

NSPCC Scotland briefing: Cyberbullying

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Summary of key points

- Cyberbullying is on the increase, in 2012/13 alone ChildLine there was an 87 per cent increase in counselling sessions carried out with young people about cyberbullying.
- Cyberbullying should be a core component of the school curriculum with a focus on: the possible consequences of young people's actions online, the impact of cyberbullying and the importance of forming healthy and respectful relationships online.
- A 'whole school' approach to anti-bullying should be taken with support given to young people experiencing cyberbullying even when incidents occur outside the school gates.
- Public awareness of the issue should be increased through a public information campaign. Teachers should also be trained in how to recognise and handle cases of cyberbullying.

About NSPCC Scotland

NSPCC Scotland is working with others to introduce new child protection services to help some of the most vulnerable and at risk children in the country. We are testing the very best models of child protection from around the world, alongside our universal services such as ChildLine the ChildLine Schools Service, and the NSPCC Helpline. Based on the learning from all our services we seek to achieve cultural, social and political change in Scotland – influencing legislation, policy, practice, attitudes and behaviours so that all children in Scotland have the best protection from cruelty.

Bullying and cyberbullying

You can't imagine how I feel. I wake up every morning scared to go to school, scared about the comments people will make and scared about the walk home in case I bump into the popular girls. Then when I get home I log into my social network account and I have messages of hate everywhere I look which point out everything I loathe about myself. I don't want to exist anymore and I don't deserve to be alive.

(Girl aged 14)

Bullying has consistently been a key issue for children and young people contacting ChildLine over the years. For almost two decades, bullying was the top problem children brought to the service. It was overtaken in 2010 by family relationship problems, and now represents the third most common concern. Bullying is the most frequently visited advice page on the ChildLine website, followed by cyberbullying. Young people also post messages and offer each other support and advice on ChildLine's moderated message boards.¹

In the year 2012/ 2013, over 30,300 young people contacted the service across the UK about bullying. Of these, just over four and a half thousand talked about cyberbullying. While this represents a relatively small proportion of contacts within the wider issue of bullying, this figure denotes an 87% increase since 2011/12.

Girls are more likely to contact ChildLine (3:1), and this is reflected in contacts about cyberbullying. Cyberbullying appears to impact a slightly older age group, mainly 12 – 15 year olds, with only 16% of contacts about this issue coming from children under

¹ <https://www.childline.org.uk/Talk/Boards/Pages/Messageboards.aspx>

11, compared to face to face bullying whereby 28% of contacts come from young people under 11.

Young people who contact the service about cyberbullying mainly talk about being bullied via the internet, through social networking sites, chat rooms and online gaming sites or receiving threatening or offensive calls and messages on their mobile phones.

Where bullying occurred over the internet, the issues young people talked about included harassment and stalking, people hacking into their personal accounts, sending threatening messages and inappropriate pictures being received and/or posted online.

ChildLine has a number of other online related categories applied to counselling sessions in order to provide insight into the issues children experience online. In 2012-13, ChildLine carried out just over 10,600 counselling sessions where young people talked about a problem they had experienced online; a 65% increase compared to 2011-12. The main issues young people talked to ChildLine counsellors about were cyberbullying, online sexual abuse, sexting and social networking issues. Again this issue appears to impact young teens with nearly 60% of counselling contacts about Online Safety and Abuse coming from young people aged between 13-16 year olds.

Should schools and education authorities treat cyberbullying differently from other forms of bullying?

I have no sense that young people are aware that certain things they are doing on-line would be considered a criminal offence. In fact I would say they are completely oblivious that certain things are illegal. (Child Line Counselling Supervisor)

NSPCC consider cyberbullying to be primarily a type of bullying behaviour which crucially needs addressed within a wider, whole school approach to anti-bullying. Whilst some cyberbullying can be anonymous, contacts to ChildLine suggest young people often know who is bullying them and it is often not limited to the internet but also happening face to face, i.e. the internet had become another 'channel' through which to be bullied. NSPCC Scotland strongly support the *Respect Me* model of anti-bullying, which promotes respectful behaviour in all human relationships, emphasising children's and human rights to respect and dignity, whether face to face or in cyberspace². Nevertheless, there are some specific issues around cyberbullying that schools, young people and parents need to be aware of, including;

