

Cyber bullying and online safety

Guidelines for professionals

What risks are young people facing online?

Although the benefits of the internet far outweigh the potential dangers, professionals must be aware of the very real risks young people may be exposed to online.

Cyber bullying

Cyber bullying is the misuse of digital technologies or communications to bully a person or a group, typically through messages or actions that are threatening and/or intended to cause offence, anxiety or humiliation.

Behaviour that is classed as cyber bullying includes:

Abusive comments, rumours, gossip and threats made over the internet or using other digital communications – this includes internet trolling.

Sharing pictures, videos or personal information without the consent of the owner and with the intent to cause harm and/or humiliation.

Hacking into someone's email, phone or online profiles to extract and share personal information, or to send abusive or inappropriate content while posing as that person.

Creating specific websites that negatively target an individual or group, typically by posting content that intends to humiliate, ostracise and/or threaten.

Blackmail, or pressurising someone to do something online they do not want to such as sending a sexually explicit image.

Privacy and information sharing

Many social media sites allow young users to host a public profile, which means the content they share online could potentially be visible to millions of people worldwide.

This presents obvious concerns regarding children's privacy, especially because leading sites aggressively prompt users to share:

- personal contact details;
- photographs or videos of themselves and their friends;
- names of the schools and clubs they attend;
- their exact locations at any given time through the use of location tagging features.

Digital footprints

Due to the lack of face-to-face communication in cyberspace, there is a tendency for the offline world to be referred to as the 'real world'. This can be a damaging notion, as it often leads young people to act with less caution when using the internet. Misbehaviour most commonly includes:

- involvement in visible, public arguments;
- the expressing of opinions that can be interpreted as offensive or aggressive;
- participation in cyber bullying through posting, sharing or commenting on malicious content.

Not only will this behaviour be damaging to others, it can often have severe consequences for the people involved. Once content is posted, nobody has control of where it might end up—even if someone uses the strictest of privacy settings on their social media profiles. If this content is offensive, they may find themselves in trouble with peers, their school or even the police. Universities and employers have been known to check the digital footprints of applicants, so negative activity can also affect a young person's educational and professional opportunities.

Grooming and sexual abuse

Grooming is the action of an adult befriending a child with the intent to prepare them for sexual abuse or exploitation. It is not a one-off event, but a process of engaging with them, tapping into their hobbies and vulnerabilities and building a falsely perceived connection.

Social media, interactive gaming and chat rooms can be the first point of contact. Abusers are able to hide behind false online identities and talk to young people with greater ease, out of the direct observation of others.

Exposure to pornographic and violent material

Inappropriate content doesn't have to be intentionally sourced. Often children will stumble across it by chance; disguised under seemingly innocent website links, attachments, or even circulated on leading social media sites. The most concerning material includes:

- extreme or abusive pornography;
- excessive violence or explicit physical attacks;
- hateful material expressing racist, sexist, homophobic or transphobic opinion;
- harmful and disturbing advice encouraging eating disorders, self-harm or suicide.

Sexualisation

Young people often feel under a lot of pressure to act provocatively. This pressure can come directly from peers, or indirectly through the commercialisation of sex in mainstream media and marketing channels. This pressure can motivate young people to:

- post provocative images of themselves on social media;
- perform sexual acts over webcam, send someone sexually explicit photographs or pressurise others into doing so;
- search for pornographic images and videos.

Key statistics

In research carried out by the National Foundation for Educational Research*, 91% of secondary school teachers and 52% of primary school teachers said that pupils in their school had experienced cyberbullying.

A survey circulated by the Anti-Bullying Alliance**, showed that 44% of teachers claimed that they would not know how to respond to cyber bullying, and 69% stated that they do not believe children are being taught enough about cyber bullying and online safety through the national curriculum.

EU Kids Online*** spoke to children and young people about what bothers them on the internet. Research found that content risks dominate children's concerns—58% identified pornographic, violent or other content risks first. The second highest concern was conduct-related, which researchers suggest is no doubt due to cyber bullying and sexting being widely linked to the use of personal and networked devices.

*ASTON, H. and BRZYSKA, B. (2012). *Protecting Children Online: Teachers' perspectives on eSafety*. Slough: National Foundation for Educational Research on behalf of Vital

**Survey commissioned by legal experts Slater and Gordon and the Anti-Bullying Alliance. Conducted using OnePoll in October 2013.

***LIVINGSTONE, S., KIRWIL, L. PONTE, C. and STAKSRUD, E. (2013). *In their own words: what bothers children online?* London: EU Kids Online Network with London School of Economics & Political Science.

