Cyberbullying and children and young people with SEN and disabilities: the views of young people

SEN and disability: developing effective anti-bullying practice

Introduction

In July and August Common Room Consulting Ltd ran four focus groups with children and young people to explore cyberbullying. The group consisted of young people with disabilities, learning difficulties, and mental health, emotional and behavioural difficulties. *

At the same time, we were running a series of focus groups on bullying and mental health and with disabled children and young people to inform the schools programme. The young people in each of these sessions also raised cyberbullying as an issue and their views are also incorporated here.

For many disabled young people this was a difficult topic to discuss. For some, this was due to experiencing severe forms of cyberbullying and for others, because this was the first time they had discussed cyberbullying as an issue. This report gives an overview of the key issues raised by young people about cyberbullying.

This report forms part of a programme of work led by the Anti-Bullying Alliance and funded by the Department for Education to reduce the incidence and impact of bullying of children and young people special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) in schools. A full guidance document on preventing cyberbullying of children and young people with SEND accompanies this report.

To find out more please visit: http://www.anti-bullyingalliance.org.uk/send-programme

Acknowledgements

We would like to express our sincere thanks to the staff and young people from:

- Equal Lives Youth Forum, Norfolk

- Young Leaders, Darlington Association on Disability.

- Junction 17, Greater Manchester West Mental Health NHS Foundation Trust

- Lincolnshire Shadow Transition Board, Action for Children, Disability Lincolnshire

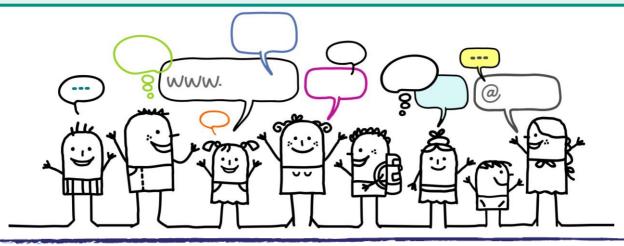- Common Room Consulting Limited

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* For brevity, the terms disabled young people or young people are used throughout the report to encompass all of the young people we spoke to, but should be clear this incorporates the views of disabled young people and young people with learning difficulties, emotional, mental health or behavioural difficulties.

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Key messages

Of the young people with disabilities we spoke to, many:

- spoke of using the **internet positively** and were doing so with awareness about how to stay safe online.

- felt that the **positive aspects of the internet and social media are often overshadowed** by talk of the internet being unsafe or of cyberbullying. They felt there should be a balanced view, with support to learn how to stay safe online and how to respond to cyberbullying if it happens, rather than being discouraged to use it.

- **had experienced cyberbullying**. This was often an extension of the face-to-face bullying they experienced, often went unchallenged, or they were not supported to respond to this.

- were **not using the internet**, despite being able to do so. For some this was because they were not given the support to do so. For others it was because they had been discouraged from using the internet or were afraid to do so for fear of cyberbullying. This means young people are also missing out on the many positive aspects of the internet.

- Said that cyberbullying can **enhance existing social pressures**.

- had not been **supported to learn about cyberbullying or internet safety**. This meant they were not aware of how to stay safe online, what to do about cyberbullying, or made it difficult for them to know if some of the things happening online were cyberbullying or not.

- said they **were often not believed** when they told someone about cyberbullying or were told the best strategy to deal with cyberbullying is to avoid the internet, which they felt wasn't realistic.

- talked of no one knowing they has a disability online and that the internet was a good way of **concealing this aspect of the identity**. This should cause us to question the negative impact of bullying on young people's identity as disabled people.

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Young people's use of the internet and social media

> **"Some people use Facebook and get really stressed over it. Lots of stuff can happen on Facebook. Groups can get together [to bully you]. I won't use it."**

The young people we spoke to fit into the following categories in terms of their use of the internet:

1. Those that didn't use the internet or social media. They were young people who

- could not access the internet independently and were not supported to go online; or

- could access the internet, but who thought the internet was unsafe, dangerous or who were discouraged from using it.

2. Of those that did use the internet there were young people who:

- could access the internet, but who had not been taught how to use the internet safely.

- could access the internet, but had experienced cyberbullying and avoided certain aspects, such as social media.

- thought the internet was a great way of connecting to other people with similar experiences and used the internet widely, with no experiences of cyberbullying.

- felt the internet was a good way of connecting to others and forming social connections, but where people wouldn't know they had a disability.

