



The cyber bullying epidemic

Julie K Wilkinson, vice chair for Children England, highlights a growing problem for children growing up in the 21st century

Why isn't more being done?' It is the question that I am asked on a daily basis by parents, teachers and professionals regarding cyber bullying and web-based attacks that young people in Great Britain are facing today. Glorification of the media has perhaps provided a benefit to highlighting the issues of concern. Statistics from the NSPCC in March 2013 have shown that at least one in three young people have been cyber bullied and over 67 percent of children and young people in the UK have been bullied at some point in their lives. Five young people committed suicide this summer because of online chatrooms and forums, and many professionals and parents do not understand that the cyber world is their world. They share everything from how they feel about a song, the difficulties of their maths homework, where they will be next and who are they with now.

Texting, sexting, BBM, MSN, Facebook, Twitter, Vine and Snapchat are just a few of the online chat rooms that most teenagers use. Teens' impulse is to connect and hang out. Sinead Taylor, a 15-year-old from Woolwich, South East London, who was being bullied at school over her tomboy appearance, even posted a agony aunt style, nine-minute video diary to other bullying victims before she died in June 2013. A day after Sinead died, another young person, Year 9 Hannah Smith, also committed suicide in Leicestershire, her parents highlighting the months of torment Hannah endured due to the Ask.fm website.

I Give Up, Izzy Dix, 14

I arrive.
 Happy and fresh,
 Ready and excited
 To celebrate the goodness.
 I am eager and keen to have a good
 time.
 As I smile from the bubbles of
 anticipation whizzing around my
 stomach
 I begin to see the crowd.
 I see more people.
 Many are happy and joyful.
 They're like me,
 To celebrate,
 I smile at them and say hello to the
 many faces I see,
 They looked shocked and surprised
 to see me,
 I question their judgemental glares as

I wonder. 'What have I done wrong?'
 I see their drinks swilling in their
 fingers as their backs begin to face
 me.
 I try to edge my way back into the
 circle of giggles and talking,
 They push me away.
 I stand still,
 My eyes glazed and absent.
 Suddenly they call me over.
 I think, 'Yes! They've noticed me!
 Then it begins. They start to ask
 questions
 As to why I am there.
 They begin to tell me that nobody
 wants me there.
 They tell me to leave and that I am
 not wanted,
 Not there, not anywhere,
 My heart, my head, my body numb.
 I feel pricks of stinging begin to pinch

my eyes as cheeks being to burn.
 'Don't let them see you,
 Don't show them that you're
 weakened,
 Weakened by their remarks',
 'Stay strong', I think,
 But it is too late,
 My palms, clammy,
 My cheeks streaming,
 My neck sweating.
 I quickly walk away from the
 chanting and laughing,
 My vision, spinning,
 My heart beginning to break.
 I look down and walk,
 My eyes drowning in a sea of
 emotion.
 Another piece of me chilsled
 away by their cruel remarks and
 perceptions.
 I give up.

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The most recent tragic incident was the death of 14-year-old girl, Izzy Dix, who hanged herself at her home in Brixham in South Devon in September 2013 due to being bullied on the internet and in school. Her mother described her as being "chiseled away by cruel remarks" and, after Izzy's death, more than 3000 people wrote tributes on her memorial page blaming the internet trolls and Ask.fm for allowing persistent and horrific abuse. Her mother has requested that this final poem of torment written by her late daughter (above) is made public and has highlighted the systematic abuse that occurs on such damaging websites:

Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, BBM and international online gaming

are the norm for our young people growing up in an ever-changing, faster pace of life. 94 percent of teenage social media users have a Facebook account and age restrictions are rarely enforced. When I arrived at a school in Luton last week, a seven-year-old boy told me he regularly uses his Twitter and YouTube account and that there were no ramifications regarding him breaking the law for underage usage. There is also growing pressure from large corporations and advertisers such as Moshi Monsters and Club Penguin to encourage children from the ages of five to 'online chat' with other members and in turn 'pressure' our children to enter a deep, dark world where privacy settings and supervision are minimal from adults.

