



Cyber bullying

This briefing is based on research carried out by the Anti-Bullying Alliance London Regional Programme. The research was undertaken in summer 2005 by the Unit for School and Family Studies, Goldsmiths College, University of London. The full research findings are available from www.anti-bullyingalliance.org

What is cyber bullying?

Cyber bullying describes forms of bullying using electronic devices such as mobile phones and computers. It is becoming more prevalent, with the increasing use of modern technology.

The research

In summer 2005, we investigated the current nature and extent of cyber bullying among school pupils in the London area using a questionnaire. Ninety-two students aged 11–16, from 14 different London schools, responded to the questionnaire. It comprised multiple-choice questions, with some qualitative sections, and took 20–25 minutes to complete.

The questionnaire looked at the incidence of cyber bullying inside and outside of school and distinguished between seven types of cyber bullying:

- text messaging
- picture or video clips (via mobile phone cameras)
- phone calls
- emails
- online chat rooms
- instant messaging
- websites.

The research assessed awareness of the different forms of cyber bullying and the perceived impact of cyber bullying in relation to more traditional forms of bullying. Age and gender differences were also examined.

The findings

We found that 20 students (22 per cent) had experienced cyber bullying at least once and five (6.6 per cent) had experienced being bullied in this way more frequently in the previous two months.

Phone calls, text messaging and emailing were the most common forms of cyber bullying both inside and outside of school, while chat-room bullying was the least common. The prevalence of cyber bullying was greater outside school than in school.

Age and gender

There were no significant differences related simply to age, but girls were significantly more likely to be cyber bullied than boys – especially by text messages and phone calls. A significant interaction between age and gender was found in relation to the effects of email bullying, and the use of instant messaging.

Awareness of cyber bullying

Students' responses differed concerning awareness of each type of cyber bullying occurring in school or among their friends. They were most aware of bullying by picture/video clips (46 per cent knew of this taking place), followed by phone calls (37 per cent) and text messaging (29 per cent). Other methods were slightly less well known, in particular chat-room bullying, with just 12 per cent of students being aware of it happening.

Perceived impact of cyber bullying

Bullying using phone picture and video clips and phone calls were perceived as having more impact on the victim than traditional forms of bullying. Website and text-message bullying were rated as being equal in impact to traditional bullying, while bullying using chat rooms, instant messaging and email were believed to have less impact than traditional forms of bullying.

The nature of cyber bullying and who is told

Most cyber bullying was reported as coming from one or a few students, in the same class or year group. It mostly lasts a week or so, but some lasts much longer – especially phone-call bullying. A substantial minority of victims (around 33 per cent) have told no one about it.

Banning mobile phones or private Internet use in schools

Most pupils thought banning mobile phones would result in pupils using them secretly and that restricting private Internet use in school could not prevent cyber bullying outside school.

Comparison with other studies

The findings from this survey are in line with previous findings from studies by the children's charity NCH, which found that 20–25 per cent of school students had been 'cyber bullied' (compared with 22 per cent in this study). Rates of text message and chat-room bullying were similar, although a greater percentage reported bullying by email in this survey.

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

Future research

Future research should make use of the seven subtypes of cyber bullying, 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 should 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 cyber bullying was experienced inside and outside of school, and given the prevalence of it outside school, further exploration of where and when this happens would be worthwhile.

Work on the perception of the impact of cyber bullying could usefully be related to mass media publicity about cyber bullying, as well as to the actual nature of the bullying, and technological advances.

Measuring responses over two or more time periods, would allow researchers to assess changing attitudes towards cyber bullying, and any increases in its use among schoolchildren.