



YOUTH ADVISORY COUNCIL

NEW SOUTH WALES

Report to the Minister for Youth on Cyberbullying

BACKGROUND

On 28 February 2008 the Minister for Youth, the Hon. Linda Burney, met with the Youth Advisory Council and asked it to provide advice to the Government on strategies to build awareness of cyberbullying and its affects on young people.

The Council took a number of steps in order to become better informed on the issue of cyberbullying. This included undertaking literature reviews of information that has direct relevance to their work on this issue including:

- *Cyberbullying: a Virtual Menace*, Sheri Bauman, University of Arizona (Paper presented at the National Coalition Against Bullying National Conference, Melbourne, November 2007).
- *Cyber-Bullying*, Dr Anne Bamford, University of Technology Sydney (Paper presented at the AHISA Pastoral Care National Conference, Melbourne, September 2004).
- *Cyber bullying: An old problem in a new guise?*, Marilyn A. Campbell, Queensland University of Technology, 2005.
- *Cyber safety*, Ria Hanewald, Professional Educator, Vol. 7, No.1, April 2008.
- *Cyber-Victimisation in Australia: Extent, Impact on Individuals and Responses*, Dr Lynne Roberts, Curtin University of Technology, Briefing Paper no. 6, June 2008.

A number of Council members participated in activities which further enhanced the Council's understanding of cyberbullying and its affects on young people. These were:

- *Warming Up Cyberia: Young People and technology Forum*, The Centre for Adolescent Health, Royal Children's Hospital, Melbourne, April 2008.
- *Can you hear me? Anti-bullying forum theatre*, Parramatta, September 2008, a project of Powerhouse Youth Theatre in partnership with the South West Sydney Legal Centre.
- *Cyber Friendly Student Summit*, Child Health Promotion Research Centre, Edith Cowan University, Perth, October 2008.

In order to consult with young people on the issue of cyberbullying the Council organised a Cyberbullying Online Forum which was held from 6 October to 7 November 2008. In order to assist young people using the Forum to fully understand and participate in the discussions, the Council developed a definition of cyberbullying to use on the Forum. This definition was adapted from a number of definitions from academic publications and resources to support young people experiencing cyberbullying.

The Council defined cyberbullying as:

'the use of e-mail, instant messaging, chat rooms, pagers, mobile phones, or other forms of information/digital technology to deliberately harass, humiliate, embarrass, torment, threaten, target/pick on, or intimidate someone.'

CONSULTATIONS

In order to consult with young people on the issue of cyberbullying the Council organised a Cyberbullying Online Forum which was held from 6 October to 7 November 2008 and hosted on the Youth NSW website. A total of 65 legitimate users registered for the forum, with the majority of these being young people aged between 12 and 21 years old. 39 of those who registered were female and 24 male (another 2 did not identify their gender).

The young people who registered for the Forum were asked to complete some voluntary questions about themselves (eg. age, gender, cultural background, current activities), as well as some voluntary questions about their experience of cyberbullying (eg. Have you ever been cyberbullied?, How often? How and who by?). Of those who registered to use the forum, 25 young people indicated that they had previously been cyberbullied.

Some young people indicated that they had been cyberbullied a couple of times, while others had experienced sustained and prolonged harassment.

"It used to happen frequently. At the moment it seems to have calmed down but I'm sure someone will start it up again in a few weeks."

Female, 17-21 years

The three most common ways that the young people who registered for the Forum indicated that they had been cyberbullied were:

- Through social networking sites, such as Facebook and MySpace
- In chat rooms
- And by email

Most of the young people indicated that they had been cyberbullied by someone they already knew, such as friends or ex friends, ex boyfriends or girlfriends, and students from the same or previous schools. Only a small number of those who registered had been cyberbullied by strangers.

"friends (pretending to be other people), ex friends..... just other general people at school"

Female, 17-21 years

The Forum consisted of five discussion areas which posed five different questions related to cyberbullying. Some of the responses from each discussion area are provided below.

General discussions on cyberbullying.

"I think cyber bullying is a real problem for young people and I think it is getting worse with the advancement of technologies."

"Cyberbullying is just a new way for bullies to torment their victims. In some ways it is just like being bullied in the playground by someone you can't identify."

"I don't know what drives bullies to do what they do, or how we can help defeat them but I do know one thing, we MUST do something to stop them and we MUST do it now!!"

Is cyberbullying an issue for young people?