Creating an e-safety strategy

Organisations that work with children and young people must take a proactive approach to protecting them from cyber bullying and online risk, instead of only reacting once an incident occurs. It is imperative that these issues are discussed early and often, and procedures are firmly in place to safeguard students and staff. To create an adequate e-safety strategy, the following steps should be incorporated.

An e-safety policy is paramount

Despite the internet being fully integrated into the lives and education of children, schools and organisations working with

young people often do not have an adequate e-safety policy. This is extremely important, as the issues related to online behaviour are complex and need to be covered in appropriate detail. This is to ensure that both young people and staff are protected, know what is deemed appropriate behaviour, and are aware of the sanctions that will be implemented if rules are broken.

For guidance on writing an e-safety policy, see Kidscape's policy checklist. www.kidscape.org.uk/professionals

Take cyber bullying very seriously

Cyber bullying is extremely damaging as the abuse is inescapable, it follows the target everywhere. When posted online the audience and potential for escalation is large, and more often than not, the content is permanent.

It is imperative that when a cyber bullying incident is reported that it be taken very seriously and investigated; following the protocols set within the organisation's e-safety and anti-bullying policies, supporting the target and adequately disciplining the perpetrators.

Educate, educate, educate!

Specific lessons and activities about cyber bullying and online risk will ensure young people are equipped with the knowledge to recognise suspicious or bullying behaviour and protect themselves from harm. To ensure messages are streamlined and firmly embedded, create links across the curriculum, for example between PSHE and ICT, and repeat lessons throughout every Key Stage. Lessons should cover:

- The risks associated with using the internet—particularly in regards to communications and social networking;
- How to protect themselves from these potential risks and recognise suspicious or bullying behaviour;
- The definition of cyber bullying and its different forms;
- The effects of cyber bullying on the target and how to treat each other's online identities with respect;
- The consequences of negative online behaviour;

- How to report cyber bullying and/or incidents that make them feel uncomfortable or under threat;
- The school/organisation's stance on e-safety and online protocol, and how it will discipline those who misbehave.

Champion reporting

Encourage young people to always tell staff about cyber bullying or anything they see online that makes them feel uncomfortable such as adult or violent content, or if someone they do not know has been contacting them. Young people often do not report cyber bullying incidents because they worry about repercussions. And if they stumble across content such as pornography, they will usually feel too embarrassed to bring it up, or assume they will get in trouble. To combat this it is important that these topics are addressed in class, to dispel any awkwardness, encourage open discussion and give young people the tools to protect themselves.

Understand the power of bystanders

Bystanders play a pivotal role in preventing and tackling cyber bullying. As well as championing reporting, have specific lessons on what young people can do if they see it happen, and how not to get involved i.e. do not pass messages on, report it to an adult and encourage perpetrators to stop e.g. by posting "this is not nice" under an offensive message.

Recognise the signs

Through keeping a keen eye on young people's behaviour and the social balances of peer groups, professionals are often able to tell when something might be wrong. Observe dynamics at break times and pick up on conversations or gossip that suggests a young person is worried about something or there is conflict between individuals or groups.

If a young person is experiencing cyber bullying, they may exhibit the following signs:

- Appear depressed or anxious.
- Become withdrawn and disengaged.

- Have a loss of friends.
- Increasing absence or sickness.
- Declining grades and a lack of interest in school.
- Avoids or stops using technology.

Invest in staff training

Professionals working with young people often do not feel adequately prepared to deal with cyber bullying or online safeguarding incidents. For any e-safety strategy to work, all staff must understand its importance and know how and when to implement policies and procedures.

Most importantly, staff must be equipped with the skills and knowledge to educate young people about cyber bullying and online risk, and appropriately deal with incidents when they occur.

In addition to offering basic and advanced CPD courses in e-safety, Kidscape specialist trainers can deliver a range of bespoke workshops for professionals and young people in a setting of your choice. We offer training for SMTs in how to implement an e-safety strategy, which includes guiding them through the process of writing policies and advising on anti-bullying initiatives that would be appropriate to their needs.

Find out how we can tailor our delivery to your school's or organisation's requirements by contacting us at training@kidscape.org.uk or on **020 7730 3300**

Involve parents

Parents are intrinsic to ensuring an e-safety strategy is successful. Invite them to workshops about online risk and safeguarding issues; giving them practical tips on how they can reiterate messages and protect their children online in the home environment. Ensure the efforts of the school or organisation are shared, and that each parent understands the protocols in place for reporting incidents, and how complaints will be managed.

Further resources

E-safety should be addressed as part of a wider safeguarding strategy that covers bullying and behaviour. Please visit the Kidscape website for further resources that offer guidance in this area. www.kidscape.org.uk/professionals