Many of the disabled young people we spoke to talked of not using any aspect of the internet. For some young people, this was because they would need support to access the internet and they were not given this support. For other young people, this was because they thought the internet was a dangerous place, were fearful of doing so, or had been actively discouraged from using it by parents and/or teachers, for 'safety' reasons.

Other young people used the internet but did so without other people knowing and without having been supported to understand how to use the internet safely.

> **"I use it a lot, but my mum doesn't know"**

Some young people talked about using the internet but avoiding certain aspects of it, such as social media, if they experienced cyberbullying or if they had experienced bullying in their day-to-day lives.

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> **"If I was feeling** [expletive] **or down, I would just close down my Facebook, delete all my social media accounts. I was feeling vulnerable enough."**

Many young people spoke of the many positive aspects of using the internet, which they often felt were overlooked. Some young people said they used the internet:

- To connect with other people with similar experiences;

- To get support with issues such as bullying or other issues, from message boards, forums.

- To build social connections, particularly where they were experiencing social difficulties or isolation in their daily lives. For example, some young people enjoyed the social aspects of online gaming or hearing other people's experiences on YouTube, blogs or forums.

> **"You can talk to people all over the world."**

> **"Even if you don't communicate directly with that person, you can feel a connection."** [said regarding watching YouTube video's of people with similar experiences]

> **"If you can't get out a lot, it can keep you in touch with people."**

However, some young people spoke of the positive aspects of the internet being that no one knew who you were. Some felt this was freeing and empowering and a way of escaping some of the difficult experiences they had in their day to day lives. Others talked of no one knowing they had a disability and that they were able to conceal this aspect of their identity.

> **"No one know's I'm disabled."**

> **"You use avatars and stuff."**

> **"No one knows who you are online."**

Many young people talked of being actively discouraged from using the internet, despite its many positive aspects, because adults were concerned they may be bullied or because of concern about internet safety. Some young people felt this was because adults were scared of the internet or were unsure how to advise them how to use if safely.

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Disabled young people's views on cyberbullying

Types and experiences of cyberbullying

The young people we spoke to spoke of experiencing or witnessing several forms of cyberbullying. For many young people, this had led them to avoid using any form of social media or led to fear using the internet in any form.

Some of the key types of cyberbullying we were told about are outlined below.

Social pressures and online 'popularity'

> **"Bullying is far more wide spread now it is online - it's not just your time in school. It affects your social life. Your social life is online. How many people like your status or your picture. Social pressures are just made worse."**

> **"How many likes you get."**

Young people talked of how much of their social lives were now online. This can increase existing social pressures and enhance exclusion and isolation. It takes many form including for example:

- People purposefully not liking a young person's status update or photo they have posted, so they seem unpopular

- Exclusion from group chats

- Not being invited to group events

Images and comments

> **"Sometimes people tag post things on people's Facebook wall that aren't nice. Sometimes they tag them in pictures that aren't nice."**

> **"Post stuff on your wall. Photos. Comments."**

> **"Like rude pics."**

> **"Some people might you photos that aren't really appropriate."**

> **"People can put picture. Naked."** [talking about seeing inappropriate images online]

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> **"Music videos. Not very nice."** [said regarding the explicit or violent nature of some music videos]

> **"On, like, Youtube and stuff, people can post video's and then in the comments, they say something bad about the video or mean about the person. It can be uncalled for."**

Many young people talked of inappropriate images online. This included inappropriate images being posted onto people's Facebook walls; being tagged in hurtful images; being sent inappropriate or sexualised content; or people taking and circulating images of other young people.

Hacking

> **"Sometimes people can get hold of your account details and pretend to be you."**

> **"My MSN account ended up being hacked and other people sending nasty messages to one of my friends when I was away. And I came back and she refused to believe that it wasn't me, when I was on holiday. Erm, so frustrating and we printed out all the messages and you could see that it wasn't me because I wouldn't write in that way. It took my mum to come in. Then they moved me into another class. I was moved but the bullying didn't go away. They didn't really do anything ... It felt like I was being punished for it. I just wanted the school to recognise it. By the time they did recognise it it was too late and I'd been through the majority of my school life being unhappy and lost a lot of my confidence."**

Hacking is gaining access to unauthorised information online. Some young people talked of their social media accounts being hacked by other young people.