Over 70 percent of teenage users hide what they are doing from their parents or carers, and the generational divide is increasing with 70 percent of parents knowing less about the online world that their children. Over 60 percent of all young people that are cyber bullied do not tell their parents or carers that they are being harassed online. As we know, the cyber world is far-reaching, invisible, anonymous and 24/7. Young people feel that adults do not understand the cyber world. They become embarrassed that they cannot defend themselves and thus start living in an isolated and dangerous world where self-harm starts to play a pivotal role in coping with such abuse.

Although, it is important to allow our children to have a world separate to adults and allow for exploration and socialisation, it is imperative to keep the younger generation safe. A report in May 2013 by the Pew Internet and the American Life project found that 91 percent of 12 to 17 year-olds post photos of themselves online and are happy to post their real name, relationship status and birth date. There seems to be a lack of awareness amongst our young people that the internet is not safe. Recent legislation in relation to cyber bullying and e-safety, such as the Children's Act 2004 and the Communications Act 2003 clearly outlines the duty of professionals and parents to safeguard and promote the welfare of children and in turn provides the foundation of the new draft statutory guidance document *Working Together to Safeguard Children*. This was issued in March 2013 by the DfE and will be revised in 2015. Almost one in five primary school children claimed to have met somebody they have previously known online and half went alone to meetings in parks, cinemas, fast food restaurants, shopping centres and, most worryingly, private addresses. A significant minority was also regularly awake into the small hours on computers in their bedrooms and never supervised by their parents.

As alarming studies and statistics show, our children are experiencing severe sexualised peer pressure in a growing sexualised world. 'Girlhood' has never before had sustained assault from pop videos, advertisements, alcohol marketing, girls magazines, sexually explicit TV programmes and free, round-the-clock access to hard-core pornography that is being regularly accessed in so many teenagers bedrooms. Subtle exploitation starts early with the Playboy bunny pencil cases and inappropriate lingerie such as padded bras and thongs for girls as young as five years old. Sexual pressure can cause our girls to contemplate suicide, self harm, develop eating disorders or try to lose themselves in drugs or alcohol.

'Sexting', which again is commonplace with young people, and involves the exchange of sexual messages or images by text, smartphones and social networking sites, has huge ramifications for our young people's future. Young people do not understand that an image of themselves can spread like wild fire in a matter of seconds. Teachers have personally told me that young boys now have explicit images of up to 30 different girls on their phone and swap them like football cards were traded in the 1980s. One teenage girl said to me that sending explicit body part images is the new 'flirting'. The head of an Australian bank personally told me last summer that CVs are now becoming redundant and employers simply look at future candidates Facebook pages, networking sites, photos and activities to gain a real insight into a candidate's personality and mindset. Increasing numbers of pornographic images that pop up through sexting are discovered amongst HR departments and are damaging our young people's futures.

The societal increase of sexual exploitation and the vulnerability of children and young people through online grooming was recorded as 23,000 sexual offences in 2011 and at a record high in 2012 with an average of 60 child sex offences per day. Chat Roulette, which is sweeping through our primary and secondary schools, is most alarming. With no privacy settings needed, age restrictions or

credit card numbers required, Chat Roulette, the second most frequented online forum after Facebook, allows any individual at any age to enter an online chatroom in people's bedrooms and lounges through the computer webcam all around the world. At a simple touch of a button, children can communicate with anyone for varying lengths of time and is heaven for grooming and pedophiles.

However, the biggest concern to professionals and parents alike is the increased usage of anonymous social networking sites such as Ask.fm, Little Gossip and Snapchat. The latter permits a post to automatically delete itself after a short period of time (5-15 seconds) and encourages bullies to send horrific images, words and captions to any 'target' without repercussions, and without the victim being able to get the image back for evidence purposes.

