# Evaluation of an Innovative Cyberbullying Intervention: STOPit
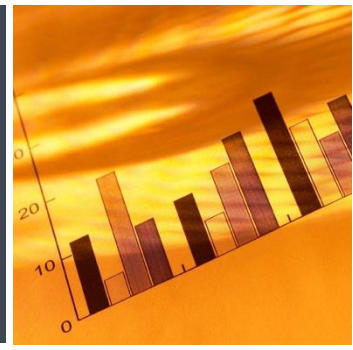
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## Background

Over recent years, the negative consequences of cyberbullying have been increasingly recognized, as has the importance of related interventions.

Cyberbullying, or willful and repeated harm inflicted through the use of electronic devices, involves threatening, harassing, embarrassing, or socially excluding someone using online technology. We know that cyberbullying can have negative impacts on the emotional, social, and physical health of children and youth, with some of those who are cyberbullied feeling isolated, fearful, lonely, and in despair. In some cases, these feelings may lead to acts of peer- or self-harm.

The effects of cyberbullying can differ from those of traditional bullying because electronic interfaces facilitate anonymity, increased dissemination, decreased supervision, and greater target accessibility. These factors also have implications for the development of appropriate interventions. Intervention approaches must also reflect the fact that students are often reluctant to discuss their cyberbullying experiences with adults and may fear the fallout should it be known that they reported a peer.

Recently, a number of electronic apps have been created to prevent and respond to cyberbullying. These provide a simplified and completely anonymous reporting system for students to quickly alert school staff about harmful or inappropriate behaviour.

One such application, STOPit, allows victims and witnesses to anonymously submit text messages or screen shots of bullying/cyberbullying incidents directly through the app to a designated school staff member. Using a complementary app, DOCUMENTit, this staff member can then respond to the student by text message and follow up on the incident.

## Method

STOPit and similar apps haven't yet been systematically implemented and evaluated in Canadian schools; prior to doing so, it is important to better understand their anticipated strengths and weaknesses. As such, the STOPit app's potential relevance and performance were assessed using a series of focus group sessions among school-aged youth (12-17) and adult professionals. For additional context, we also reviewed literature pertaining to cyberbullying prevention technologies, as well as similar technologies and apps.

## Findings

Overall, youth agreed that currently-available approaches to addressing cyberbullying are insufficient. They indicated that current approaches to preventing or intervening in cases of cyberbullying, and bullying in general, are limited, and they questioned their effectiveness.

Youth found the STOPit app to be highly functional, useful and innovative, particularly with regards to its anonymous feature and the possibility of sending fast text or video/image reports (for capturing proof via screenshots).

Youth indicated that trust, reputation, and credibility were necessary precursors for their potential use and acceptance of the platform – in particular, it was important to them to be informed of to whom their reports would be sent, and who would be responding. Technical functionality and capabilities, reporting and follow-up features, ease-of-use, and anonymity were also highly important to youth.

The adult professionals found the complementary app, DOCUMENTit, to be useful for capturing and tracking incidents as well as for statistical analysis, although

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some participants experienced difficulty navigating the online system. The adult professionals also raised issues that may be generalized to any cyberbullying prevention and intervention platform, including questions about capacity (school time and resources for managing the platform) and accountability (setting appropriate parameters and defining the scope of the school's mandate to deal with bullying both online and offline).

Finally, based on a review of the efficiency and economy of both STOPit and related platforms and apps, it is clear that these solutions have the potential to provide reasonable value-for-money when compared with other approaches.

## Implications

The best approaches to addressing cyberbullying are ones that are holistic in nature, including a tailored mix of prevention (e.g., awareness building, education, blocking), intervention (e.g., reporting, addressing incidents), and post-incident resolution methods (e.g., counselling). Cyberbullying is an issue that requires a coordinated approach from a community of professionals and practitioners, including school administration, educators, health professionals, families, law enforcement, technology providers, researchers, and the private sector.

STOPit and similar platforms align with these principles, and, overall, this examination showed that cyberbullying prevention and intervention technologies like STOPit could not only support existing approaches but may, in some ways (e.g., anonymity and ease-of use), be superior to them. Both students and adult professionals perceived existing approaches as not being very effective; on the other hand, they thought the STOPit app could serve to empower students with a tool for reporting or seeking advice, stop or prevent harmful situations, and equip school staff and administration with the information and means for targeted intervention and improvement.

Despite these advantages, the need for the STOPit app or others like it in any institutional setting might depend on contextual factors, such as school size and cultural characteristics or teacher/administration engagement. The advantages would also have to be confirmed after the app was widely implemented.

Given the current assessment focused on *potential* implications, it would be important to now progress to rigorously evaluating STOPit or a similar app once it was actually implemented. Ideally, implementation in a Canadian school setting would be planned concurrently with a high-quality evaluation study.

Overall, cyberbullying represents a serious challenge for many youth, and while further examination is needed to better understand how STOPit and similar apps contribute to mitigating the associated risks, these apps hold promise in being able to do so.

## Source

Gelder, Gingras & Associates. (June 2017). *Evaluation of a Cyberbullying Prevention/Intervention Initiative: Final Evaluation Report*. Prepared for Public Safety Canada, Community Safety and Countering Crime Branch, Research Division.

## Additional Sources

Hinduja, S. and Patchin, J.W. (2015). *Bullying Beyond the Schoolyard: Preventing and Responding to Cyberbullying*, 2nd Ed. Corwin Publications: California.

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