

# Cyber-bullying – a major threat to our students

*Dennis Sleigh*

**A**t a recent meeting of Australia's Shadow Ministers for Education, the question of bullying was high on the agenda – but not just “traditional” bullying. These senior politicians devoted their energy to *cyber-bullying* and how to curb it. In tackling this issue, they were certainly responding to public disquiet.

If you Google for bullying today, your query will elicit over 15 million entries. While cyber-bullying is less of an issue, it is nevertheless a major concern, with nearly two million entries. What, then, is cyber-bullying?

## Cyber-bullying described

A basic definition is that cyber-bullying is the use of technology such as the internet or mobile phones to harass your victim, using text or pictures. While it is a comparatively recent phenomenon, it is nevertheless a well-established one. Recent research shows that it is both widespread and pernicious.

The features of this sort of harassing behaviour include its apparent anonymity and its universality – it can occur anywhere, anytime. In addition, it has a vast audience, and, much to the surprise of many perpetrators, it is permanent. It is worth looking at these features before discussing the legal implications of the topic.

## Anonymity

When you realise that cyber-bullying occurs via the internet (reportedly the preferred medium in USA and Canada) and by mobile phones (more popular in Australia and the UK) you can see why many users think they are anonymous. In the past if you really hated someone, you could convey this message by dropping an unsigned note in their letter box (or, at school, into their desk); as long as your handwriting was disguised, you had some chance of remaining undiscovered. Today, the same messages can be sent electronically, and no-one would sign their messages – or would they? In fact they do – even though they might not realise it. Messages can be traced by experts and the perpetrators can be apprehended – especially if the receiver doesn't delete it. This is worth remembering when trying to discourage such offences.

## Universality

You can now bully your victim, as they say, “24/7”, and it doesn't matter even if they are overseas. No longer is it necessary to lure the hapless person down behind the weather shed



to demonstrate your nastiness; you can do it at school, at home, and anywhere in between.

## Widespread

Some cyber-bullying involves displaying embarrassing videos of people (e.g., being beaten up) and the message is not limited to the intended victim. It can be broadcast on social networking sites or beamed to many mobile phones, thereby multiplying the audience and the embarrassment.

## Permanent

Those of us who are still fairly ignorant of modern technology might naively believe that if we have a change of heart and delete our messages, the whole incident is assigned to the waste bin. Alas, this is not the case. Once transmitted, its transmission might be limited in some way by technically astute operators, but this is not the same thing as tearing up a nasty letter you might have written, or erasing



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a taped message. Reconstructing a shredded page of vitriolic text would be beyond the skill (or patience) of most of us but reconstructing electronically transmitted materials is easier.

## A powerful weapon

In dealing with the victims of bullies we often recognise their sense of helplessness. We might promise to protect them, and to punish the bully, but our words often fall on deaf ears because they, the victims, know better. They have often learned the hard way that we cannot offer sufficient protection to keep them safe from a determined bully. They have an understandable sense of being victimised.

This feeling of being victimised – which is equally present in the victims of cyber-bullies – can evoke a raft of responses. One person might dismiss the event as a childish prank; another might be driven to suicide – as has happened in at least two widely reported overseas cases. Other responses include a fear of escalation (If I say anything, they will expand the audience!), frustration about the one-sided nature of the attack (Why me?), sadness at damaged relationships (I thought I could trust her) and anger, perhaps leading to revenge and further escalation.

These are not new responses; they emerged from the victims of the traditional school-yard bully. What makes the situation different today is the intensity of the emotions as the victim realises the unlimited scope of the bullying.

Young people often lack the strategies to respond to this new menace. They often feel their parents cannot understand the implications of technological attackers and they also feel, according to recent Australian research, that teachers are oblivious to the seriousness of the attack; after all, how can they earn sympathy when there is no blood or bruising?

One researcher summed it up this way: perpetrators seem unaware of the effects of their actions; parents seem unaware of the technology; teachers seem unaware of the extent of the problem. To make things worse, victims often decide that they won't confide in their parents about the bullying because, in a move to protect their children, parents might take away the mobile phone or internet access.