Bullying by calls, text or answerphone

> **"Phone. Texting. I got bullied by person. Keep texting me. Didn't like it. My mum found out. Deleted it. Blocked it. Upsetting me."**

Many young people reported being sent nasty or inappropriate text messages directly, or knowing that other young people were sending nasty messages about them to others.

Peer pressure

Young people said cyberbullying often took the form of peer pressure including pressure to get involved in bullying others or pressure to send images of themselves. This was often done on the promise of friendship or fear or threat of isolation and exclusion from within a peer group.

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Use of disablist language

> **"It makes you feel angry, sad, not confident."**

> **"People use nasty words"** [about disability]

Young people also talked about disablist language aimed at them directly.

> **"Call you names or say stuff, like give you messages and say nasty things."**

A lot of young people talked about frequently seeing disablist language online or jokes about disability, which they found upsetting or difficult to see, and affected how they felt about themselves as people who had disabilities.

Exacerbates and extends face to face bullying

Young people talked of cyberbullying exacerbating the face to face bullying they experienced in or out of school and said it meant bullying followed them and became inescapable.

> **"Real life follows you home."**

> **"Not even safe in your bedrooms."**

> **"Not just in school or out of school."**

> **"Your social life is everywhere. Not even your bedroom is yours."**

> **"It takes what's happening in school to a whole other level"**

> **"Bullying will never go. They'll always find new ways of bullying you. They'll find ways to follow you. Like on Facebook. You can only ever reduce it** [bullying] **a certain amount..."**

> **"Bullying follows you... School, community, online."**

> **"You used to be able to go in to school, get your head down, and have different friends outside of school... You could separate it... Now you can't."**

> **"You can't get away."**

> **"I'd say it's worse** [than face to face]**. It's more pervasive and far more intrusive. I was reading something in the guardian. The difference now is that bullies don't stop at the gates. They follow you into your homes... And it's now got that constant feel to it."**

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As well as face to face bullying being extended by cyberbullying, they also talked of bullying which begins online, escalating into to face to face bullying.

> **"Can escalate to real life... Fights. Got beaten up."**

> **"Lad around the corner used to come and wait for me at the gate."**

Cyberbullying also added a new dimension to the face to face young people experienced:

> **"You're not allowed your phone in school, but everyone still does. These girls were picking on me and they were getting their phones out under the table and BBMing each other and saying things about me, but they were doing it so that I could see the message. Doing it so you could see it. And then, when I finally flipped, and threw my book or something and I get a detention. And I'm like, 'why aren't you doing anything about them'? I told them but they didn't believe me, because they said it could't have happened because no phones were allowed in school."**

Cyberbullying increases the number of people involved and the severity of bullying

Young people felt cyberbullying increased the imbalance of power, as it enabled much larger numbers of young people to get involved in bullying someone.

> **"A lot of people, like I've seen them on Facebook, and they'll take a photo of someone without them knowing it, and there'll be hundreds of comments on it, just like taking the mick out of them. And then I think it's, especially before and after school, when they have their phones out."**

> **"There was this picture of this girl of** [removed]. **It got plastered everywhere, all over Facebook. Everywhere. I wasn't in school for years before that and even I got that picture. It got BBM'd to me. It just circulated everywhere. It was ridiculous."**

They felt cyberbullying was also taken further and often nastier or more hurtful, because people do not see the direct impact they're having on the person being bullied.

> **"There's no guard up. They say the most awful things to each other on Twitter"**

> **"From personal experience, I think it's more hurtful. The things they say."**

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Issues raised by young people about cyberbullying

Is it bullying?

> **"I don't think sometimes they realise what they're doing is bullying. I don't even think sometimes the victim knows it's bullying. I know like there's things that have happened to me online, and when I've spoken to teachers about they said it was cyberbullying, but I didn't realise."**

Young people talked of the difficulties of understanding whether something was bullying or not. This is an issue for many forms of face to face bullying - but can be exacerbated online, for example, as there are less cues to understand someone's intention or where words can be interpreted and read in different ways.

Young people said it could be difficult to know when online communication had turned from joking to bullying.

> **"Teenagers will do stuff to** [expletive] **about... Might be humiliating a friend... More often than not that's harmless, but sometimes it will cross a boundary without realising"**

They felt this could be harder to spot online, but part of understanding whether something was bullying:

> **"About consistency. If it's genuinely hurtful."**

Some young people felt this could be particularly difficult for young people with communication impairments, who may need support to understand and determine whether something is cyberbullying.

