ParentingNI
Supporting Families

Cyberbullying

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What is Cyberbullying?

Parents are very conscious of the impacts of bullying on their children, and many schools in recognition of the issue have developed robust anti-bullying policies and procedures. Additionally, there are a number of public bodies and third sector organisations that provide support for victims, parents and others with experience of bullying.

It is important to note that many aspects of bullying have changed. In Northern Ireland 39% of Year 6 pupils and 29% of Year 9 pupils reported being bullied (Department of Education NI, 2011). While some of this bullying is what is considered to be "traditional" – verbal abuse, physical threats or exclusion – around two thirds of bullying is spoken or written (NI Direct, 2019). Much of this takes now place online or via mobile phones, which falls under the definition of "cyberbullying".

Slonje and Smith (2008) defined cyberbullying as "aggression which occurs through modern technological devices, and specifically mobile phones or the internet". Cyberbullying is a real issue in Northern Ireland, as well. A report from June 2019 found that 22% of children in NI had recently had a nasty or unpleasant experience online. It was also significantly higher for girls – 27% - than for boys – 17% (BBC, 2019). This type of bullying often presents a serious challenge for parents. This is because, unlike physical bullying the discreet nature of children's usage of technology means that is can be much more difficult for parents, teachers or other supportive adults to notice it is occurring. Teachers in Northern Ireland described feeling a level of frustration in their attempts to deal with the growing and very complex problem of cyberbullying (Purdy & McGuckin, 2015).

Why Does Cyberbullying Matter?

Some have argued that because of a lack of physical presence, cyberbullying is "less serious" than traditional bullying. The advice to "just turn off" devices, block or ignore bullies however is insufficient. While there is less immediate threat in terms of violence, research has demonstrated that cyberbullying has dramatic effects on the wellbeing of children and young people. Victims of bullying of all types tend to have lower self-esteem, but "a statistically significant relationship exists between cyberbullying victimisation and offenders and self-esteem" (Patchin & Hinduja, 2010). Lower levels of self-esteem have negative impacts on academic and personal development.

The effects of cyberbullying are no less serious than those of traditional bullying, though the two often occur at the same time. Grossman and Rapp (2016) noted that victims of cyberbullying were more likely to be absent from school, depressed, suffer mental health issues and other negative effects. These may lead to negative physical health outcomes such as self-harm and in the most serious cases, cyberbullying has been linked to a victim being almost twice as likely to have suicidal ideation, and a perpetrator being 1.5 times as likely (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010).

One of the reasons that cyberbullying is particularly damaging psychologically is the fact that it is constantly in the child's life. Unlike traditional bullying, where the home or other places might provide a "safe space", with cyberbullying the victim may continue to receive text messages or emails wherever they are (Slonje & Smith, 2007).

Additionally, while children are usually very aware of who the perpetrator of traditional bullying is with cyberbullying cyberbullies can remain "virtually" anonymous through the use of temporary/throwaway e-mail and instant messaging accounts, anonymisers and pseudonyms on social networking sites (Patchin & Hinduja, 2010). While children typically know (or suspect) who the

perpetrator is, the layer of anonymity can make it challenging for parents or other authorities to identify them with certainty.

Another important distinction between cyberbullying and traditional bullying is the fact that the person carrying out the cyberbullying may be less aware of the consequences of their actions (Slonje & Smith, 2007). A report by Nottingham Trent University noted that cyberbullies are anonymous to the consequences of their actions online, which isn't the case with face-to-face bullying. This may lower the barrier to entry into bullying behaviour, and explain why children that might never be involved in traditional bullying may take part in cyberbullying.

Importantly, the negative effects often harm the perpetrator of the cyberbullying as well. While the most serious harm is inflicted upon the victim, those taking part in cyberbullying also have negative outcomes. Nixon (2014) found that perpetrators of cyberbullying are more likely to report increased substance use, aggression, and delinquent behaviours. Therefore, it is important for parents to be aware not only if their child is being bullied online, but also if they might be taking part in it.

What Can I do as a Parent?

Cyberbullying – or bullying in general is not a crime. Therefore, parents and schools cannot seek support specifically for it from the police. However, the PSNI note that if you are being or have been bullied, you may be the victim of a different sort of crime. The PSNI give 5 tips – called Take 5 – to address cyberbullying. These are:

1. Put down the mouse and step away from the computer....take 5 minutes to think!
2. The internet and mobile technology are very powerful. But if misused, they can also be dangerous to yourself and others.
3. When people act out of anger, frustration or fear things get out-of-hand quickly. Emotions create a situation where we click before thinking. We don't think about how the person on the other end could misunderstand our message or our intentions.
4. By not reacting and taking the time to calm down, we can avoid becoming a cyberbully ourselves. If you are the victim of bullying, speak to someone.
5. What can we do for 5 minutes to help us calm down? Get some exercise, call to a friend's house etc.

They also advise people to think very carefully about what they post online. Children should keep their online content private, but also be prepared for any images or messages they share to be viewed by the public. Talking to your child about the potential consequences of shared images or videos can be useful in preventing cyberbullying before it starts.

In addition to this, Family Lives, a UK family support charity suggests that parents look out for the following signs that your child might be being cyberbullied:

- Low self-esteem
- Withdrawal from family and spending a lot of time alone
- Reluctance to let parents or other family members anywhere near their mobiles, laptops etc
- Finding excuses to stay away from school or work including school refusal
- Friends disappearing or being excluded from social events
- Losing weight or changing appearance to try and fit in
- Fresh marks on the skin that could indicate self-harm and dressing differently such as wearing long sleeved clothes in the summer to hide any marks
- A change in personality i.e. anger, depression, crying, withdrawn

This is not an exhaustive list, but parents should keep an eye out for any sudden and unexplained changes in their child's mood or behaviour. This is equally true if you worry or suspect your child is taking part in cyberbullying. In this case, it is important to talk to your child about the potential harm they may be causing. Children may lack the emotional intelligence or empathy to fully understand that the messages, images or videos they comment on, post or share have consequences. Your child may think that it is "just a bit of fun". As a parent and an adult, you have the experience to explain the damage such behaviour can do.

If you discover that your child is the victim of cyberbullying, parents should:

- Get their child to show them any distressing or messages, as well as any new messages that come;
- Advise your child not to respond, and warn them that acting when angry can make things worse;
- Tell them that the bullying usually ends when they seek help.
- You should then see if the child knows (or suspects) who is bullying them, and contact the relevant adults. These might be teachers if it is a school colleague, a young group leader or other parents.

Finally, if you are struggling with cyberbullying in your family, there are a number of organisations that can provide help and support. Parenting NI can support parents whose children are either involved with or victims of cyberbullying.