RESEARCH BRIEF

AN INVESTIGATION INTO CYBERBULLYING, ITS FORMS, AWARENESS AND IMPACT, AND THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN AGE AND GENDER IN CYBERBULLYING

A Report to the Anti-Bullying Alliance by
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Introduction

'Bullying' is often described as being an aggressive, intentional act or behaviour that is carried out by a group or an individual repeatedly and over time against a victim who cannot easily defend him or herself (Whitney & Smith, 1993; Olweus, 1999). Bullying is a form of abuse that is based on an imbalance of power; it can be defined as a systematic imbalance of power (Smith & Sharp, 1994; Rigby 2002).

Using these definitions for bullying, we can extend them to define cyberbullying. Cyberbullying therefore can be defined as an aggressive, intentional act carried out by a group or individual, using electronic forms of contact, repeatedly and over time against a victim who can not easily defend him of herself. Cyberbullying is a form of bullying which has in recent years become more apparent, as the use of electronic devices such as computers and mobile phones by young people has increased. Cyberbullying can take many forms, and for the purpose of this study we subdivided the concept of cyberbullying into 7 sub-categories:

- Text message bullying
- Picture/ Video Clip bullying (via mobile phone cameras)
- Phone call bullying (via mobile phones)
- Email bullying
- Chat-room bullying
- Bullying through instant messaging
- Bullying via websites.

Executive Summary

- Cyberbullying describes forms of bullying using electronic devices such as mobile phones and email.
- Cyberbullying is becoming more prevalent, with the increased use of technology.
- We investigated the nature and extent of cyberbullying among school pupils in the London area.

Method

- A questionnaire was returned by 92 students aged between 11-16 years, from 14 different London schools, in June/July 2005. It comprised multiple-choice questions, with some qualitative sections, and took 20-25 minutes to complete.
- The questionnaire looked at the incidence of cyberbullying in school, and outside of school, distinguishing between seven types of cyberbullying; Text message bullying; Picture/Video Clip bullying (via mobile phone cameras); Phone call bullying; Email bullying; Chat-room bullying; Bullying through instant messaging; and Bullying via websites.
- It assessed awareness of the different forms of cyberbullying.
- It assessed the perceived impact of the different forms of cyberbullying in relation to more usual or traditional forms of bullying.
- Age and gender differences were examined.

Results

Incidence of cyberbullying

- 20 students, or 22%, had been victims of cyberbullying at least once, and 5, or 6.6%, had experienced being cyberbullied more frequently, over the last couple of months.
- Phone call, text messages and email were the most common forms of cyberbullying both inside and outside of school, while chat room bullying was the least common.
- Prevalence rates of cyberbullying were greater outside of school than inside.

Age and gender

- There were no significant differences related simply to age.

- Girls were significantly more likely to be cyberbullied, especially by text messages and phone calls, than boys.
- A significant interaction between age and gender was found in relation to the effects of email bullying, and the use of instant messaging, which showed contrasting opinions between boys of different age groups.

Awareness of cyberbullying occurring

- Student's responses differed concerning awareness of each subtype of cyberbullying occurring in school or among their friends.
- Students were most aware of bullying by picture/video clips (46% knew of this taking place), followed by phone calls (37%) and text messaging (29%). The other methods were slightly less well known, in particular chat room bullying, which just 12% were aware of happening.

Perceived impact of cyberbullying

- Picture/video clip and Phone call were perceived to have more impact on the victim than traditional forms of bullying.
- Website and Text message bullying were rated as being about equal in impact to traditional bullying.
- Chat room, Instant messaging and Email bullying bullying were believed to have less of an impact than traditional forms of bullying.

The nature of cyberbullying, and who is told

- Most cyberbullying is reported as coming from one or a few students, in the same class or year group.
- Most cyberbullying lasts only a week or so, but some lasts much longer, especially phone call bullying.
- A substantial minority (around one-third) of victims have told nobody about it.

Views on school banning mobile phones or private internet use

- Most pupils thought that banning mobile phones would result in pupils using them secretly.
- Most pupils thought that restricting private internet use in school could not prevent such forms of cyberbullying outside school.

Comparison with other studies

- The findings from this survey are in line with previously reported findings from studies by the NCH, which found that between 20 and 25% of school students had ever been cyberbullied (compared to 22% in this study).

- Rates of text message and chatroom bullying were similar, although a greater percentage reported bullying by email in our survey.

- These findings are all higher than reported rates of cyberbullying in studies by Oliver and Candappa (2003) and Balding (2004), although both of these studies focused on only one year group.

Implications for further work

- Future research should make use of the seven subtypes of cyberbullying, all of which have been found to occur in school, even though sometimes to a limited extent.

- A greater sample size would allow for a more thorough exploration, which would include more year groups to compare across the entire age range and allow a more profound examination of age differences or the lack of them.

- The gender difference found in cyber victimisation is interesting and strongly merits further study on a larger sample.

- It proved useful to compare how often cyberbullying was experienced inside and outside of school, and given the prevalence outside school, further exploration of where and when this happens would be worthwhile.

- Work on the perception of impact of cyberbullying could usefully be related to the content of mass media publicity about cyberbullying, as well as to the actual nature of the bullying, and technological advances such as 'bluetooth'.

- A longitudinal approach, measuring responses over two or more time periods, would allow researchers to assess changing attitudes towards cyberbullying, and any increases in its use among schoolchildren.

Additional Information

The full report can be accessed at www.anti-bullyingalliance.org/ResearchandEvaluationTeamResearchReport.htm

Copies of this Research Brief (RBX03-06) are available free of charge from DfES Publications, PO Box 5050, Sherwood Park, Annesley, Nottingham NG15 0DJ (tel: 0845 60 222 60). Research Briefs and Research Reports can also be accessed at www.dfes.gov.uk/research/

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