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Cyber bullying: issues for policy makers

Cyber bullying is a term used to describe covert, psychological bullying behaviours among mainly teenagers through email, chat rooms, mobile phones, text messages, mobile phone cameras and websites (Campbell 2005; Brown, Jackson & Cassidy 2006). As a relatively new phenomenon, there is limited research on cyber bullying. The rise of cyber bullying is attributed primarily to increased adolescent access to the internet and mobile phones, facilitated by the anonymity provided by the internet. Willard (2003, cited in Brown, Jackson & Cassidy 2006) noted that its appeal to teenagers comes from five factors:

- illusion of invisibility
- absence of visual or aural feedback from the online abuse or harassment, possibly resulting in lack of empathy for the victim
- image as a social norm
- avatars (online personas), where responsibility can be shifted from the offender to the avatar
- comfort communicating online, and therefore likelihood of retaliation through this medium.

Brown and colleagues suggest that cyber bullying could be a response to conventional bullying, where cyber bullies are the victims of bullies themselves. It appears more common among adolescents, who use technology to communicate with peers, than among younger children (Campbell 2005). Furthermore, it is recognised that it is harder to escape cyber bullies, as they cannot be avoided as easily as physical bullies. Canadian researchers who reviewed international cyber bullying literature note that the best interests of the bullied child should always be at the forefront of any policy response, but balanced with the rights of privacy, liberty, freedom of expression and security (Brown, Jackson & Cassidy 2006). They observed that internet service providers so far have been reluctant to intervene and remove offensive online material, in part for censorship concerns. The researchers considered prevention to be better targeted through school initiatives and recommended these policy approaches:

- schools should develop acceptable use policies that address school and home online use and behaviour
- students should have a voice in developing policy so it is consensual and not imposed
- strategies should empower victims and modify students' computer behaviour
- strategies should understand youth internet use and behaviours
- standards of responsibility should be developed in schools
- research should continue into the characteristics of cyber bullies, to help identify potential bullies
- parents' lack of awareness of the problem should be considered
- effectiveness should be evaluated constantly.

References

Brown K, Jackson M & Cassidy W 2006. Cyber-bullying: developing policy to direct responses that are equitable and effective in addressing this special form of bullying. *Canadian journal of educational administration and policy* 57

Campbell MA 2005. Cyber-bullying: an old problem in a new guise? *Australian journal of Guidance and Counselling* 15(1) 68–76