“Cyber bullying is becoming popular with less or no adult supervision to prevent it. A parent cannot monitor their teenager's every minute on the internet and therefore cannot know everything that goes on.”

“There shouldn't be any stigma about bullying at all let alone cyber bullying and I personally do not understand why there is.”

Cyberbullying is an issue for young people as they can now get bullied online as well as face to face.”

“Young people, bullied people, don't want to tell anyone about it. Sometimes they're scared, sometimes they feel that nothing can be done, sometimes they just can't talk about it. Communication is what is lacking in all these areas of cyber-bullying.”

Your experiences of cyberbullying.

“I've had all kinds of things - from text messages and abusive calls (which were private calls and so therefore could not be tracked) all the way to emails, comments, and other such basic bullying tactics.....a friend from school...pretending to be me in several instances.”

“Over the course of three years one girl has fuelled the cyber bullying against me by writing defamatory blogs about my fiance and I.....and by convincing her friends to send not only myself, but my other friend rude comments. There have been threats against me.”

What can you do to protect yourself from cyberbullying?

“You do not have to accept anyone as a friend if you do not want to.”

“...don't give out your real name to strangers online. Generally, if you meet someone online, don't immediately trust them and start detailing your life story to them.”

“...having a 'secret' question is a good idea. Not trusting everyone online is another... Just simple common sense.”

“...someone of higher authority can step in to help. When in online forums, moderators and administrators should step in when things get too personal and get out of hand. When using sites like facebook and myspace.....an email sent to the administrators of the site can actually be a great help”

“It's interesting that a lot of young people are reluctant to tell their parents if they are being cyberbullied for fear of being 'disconnected'. I think parents of young people who are being cyber bullied need to be equipped to support their son/daughter in a way that is appropriate and doesn't inadvertently punish the victim.”

What do you think should be done about cyberbullying?

“I think there needs to be sites on the internet which young people can access help for cyber bullying as its not often something people like to talk about.”

“Definitely think there needs to be a bigger push on education.....and it might sound funny - but educating the teachers first, so that they can then teach students about it!”

“I wonder how the gov. can work with giants like facebook, myspace and msn to help build awareness about the problem.”

“I think there needs to be a comprehensive, multi-dimensional education program in our schools, including teacher resource kits, teacher training, allocation of time in the school syllabus, possibly PDHPE curriculum to facilitate learning outcomes.”

COMMENT

A number of key issues were identified by the Council as a result of research and the Online Forum.

- Research suggests that the anonymity of cyberspace may embolden young people who may not otherwise bully to participate in online bullying activities. This belief that they are anonymous allows bullies to behave in ways that are outside accepted social norms, without a fear of repercussion. The bully may believe that they are not able to be caught and punished for their actions. As a result of the anonymous method of bullying, cyberbullies do not have to witness the effect of their behaviour on the target. This lack of direct experience of the harm their actions cause reduces the likelihood of the bully having an empathetic reaction to the targets distress¹. There is also evidence that some young people who have been the victims of direct bullying then use technology to inflict bullying on others from a distance².

In order to counter the effect that anonymity has on potential online bullies it is important to encourage young people to develop their innate sense of right and wrong, even when the threat of punishment or exposure is absent. Young people should also be encouraged to recognise that cyberbullying activities do cause harm to others³.

- For many young people cyberbullying is an isolating and harmful experience. Anonymous cyberbullying may cause a young person to be unable to trust in others and encourage ongoing anxiety and fear. Cyberbullying in general may result in a young person experiencing depression or other more serious mental health problems, having interpersonal and social difficulties, and displaying poor school attendance and performance. In the most serious circumstances online bullying can result in long term mental health issues and suicide.

In attempting to provide information and resources to young people on the issue of cyberbullying it is important to recognise that for many young people there is a stigma attached in admitting that they have been bullied. The combination of this stigma and the negative effects mentioned above may mean that some young people are unwilling or unable to access help or support when experiencing online bullying. Their growing isolation and reluctance to identify themselves as having been cyberbullied presents a barrier to their accessing services and support. Encouraging a better community understanding of electronic bullying and its affects can not only assist in reducing the incidence of cyberbullying but also help to reduce the stigma which it attracts.