## Schools' response

Schools have made considerable progress in recent years in responding to bullying. Physical bullying has been strategically targeted, and both psychological and emotional forms of bullying have been taken seriously. However, the bully's "field of terror" has been greatly expanded by the spread of technology. Teachers can no longer be complacent about flaming, outing, harassing or excluding in the cyber-world. Our duty of care demands a considered response.

There are two major options to handle these repeated offences: legal action and increased school response. While both have their place, it seems that any hope of taking decisive and long-term measures lies with the schools.

## Legal responses

The current legal options are somewhat piecemeal. We don't even have an agreed definition of bullying – they vary from jurisdiction to jurisdiction. Furthermore, there is no single legislative initiative that deals with this growing offence. It is fair to say that current legislation has failed to keep abreast with the enormity of the offence.

In responding to bullying in its many forms, the police might handle the issue in order to gain justice for the victim and for society at large. This action by the state, usually under criminal law, is aimed primarily at punishing the perpetrator, not compensating the victim.

A different response would be on where victim seeks redress, perhaps suing the bully to prevent further problems and to gain some compensation. The major problems here are the high cost of litigation and the low level of compensation awarded in many cases.

## *We must also try to "bully-proof" our students*

Finally, there is recourse to workplace industry codes, which attempt to set a standard of behaviour for employers and employees. Sadly, while these codes do send the message that bullying at work or school will not be tolerated, their strength depends on the determination of the employer to enforce these aspirational statements.

Whatever course of action is taken, the victim needs to have evidence and therefore we must encourage our students to retain such evidence. Deleting offensive messages might seem to lead to peace of mind, but such an action makes it harder to prove an offence actually occurred. This is just one more reason why we must try to develop a relationship of trust where victims will actually confide in authorities.

## School responses

While cyber-bullying is by no means limited to schools, educators must still play the major role in fighting it, since our students, by virtue of their age, are entitled to a high level of protection. It has been said campaigns against workplace bullying only started to have an impact when parents realised that bullying had been successfully tackled at school. Perhaps the same situation might occur with cyber-bullying.

If we are to act successfully, we must provide unambiguous policies to define the issue, leaving no room for students or their parents to squirm out of unacceptable behaviour. Experienced teachers have all heard bullies try to justify their actions, and sadly, parents have sided with their children in many instances, often claiming that their children were just joking or that they were themselves responding to a perceived threat. The seriousness of cyber-bullying has to be spelled out for all parties, along with a clear statement of zero-tolerance of this cowardly behaviour.

"Acceptable use" policies for all technology are a simple starting point, but they must be widely published and consistently policed. Whether we are discussing issues of plagiarism or cyber-bullying, inappropriate downloading or time-wasting activities on the computer, our students must realise that we mean what we say.

We must also try to "bully-proof" our students, showing them strategies that will protect them from further attacks. In this regard they must be shown that a victim's silence is the bully's greatest weapon. We also need to ensure that parents are – and are clearly seen to be – significant partners in this enterprise. Although some parents might think that the best defence is to deny their child access to the internet or to mobile phone, just as some parents think the only solution to school bus bullying is to drive their children to and from school, schools must show the weakness in such responses. In today's environment, technology is an undeniable reality and it is much better to show a child how to use it wisely than to deny them access.

Because students are allegedly choosing not to report a lot of cyber-bullying, it is important that teachers stay alert to what is happening around them. We must listen, really listen, to our students. We also need to respond sensitively when we are given information. There is no room for a dismissive response or for disbelief. Again, liaison with parents is important. Many parents hear more about other people's children than about their own, but if this information is prudently shared, dangers can be averted.

Perhaps schools need greater power to follow up incidents that occur outside school hours, but in seeking such powers, we should make clear that our aim is to prevent injury rather than to punish offenders.

Every school now has its bullying policy, and with just a bit of creative thought, this could be expanded to include cyber-bullying. When making such adjustments, we need to give special thought to the role of parents in the whole exercise. In many cases, cyber-bullying is a new phenomenon for them, so we need to make sure that they are fully informed about any policies we introduce. Above all, because cyber-bullying is more likely to occur at home than at school (although the victims might be school mates) we need to make sure that there is a strong two-way communication flow between home and school. We have to be able to share in information that parents give us, and we need to keep parents aware of actions we take. Anything less than this openness will simply aid and encourage cyber-bullies.

Together, we can beat them.



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