The compulsion is to keep checking the nasty sites again and again. Switching the computer off, bearing in mind that this is their whole world, makes them feel even more of an outcast. One of the few long-term studies of bullying published in the in the journal of *JAMA Psychiatry in America*, has found an elevated risk of psychiatric problems that extends into adulthood, sometimes years even after the intimidation has ended. The effects persisted (such as stuttering, eating disorders and long term depression) even after researchers

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Solutions to cyber bullying: some top tips

1. Set all privacy settings with your child so that they cannot be contacted by strangers. This means that only friends can see their posts. Repeat this action every month.
2. Place the family computer in the lounge. Set the password yourself and change it each month. Do not allow your child to spend hours alone on the computer.
3. Look out for signs and symptoms of your child being bullied. These include absenteeism from school; becoming aggressive; poor academic achievement; becoming withdrawn, isolated or secretive; self-harm, including over or under-eating; insomnia, nightmares and bedwetting.
4. Google your child's name. Anything said on Twitter about your child will be picked up. Set an alert on Google: if your child's name is mentioned on the internet, you will receive an email.
5. Ensure that your child has a lock or password on their phone or tablet. This password should be changed once a month. Reiterate that they should never give their password away, even to their best friend.
6. All websites provide a function to block another user. Google 'block a friend on Facebook' to find out the procedure.

accounted for pre-existing factors such as physical abuse and poverty.

It seems that some of our young people are becoming addicted to the cycle of torment and belittling. At a school in Leicester recently one young person admitted to me that she keeps all her abusive messages from 'trolls' and regularly re-reads the messages when feeling depressed. Abusive comments such as: "You think you are so f***ing perfect when boys fall at your feet. Well you are nothing. I hope you get ill and die. We do know where you live." Her state of paranoia was understandable as the threats started to become real. After being attacked outside her home a few weeks later, the isolation, self-harm and lack of confidence and self-esteem increased into a spiral of fear and torment.

Although we, as professionals and parents, will find it hard to understand why bullies post such horrific comments as death threats, racial insults and homophobic propaganda, we do know that the computer never says no. Bullying face-to-face is far harder as body language and most people's natural empathy will entail a 'guilt' factor that may restrain the bully. The definition of bullying is the 'deliberate intention to hurt, harm or cause distress' and the bully wants to feel that they have more power and control over their 'target'. Many children who bully have underlying issues either at home or

school. Divorce, separation and even death 'triggers' aggression and fear that can lead to bullying as our young people seem to face an ever-changing world that is confusing and scary.

Reports suggest that as many as one in three women in the UK experience domestic violence. Women suffering domestic violence leave their partner an average of 26 times. Police forces report increased levels of aggression and violence in the home, particularly amongst siblings to parents. Children are living in a constant state of fear. They are learning aggressive personality traits not just from their parents but also from the media, that seems to accept bullies. Even *The X-Factor* and *Come Dine with Me*, viewed by millions each week, have started to belittle, bully and torment their participants. I will always remember the laughter and reaction of the audience's face when the now famous Susan Boyle appeared on the show. It seems our global perspective regarding looks, image and the lack of individuality plays a large part in labeling and derogatory stereotyping. This in turn affects the moral values and beliefs of our young people regarding difference, equality and respect. Many young people feel that they have to join friendship groups or a gang so they are not bullied. Initiation, originally used as a tool for acceptance within a gang, is now commonplace in 'normal' friendship groups and coercion is widely accepted

as a part of our young people's everyday social lives.

Listening, guidance and instinct are our best methods of support for our young people. Encourage all children and young people to provide solutions for themselves by following the advice and top tips below. 'Bully proofing' ensures our children and young people have confidence, identity and are assertive, rather than being aggressive or passive. Encourage all young people to engage in other outside activities with other friendship groups such as swimming clubs, tennis and other physical activities. The self-fulfilling prophecy is a technique that is widely underused and an excellent tool to reinforce confidence and self-esteem. Using self-identity and 'What are your Roots?' exercises allow for our young people to gain a sense of belonging and in turn self-fulfilment. Encouraging fulfilment away from the computer or mobile phone will start to re-enforce a sense of personal achievement with new interests and thus reinforce a child's own individuality and the important contributory role he or she plays within society.

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<http://bravetherage.co.uk/>