- The 'anonymity' of cyberspace can be a dis-inhibitor, leading people to say extreme things they may not say face to face. According to ChildLine counsellors, there can be very high levels of 'nastiness' on social networking sites that may be increasingly accepted as 'normal', making children less likely to realise they are being bullied.
- The public nature of cyberbullying can be extremely hard for young people to cope with. The internet provides a platform for others to find out what is happening, and also at times to participate and continue the abuse. The sense that the whole world is involved can greatly increase the pain and humiliation for the young person.
- Young people, teachers and parents need to fully understand the potential dangers of socialising in cyberspace; not just grooming but peer pressure,

² http://issuu.com/keywest/docs/making_a_real_difference_-_evaluati?e=1098417/3911092 A PDF copy of "Making a real difference" An External Valuation of Respect Me Scotland's anti bullying service" accessed 04 March 2014

cyber-bullying and sexting. Education and awareness raising is crucial to empower young people and adults to understand the potential consequences of online actions. Young people need to be aware that actions in 'cyberspace' are not out with the legal framework. Raising awareness that for example, sending indecent images could lead to prosecution will prevent harm in general as well as preventing young people from inadvertently being drawn into the legal system.

- All bullying can make young people feel extremely isolated and powerless and can have both short and long term impact on their emotional and mental health. Cyberbullying cuts off a channel of communication/ socialisation that is now an integral part of most young people's lives, aggravating the sense of isolation.

How can schools best respond to gender differences in cyber-bullying?

I used to sext this guy last year and everyone found out. It caused me to lose all my friends and people hated me for it. People still call me nicknames and I feel left out of everything. It's making school unbearable with everyone taunting me. I am so angry with myself that I made such a stupid mistake.

ChildLine message boards

Whilst there does not appear to be a clear gender differences in the extent to which girls and boys experience cyberbullying overall³, it is clear that *certain kinds* of cyberbullying are not gender neutral. For example, the ratio of girls to boys contacting ChildLine about sexting is 9:1, with many girls describing feeling bullied or coerced into sending images, or alternatively voluntarily sending images which are subsequently used against them. Sexting when seen in this way is a gendered form of cyberbullying.

A recent NSPCC pilot study into young people's experiences of sexting, which sought to distinguish young people's problems from 'moral panic' headlines, uncovered a diversity of experiences which contradict easy assumptions about sexting as a 'singular phenomenon'⁴. Sexting cannot be understood in absolute terms, as 'wanted' versus 'unwanted' sexual activity; much of young people's *engagement* with sexual messages/ images lies in the ambiguous zone. For example, few teenagers wish to be excluded from the sexual banter, gossip and flirtatious activity endemic to youth culture. However, **to take part is to be under pressure.**

Much of young people's talk, therefore, reflects an experience that is pressurised yet voluntary: they 'choose' to participate, but often cannot choose to say 'no'. The research found that young people have become normalised to acts of sexual aggression and exploitation and highlighted how intricately these have become embedded in their peer culture. The exchange of sexual images of girls is almost a form of currency among boys and the accumulation of pictures and sexualised

³ Respectme's 2011 survey on cyberbullying found 49% boys and 51% girls had experienced cyberbullying whilst an EU Kids online survey found a *higher* percentage of boys experienced online bullying compared to girls. Twenty three per cent of boys reported online bullying compared to nineteen per cent of girls. Analysis of ChildLine information shows that three times more girls than boys contact the service about 'cyberbullying', however this is not dissimilar to the ratio of girls: boys contacting the service overall, across all problems.

⁴ http://www.nspcc.org.uk/Inform/resourcesforprofessionals/sexualabuse/sexting-research-report_wdf89269.pdf a PDF copy of J Ringrose R Gill Livingstone, L Harvey A qualitative study of children, young people and 'sexting' accessed 03 March 2014

messages is a means of building a reputation. The research indicated that because of these sexualised practices, children are entering adulthood with a skewed impression of what is appropriate sexual behaviour.

Subsequently, whilst NSPCC strongly believe that cyberbullying must be addressed within a whole-school rights based approach to anti-bullying based on respectful human relationships, there is a clear need for the Sexual Health and Relationships Education (SHRE) curriculum in Scotland – as well as teacher training - to ‘evolve’ in line with children’s use of and experiences around mobile and on-line technology. This must extend to teachers better understanding how cultural phenomena influence children’s developing ideas about sexuality and sexual behaviour.

