



Postscript

Cowie, H. (2011). Coping with the emotional impact of bullying and cyberbullying: how research can inform practice. *International Journal of Emotional Education*, 3(2): 50-56.

Despite more than two decades of anti-bullying initiatives in schools, children and young people regularly mention relationships within the peer group as the major factor that causes them to feel unsafe at school. The situation is complicated by the fact that these interpersonal safety issues are actually generated by the peer group and often in contexts that are difficult for adults to control. The recent upsurge of cyberbullying is a case in point. Teachers and parents often feel powerless to intervene in the private world that children and young people create for themselves. This article explores the strategies that are commonly recommended for dealing with cyberbullying and examines what research tells us about their effectiveness. The conclusion is that, whatever the value of technological tools for tackling cyberbullying, we cannot avoid the fact that this is also an interpersonal problem. The implication for practice is that we already know many approaches for preventing and reducing cyberbullying and should build on this knowledge rather than treating the issue as something completely new.

Keywords: bullying, cyberbullying, school, strategies, coping

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POSTSCRIPT

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This post script to an article originally written in 2011 takes account of changes that have occurred since then in the ways that children and young people use the social media. Although the fundamental message of the original article remains the same, the post script discusses key ways in which the article would differ if it were being written today. The focus here is on i) young people's need for connectedness which is increasingly met in online digital communities; the problems occur when young people are excluded or humiliated within these online communities; ii) the increase in

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moral disengagement on the part of bystanders in situations where humiliating messages and videos are widely circulated amongst the peer group; iii) changes in laws concerned with online harassment and abuse, and how these affect young people. The influence of the wider culture is also discussed.

Since the original paper was written in 2011, there have been substantial changes in the extent to which people engage with social media. Children and young people are surrounded, as never before, by digital systems which appear to be embedded in almost every aspect of their lives, offering easy and instant communication with others and access to media that can be live-streamed at any time of the day or night. It has been difficult for researchers, educators and parents to keep up with this rapid change. The argument of the original article still holds and the issues that were highlighted remain important, but if it were written today, the emphasis would shift away from the characteristics of the individuals directly involved in bullying to the social and cultural contexts where bullying flourishes.

If I were writing the article today, my first point would concern ‘connectedness’. Spears (2018) comments on the importance of ‘connectedness’ for young people today and the distinctive role that social networking plays in developing their sense of being part of a community where people instantly form new relationships, share experiences through photographs, videos and emojis, and keep in contact with friends and acquaintances. Many more young people now have access to smartphones which link them to digital communities far beyond the immediacy of their face-to-face friendship groups. Consequently, they can share and view large amounts of digital content which increasingly has a strong influence on their attitudes and perceptions of self and others. There are, of course, benefits, including widespread access to information, participation in groups that share interests, potential for online games and play and many other opportunities for building new relationships with others. However, there are probably even more concerns about bullying and cyberbullying, than there were when this article was originally written.

A proportion of children and young people do not perceive themselves as being connected and feel that they are excluded from social networking groups. This may be ‘justified’ by the bullies on the grounds of such factors as the victims’ appearance, their ethnicity, their gender, their sexual orientation. The impact of such public shaming or social exclusion can be catastrophic for the target child. At the time of the original article, ChildLine was alerting parents and professionals in the UK to the worrying number of calls by children about bullying and cyberbullying. Unfortunately, the latest UK report from ChildLine (Bentley et al., 2017) states that in 2016/2017 there were 12,248 counselling sessions with young people about online safety and abuse – a 9% increase on the previous year – of which 5,103 mentioned cyberbullying. Since the original article was written, there is a growing perception of the impact on mental health and social cohesiveness that bullying, like other forms of abuse, can have. Research (for example, Cassidy, Faucher & Jackson, 2013; Cowie & Myers, 2018) confirms the damaging effects that bullying continues to have on young people’s mental health, as was proposed in the original article. Just as importantly, bullying affects the social cohesiveness of groups and communities, both face-to-face and online. This leads to the next point, the issue of *moral disengagement*.

One serious outcome of bullying and cyberbullying is the indifference to peers’ suffering on the part of those who observe the bullying but who take no action to prevent it. Despite the best efforts of schools,

very few bystanders report an incident of cyberbullying to a parent or teacher. Purdy and York (2016) found that a message intended for one person or for a small group of friends could quickly be sent to strangers without the young person's consent, so exposing them to potential online abuse. Far from being uninvolved bystanders, witnesses to such cyberbullying often played a key participant role by forwarding unpleasant comments or embarrassing video clips to others "for a laugh" with full awareness of the emotional damage being done to the target child. While the emotional detachment of bullies is well-documented, recent research has placed more emphasis on the action (or inaction) of bystanders and their important role in determining whether the bullying continues or is challenged. Since the original article was published, there has been more focus on the range of participant roles that are enacted by children and young people and on the social contexts in which these roles emerge. The negative responses of witnesses and bystanders illustrate what Kyriacou and Zuin (2018) call 'moral disengagement', a callous disregard for the feelings of an individual member of their peer group as well as prejudice towards a whole group of young people, for example, those who are LGBT, those who are disabled or those who are refugees.

Recent research shows that video and internet games continue to pose a risk to young people because of the violent content that is predominant. Verheijen, Burk, Stoltz, van der Berg and Cillessen (2018) found in their study of 705 gaming adolescents in the US that for boys, but not for girls, exposure to violent video games predicted the aggression of their best friend one year later, whether or not the friends had played the video games together. The researchers concluded that this partner effect happened because violent games increased 'deviancy training' between the friends through such activities as expressing positive emotions towards characters' aggressive reactions and deriding targets on the grounds that they deserved to be attacked. As the researchers conclude, if peers approve of violence while gaming, long-term tolerance of aggression may develop as well as contempt for those who appear to be vulnerable and weak. Studies like these indicate the huge influence that digital media can have on young people's values, including their capacity to develop empathy for others in their peer group and a concern to support others when they are in distress. Such disregard for the impact of violence and abuse on another person can easily evolve into passive acceptance of cyberbullying where the drama of another's distress and humiliation becomes another form of online entertainment supported by the process of detachment from face-to-face interaction. Additionally, the digital media can reinforce negative perspectives of others who are perceived to be different in some way.

Since the original article was written, there have been changes to UK law on 'adult' abusive activity online. Many forms of internet abuse, such as harassment and intimidation through abusive emails and texts as well as online instances of hate crime over a period of time, are now illegal in the UK and in some other European countries. As Myers (2018) writes, this kind of behaviour quickly evolves into the arena of criminal activity, such as hate crime that targets LGBT people, asylum-seekers and members of particular faith groups, or sexual harassment. Since the original article was written, there has been greater emphasis on the boundaries between bullying and crime and the damage that is being done to whole sections of our society. This is an aspect of the issue that urgently needs to be investigated if we are to be more successful in addressing the issue of bullying.

The original article recommends the need to work with the relationship between perpetrator and target. To that I would add the urgent need to focus on the increase in intolerance and prejudice in society at large. Today, I now argue, the challenge for educators, healthcare professionals and policy-makers is to change the culture of an organisation, such as a school or a university, in order to address prejudiced behaviour and to promote reasoned debates about values and morals in a rapidly changing society. This means that we need to consider not only the relationships among children and young people but also the values of the wider peer group and the social contexts that facilitate more open and reasoned discussions about behaviour towards others that is fair and just.

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