- Research indicates that cyberbullying may be more damaging to young people than face-to-face bullying for a number of reasons. The fact that the insults, comments or footage can be preserved either by the person who was bullied or others means that the target may read or view them repeatedly, re-inflicting harm with each reading or viewing. Those young people who are bullied in person will most likely not remember every word that was said, however those bullied online are able to repeatedly read or view the damaging material. In addition, the size of the audience that is able to view or access the damaging

¹ *Cyberbullying: a Virtual Menace*, Sheri Bauman, University of Arizona (Paper presented at the National Coalition Against Bullying National Conference, Melbourne, November 2007)

² As above

³ *Cyber-Bullying*, Dr Anne Bamford, University of Technology Sydney (Paper presented at the AHISA Pastoral Care National Conference, Melbourne, September 2004).

material increases the humiliation experienced by the target, which is likely to increase the damaging impact of the event⁴. The consultation results and other research indicates that many young people are friends with or know their cyberbully either through school or other personal connections, increasing the potential for embarrassment and humiliation. Social networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace allow cyberbullies to engage in campaigns against a particular person which may involve many others. The speed at which harmful messages can reach large audiences also plays a major part in making cyberbullying so damaging to the targets.

- The Online Forum conducted indicates that young people may be aware of basic strategies that they can use to protect themselves against cyberbullying, such as not giving out your real name or personal details, blocking people on social networking pages, email accounts and mobile phones, and keeping your profile on social networking sites private. However it appears that many young people are not aware of what steps they might take to deal with cyberbullying if it becomes more serious. Anecdotal evidence also suggests that some young people may be reluctant to seek help or advice from their parents as they are worried that their parents will restrict or remove their access to technologies. Both parents and young people would benefit from more information on cyberbullying in general, its affects on young people, strategies to prevent it from happening, and information on what steps can be taken if cyberbullying is taking place.

⁴ *Cyberbullying: a Virtual Menace*, Sheri Bauman, University of Arizona (Paper presented at the National Coalition Against Bullying National Conference, Melbourne, November 2007)

ADVICE TO THE MINISTER

The Council would like to provide the following recommendations to the Minister in response to the request for advice on strategies to build awareness of cyberbullying and its affects on young people.

It is recommended that the Government:

1. *Ensure that young people are educated about the effects and impacts of cyberbullying on mental health and self esteem. Provide better support and access to assistance to those young people experiencing cyberbullying.*

This may include organising programs such as peer to peer mentoring, peer mediation, school education programs, encouraging informal peer support, and providing information on services available to young people experiencing cyberbullying. It is important to provide appropriate training and support to any young people participating in mentoring or peer support programs.

2. *Work with existing services for young people, eg. Mind Matters, Reach Out, Headspace, to increase their capacity to specifically respond to and assist young people experiencing cyberbullying.*

3. *Work with telecommunications bodies and peaks, internet service providers and social networking websites to develop a central body which would act as a contact point to assist young people experiencing cyberbullying with practical steps to address the issue.*

This could include both a website and call centre which would assist young people with practical steps they could take to deal with their particular situation, and involve the relevant service provider or internet site in assisting the young person with their problem. Solutions which could directly involve service providers or internet sites include providing a one-number-for-all call service to block unwanted contact from specific numbers, and enabling easy blocking or removal of an abusive user from a website. This body could also facilitate training and workshops in schools, for parents or as otherwise required.

4. *Encourage a better awareness and understanding of the issue among parents and guardians of young people.*

This could include providing parent information evenings, including information in school newsletters, encouraging parents to talk to their children about the issue, and providing parents with practical advice on ways to work with their children to prevent cyberbullying and what to do when it occurs.

5. *Encourage better general community awareness of the impacts of cyberbullying on young people's mental health and self esteem, and reinforce the view that this type of activity is unacceptable within society.*

This could include developing a general awareness campaign which provides the community with information on the serious impacts of cyberbullying on young people, possibly using anonymous case studies which resulted in serious mental health outcomes or suicide to provide weight to the message. The campaign could also inform the community that cyberbullies may be breaking the law and that there are legal penalties for harmful and illegal online or mobile phone activities.

6. *Encourage a better awareness and understanding of the issue among teacher and school communities.*

This could include providing information and resources to teachers and schools, ensuring that teachers are able to assist and provide advice to students experiencing cyberbullying, and enabling teachers and schools to provide information sessions and resources to students and parents. The Council feels that the Government should focus on educating and providing resources to teachers and students rather than investing in technology which attempts to block or protect users from harmful messages and images, eg. firewalls, which are often ineffective and must be constantly updated.

7. *Include cyberbullying as a specific area of concern within the revised NSW Department of Education and Training Student Welfare Policy.*

8. *Encourage a cohesive national approach to the problem of cyberbullying by pursuing the issue through relevant national forums.*

REFERENCES

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