Whilst Scotland has made considerable progress in implementing an SHRE curriculum in the last decade, the recent report of the Public Petitions Committee’s Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation suggests there is some way to go, concluding that whilst there are many examples of good and innovative practise in Scottish schools,

“it is clear . . . that much of what is provided . . . is left largely to the discretion of the head teacher. Moreover, although Curriculum for Excellence lays significant emphasis on health and well-being, in practice the time and other resources available for SHRE are often limited. There are also questions about the level of training available for teachers involved in SHRE and the extent to which the subject, as one that does not, in itself, lead to any qualification, receives any degree of priority in schools, or, indeed, in school inspections”.

A key limitation of SHRE is also clearly its inability to reach those outside school, such as transient families, young people who persistently truant or looked-after children and excluded children, not in receipt of formal education. These groups may be at an increased risk of exposure to particularly risky sexual behaviour.

NSPCC Scotland are aware of several awareness raising programmes in schools which are addressing the gendered nature of ‘sexual bullying’ and violence in young people’s relationships, in-line with the Scottish Governments gender based definition of violence against women and girls. These include Rape Crisis’s *TESSA* programme and the Violence Reduction Unit’s *Mentors in Prevention* programme.

However, it is clearly unacceptable that there should be a ‘postcode lottery’ on whether young people receive an adequate education in such a vital area. The Public Petitions Committee recently recommended that all schools have safety programmes including interactive safety workshops and covering internet and social media dangers and that education programmes need to show young people how to recognise and challenge sexual bullying and challenge gender stereotypes. It may be that it is time for SHRE to achieve ‘subject status’ in Scotland, with dedicated teachers. Furthermore, youth work programmes dedicated to outreach and targeting of vulnerable groups are essential to meet the needs of excluded groups of vulnerable young people.

What are the most effective means of reducing cyber-bullying?

‘Just saying no does not work. . . . For a lot of young people internet access in their pockets is an integral part of their life and it’s how they keep in touch with their friends’ (Peter Davis, CEO, CEOP)

ChildLine counselling supervisors stress above all the role of communicating, awareness raising, educating and role modelling about respectful human relationships, including partner relationships, is vital to reducing *all forms* of bullying behaviour including cyber-bullying.

Curriculum for Excellence has placed the theme of Health and Wellbeing as a responsibility of all staff, alongside literacy and numeracy, as core teaching. Health and Wellbeing Experiences and Outcomes promoted by Education Scotland mean the curriculum and the school learning environment must be geared towards supporting children to: *develop self-awareness; self-worth and respect for others; build relationships and build resilience and confidence; acknowledge diversity and understand that it is everyone's responsibility to challenge discrimination.*

ChildLine staff in consultation also pointed to the clear **ethical obligations of providers**, stressing that the 'safety' of online sites can vary dramatically. NSPCC Scotland consider it vital that moderators play a more active role providing a human presence on sites which allow people to communicate and that there is greater sense of safety on on-line sites, with 'report' buttons clearly visible, regular flash up reminders for young people and prompt responses to reports of problems. Sites should also clearly show provisions for young people to turn to if they are being bullied or harassed. In Addition, NSPCC would like to see all social networking site providers signing up to the European Commission's 'Safe Social Networking Principles for the EU'

ChildLine provides 'tools' for young people to help them defuse pressure to send explicit images. The ChildLine app – Zipit - offers humorous images to send rather than explicit ones, as well as advice for young people on engaging in safe chat and on what to do if you feel threatened or if an image becomes public, and a direct link to ChildLine⁵. Contacts to ChildLine usually take place when the issue has escalated beyond their control: the app is designed to provide preventative support before an issue escalates.

How should schools respond to cyber-bullying that takes place out-with school?

Schools have a duty of care to young people and whilst bullying may not always be obvious to teachers in school, this does not mean it is not going on. Where incidents of bullying come to light, within or out with the school, the school has a responsibility to be supportive of the young person and work with them towards addressing the issue, being sensitive to their right to be involved in decisions about action. The GIRFEC approach, now enshrined in legislation via the Children and Young Peoples Bill, enshrines the principle of intervening early where there is concern about a child's wellbeing. Bullying can impact significantly on many aspects of a child's wellbeing including safety, achieving, included and respected.

For further information, please contact:

Alison Wales
Policy and Information Officer
awales@nspcc.org.uk
0207 650 6764

⁵ <http://www.childline.org.uk/Play/GetInvolved/Pages/sexting-zipit-app.aspx>