Young people said it was difficult to know whether something was bullying or not, as they had not been given support to learn what cyberbullying is, how to spot it, or what to do about it. They wanted to learn about real life examples, so that they could use this to spot when they or others are being bullied or to understand when their own actions could be construed as bullying.

Lack of teaching about cyberbullying and internet safety

> **"A girl at school was being cyberbullied so bad she started cutting herself in a lesson. That's the first time we heard anything about it** [internet safety or cyberbullying]**. They did some lessons about it. But it weren't about bullying, it was more about men pretending to be young**

> **girls. When they got to the bullying bit it was just dead brief. They just said if you felt scared don't go on those sites and stuff like that."**

Most young people we spoke to had had little or no teaching and support to understand cyberbullying or internet safety. For those that had had lessons or teaching about cyberbullying, it was often very brief, focussed more on 'strange men pretending to be young people', or gave few strategies for young people to deal with cyberbullying, other than avoidance of the internet.

> **"The most we got, was like, a video of someone who got groomed online."**

Whose responsibility is cyberbullying?

Young people said they felt it was unclear about who to go to about cyberbullying and this meant young people could get away with cyberbullying. They said their schools often had no clear approach to dealing with cyberbullying; had no clear guidelines on what is and isn't acceptable for students outside of school; or that school's said it wasn't their responsibility, as it wasn't happening in the school.

Lack of support and appropriate responses

> **"I get bullied because of my disability. Told to put up with it. They don't care. It's like it's my fault because I'm disabled."**
>
> **"But what bothers me is people bully me because of my disability but people don't do anything. People listen, don't do anything. They tell you to tell someone. They tell you to put up with it and say 'they're only young'. I get picked on by a little a girl, she's only 8. I tell people. People say to me ignore her she's only young, she doesn't understand. But you can't be too young to learn about bullying"**
>
> "[Everyone says] **just ignore it. Why can't you just sort it out for me?"**
>
> **"I don't think teachers know how to deal with it, what to say or how to deal with the situation."**
>
> **"They don't do anything"**

Young people reported that when they often experienced a lack of support or appropriate responses when they disclosed they were being bullied. They experienced a combination of both the lack of understanding about how to respond to disablist bullying, as well as a lack of understanding effectively dealing with cyberbullying. Their experiences included being told to avoid the internet as the best means of stopping the bullying or that they should 'put up with it'.

Many young people also spoke of not being believed when they reported cyberbullying (or bullying of other kinds).

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> "Sometimes it's not just the students that do it. Sometimes the teachers don't like listen to you, like, and if someone's telling a lie and they're blaming you for something you haven't done wrong then the tutor believes them and you get in trouble for it. When someone tells lies about you and blame you. And like I never did."

Lack of support to understand appropriate communication online

> "See bullying everywhere. Celebrities are bullied by the media. … Makes it all seem OK."

Some young people talked about getting 'into trouble' for things they had done or said online, as they had not realised how the things they said might affect other people, or been supported to understand how to communicate appropriately online.

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Preventing cyberbullying

"People should know how it affects people lives."

Young people thought of several key ways to prevent cyberbullying from happening or to improve their knowledge and understanding of cyberbullying and how to keep safe online.

Learning about cyberbullying and online safety: parents, teachers and young people

"Even though they have cyberbullying as a poster, they had no way of stopping it."

Many young people had received little or no education about cyberbullying; what they should do if they are being cyberbullied; or how to stay safe online.

"Don't talk to strangers."

"Don't put details. Address. Where you live. Phone number. Mum and school [told me about internet safety]**"**

"Don't meet people. Not true." [You may not know who people are]

"If you get a friend request on Facebook and you don't recognise their name, no matter how many mutual friends you've got, don't accept them."

"Don't add strangers as friend [on Facebook]"

 "I know some people on Facebook and they put their full name and date of birth" [need to keep personal details private]

Young people wanted to learn:

- About what cyberbullying is and the different forms this can take. They felt this should use real life examples, so they could learn to spot bullying when it happens. Young people said they often didn't talk about cyberbullying, as it is often difficult to know if something is bullying or not.

- What they should do when cyberbullying happens, to themselves or others

- How to stay safe online

- What is and is not appropriate communication online, so they can learn how to communicate appropriately to others

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> **"Have a subject, like, so you're open to talk about** [cyber] **bullying at school."**

They felt this should be integrated into the school curriculum and taught regularly to *all* children and young people. Many young people talked about using the internet, but their parents or teachers assumed that they weren't. They felt this should be linked to wider learning and teaching about staying safe and should also support them to understand how to communicate appropriately online.

