are then used to cause upset for the victim because

- The victim has been unaware that photos or videos were taken
- The images present the victim in an unflattering or degrading way
- They are shared with a wider audience by mobile, or on social networking sites.

This is an invasion of privacy and the practice can be extremely distressing for the person involved. Once released into a wider forum, it is impossible to track down and permanently delete the images or files, so adding to the misery and ridicule of the victim.

In addition, photographs could include clues as to the person's location, such as the school name in the background, which if distributed inappropriately, could lead to the risk of contact by strangers.

Happy slapping

The filming of physical attacks is a worrying trend in modern bullying. 'Happy Slapping' (which began as a youth craze in 2004) occurs where someone slaps or assaults an unsuspecting victim while an accomplice records the assault, usually on a mobile phone or digital camera. The subsequent video is then distributed to a wider audience by phone or on the internet.

Initially, the aim of happy slapping was to make the assault seem comical, due to the surprised reaction of the victim and so many young people viewed it as harmless fun. As the craze spread however, the attacks became more vicious and violent, sometimes leading to serious physical harm and sexual assault.

The video capability of today's mobile phones means that such attacks need not be planned beforehand, and video footage is easily circulated afterwards.

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Social networking

For young people in particular, online social networking websites such as Bebo, MySpace and Facebook have become very important features of their day-to-day lives.

Bebo, for example, has more than 8 million users in the UK, and almost 70% of all 13-17 year-olds in Britain have profiles on networking websites.

Young people use online networking to chat, post messages, create personal profiles and share photographs with friends. Unlike the telephone however, online networking makes it possible for a young person to be connected to many friends at the same time which provides different types of opportunities for bullying behaviour. An online bully can for example:

- post unkind or abusive comments directly onto the victim's profile
- send hurtful and threatening messages
- spread false and damaging rumours
- publish compromising photographs or videos
- set up a fake profile pretending to be that person.

Exclusion is also a strong form of bullying. Being left out of a group of friends online can be as distressing for a young person as being left out of a group of friends at school.

Statistics

- It is believed that one in five young people has been bullied by mobile phone or via the internet.
- One in every ten young people have been victims of bullies who use images taken with mobile phone cameras to intimidate or embarrass them.
- 'Happy slapping' attacks, where assaults on children and adults are recorded on mobile phones and sent via video messaging, have increased.
- Three out of every 4 victims of cyberbullying know the identity of their attacker.
- Nearly half of all cyberbullying incidents take place within school.

Effects of cyberbullying

The distress caused by threatening and abusive messages can lead to victims suffering emotional problems such as fear, anxiety and stress. It can make people withdraw from social situations so that they avoid contact with others. Bullying can have an impact on the victim's performance at school and in exams. In some cases, bullying leads to mental health problems such as depression and self-harming. Sustained bullying has also caused victims to commit suicide.

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The law

Making anonymous or abusive phone calls or texts is a criminal offence under section 43 of the Telecommunications Act 1984, whilst the Protection from Harassment Act 1997 covers many forms of harassment that causes distress to the victim. Conviction can lead to a prison sentence of up to 6 months, plus a fine.

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Safety Strategies

Although cyberbullying can be hugely upsetting, there are strategies that young people can use to protect themselves and take action against the bullies.

- 1) Talk to a parent or another trusted adult - you do not need to deal with bullying by yourself. If the harassment gets worse it can be reported to the police. Remember, bullying is against the law.
- 2) Don't reply to messages from cyberbullies - even though you may want to. This is exactly what bullies are hoping you will do. They want to know that you are worried and upset. Usually the bully grows bored of sending one-way texts and stops.
- 3) Don't delete messages sent by cyberbullies. Keep them as evidence. Print off the messages if you can, or make a careful note of every one - the date, time, the caller-ID if available.
- 4) Never ignore threats. Take careful note of what is being done to you, who is doing it and how, and make a record of this in a diary. Apart from a trusted adult, don't tell anyone else that you are keeping a diary.
- 5) Consider changing your mobile phone number and sharing it with only family and trusted friends. Keep a record of everyone you've given the number to.
- 6) Contact your internet service provider or mobile phone provider and tell them that you are being threatened or abused. They will have procedures to deal with unwanted messages, and can advise you on the next step.
- 7) Most e-mail programs allow you to use e-mail filters that will block or automatically delete messages from undesirable senders. Bebo and Facebook offer similar blocking features.
- 8) Make sure that your privacy settings on social networking websites allow only trusted friends to viewing your profile. Select the 'No Picture Forwarding' option on the settings page – this will stop people forwarding your pictures to anyone without your consent.
- 9) Never give out personal information or passwords. This includes your name, the names of friends or family, your address, phone number or school name. Personal information also includes pictures of yourself and your e-mail or IM address.
- 10) Don't suffer in silence - there are many ways you can get help. Everyone has a right to feel safe from any kind of bullying and physical assault. If you feel you can't talk to someone you know, call Childline in confidence on 0800 1111.

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Helping to stop cyberbullying

There are also things you can do to help stop other people being bullied.

- Never forward pictures, messages or insults about a person. You may think it is a joke, but you could be upsetting the person involved and committing a crime. To support this kind of behaviour means you are contributing to cyberbullying.
- Standing back and letting cyberbullying happen can be just as bad. If you are worried that someone is being threatened or hurt by others, offer them support or tell an adult you trust so they can help make it stop.