Young people also wanted information and resources for their parents and carers to enable them to understand:

- What cyberbullying is and the forms it can take, so they could support their child to learn what bullying is and is not

- Strategies and responses to cyberbullying, so they could support their child to know what to do, if they are being bullied online

- Learn about the positive aspects of the internet for young people, how young people use online spaces, and how this can be an important social tool for young people.

Young people also wanted teachers and school staff to learn about cyberbullying and:

- Its effect on children and young people

- How to support disabled young people to stay safe on the internet

- How to support young people effectively when they have been bullied

- The particular issues for cyberbullying for disabled children and young people

A whole school approach

Young people felt strongly that learning about and effectively responding to cyberbullying should start in schools, particularly as:

- Many young people said schools didn't see cyberbullying as their responsibility as it happened outside of school

- Many young people said cyberbullying was an extension of the bullying they experienced in school

Young people said:

- Each school should have a specific member of staff to deal with bullying and cyberbullying. This was to ensure children and young people knew who to talk to if they were being bullied, and so they would feel confident this person would listen, believe them and help to do something about it.

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- Schools should have guidelines about bullying and cyberbullying, and clear strategies for learning about and responding to cyberbullying.

- Make cyberbullying more visible in schools and to ensure this information was in accessible formats, so it could be accessed and understood by all children and young people.

- Bullying and cyberbullying should be built into 'everyday' school conversations, so that during, for example, personal tutor sessions, staff should talk to young people about bullying and cyberbullying so that young people have the opportunity to talk about any issues they are experiencing.

   "In colleges when you have 1-1 about your work and stuff. Have some of the time for general stuff so people can talk about if they're getting bullied. Time to talk about it. Or if I went to my tutor about my work they should ask how are things in general in school. Give you time to say 'I'm ok but I'm being bullied'"

- Schools should promote disability equality, promote positive attitudes to disability and ensure disablist bullying is explicitly addressed in all anti-bullying strategies.

   "People in school didn't understand me because I think differently. People need to learn more."

   "Understand people for who they are"

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Reporting and responding to cyberbullying

Disabled young people suggested several ways to improve support and responses to bullying when it happens. Their overarching message was that **something** should be done. Many young people had experienced severe forms of bullying and cyberbullying, but had not been believed, listened to, or given any support to deal with the bullying they had experienced.

Saving evidence

> **"Once it's in print though, you can't disprove it… It's there for people to see"**

> **"Cyberbullying… You've got proof"**

Many young people said they had saved messages, or taken screenshots, of cyberbullying so that they could:

- Show this to someone they trusted, to help them to understand whether something was cyberbullying or not, where they were uncertain.

- Use this as evidence, especially where they had reported this previously and not been believed.

Being listened too

> **"I think they just go home and run up to their room and cry"** [when people don't listen]

Young people recognised that effectively dealing with bullying could often take time and not always resolved immediately. However, one of their strongest recommendation's was for schools to make it clear who they could talk to about bullying; for teachers and school staff to listen to them; to give them time to talk about their experiences; and for staff to believe them.

Support for both sides

> **"Can't just punish them and expect that to be it."**

Young people felt it was important to give help and support to both the person who had been bullied and the person (or people) who had bullied them.

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Young people said:

- It was important for the emotional impact of bullying to be recognised and to be given support to deal It was important to support the young person who had bullied them, as they may have been bullied themselves, or may not understand how their behaviour and actions have affected others

Reporting to social media providers and/or police

"Do more than use the stick in these situations. Need to get social networking sites to make enquiries into why the bullying is happening."

Young people said bullying could and should be reported to social media sites for investigation or too the police where the cyberbullying was of a serious or threatening nature.

Agree a course of action and support with the young person

"[Teachers] **Tend to be a bit scared of dealing with it."**

Young people felt that often, teachers or other school staff did not how to respond to cyberbullying. Young people were commonly told to avoid using the internet, as a response to cyberbullying, rather than trying to stop the bullying or supporting them to increase their online safety.

They wanted staff to:

- Work with them to agree a course of action and support, so the young person felt in control of this.

- Support them to review how they currently use the internet and explore ways of improving their online safety. For example, blocking people or increasing their privacy settings.

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