INQUIRY INTO BULLYING OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

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Legislative Council

General Purpose Standing Committee No 2

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<u>Cyber bullying - What, When, How and Why?</u>

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Cyber bullying - What, When, How and Why?

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An October 2006 study tour to the United States of America highlighted the growth in popularity of internet technology, especially with youth, which has seen cyber bullying and harassment emerging as the number one issue confronting the safety and well being of young people and the wider community. Together with associated technology including 3G mobile telephones, 'live' gaming sites, virtual worlds and the explosion of social networking sites such as Facebook & MySpace, today's youth have access to and are accessible by many millions of people worldwide.

In 2005, the Australian Broadcasting Authority and NetAlert Ltd, commissioned a report into the behaviours and attitudes of both young people (particularly those aged between eight and 13 years) and their parents regarding internet use in the home (ABA, 2005). Key findings from the report were that 37% per cent of children accessed the Internet on a daily basis with a further 33% accessing it two to three times per week. The report also found that the age at which children are accessing the Internet for the first time is declining. Just over one-third of young

children (aged eight or nine) surveyed in the study had started using the Internet at age five or six. Of older children aged 12 or 13, the largest proportion first accessed the Internet at age nine or ten (ABA, 2005).

Australian Bureau of Statistics June 2006 shows that there were almost 6 million active internet subscribers in Australia. In Victoria there are in excess of 1.4 million internet subscribers. Education at a Glance: OECD Indicators 2002 figures show that 90.2% of 15 year old Australians have at least one computer at home, which places Australia 4th in the world.

Globalisation means it is just as simple to be on line to a person anywhere in the world, as it is someone in the next street. The unprecedented amount of personal information available on these sites makes them a perfect place for people who would happily identify their victims and gain their trust. This trust can then be used to lure teens into a false sense of security, making them vulnerable to grooming and enticement to meet in person, often for the purposes of engaging the young person in sex. Other identified dangers include exposure to inappropriate content, cyber bullying and harassment. Young people are not aware that their words and or photos, which may have been intended for a small audience, sometimes find their way to a larger one, often with both unexpected and undesirable consequences.

A detailed study in America by the National Centre for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC), 'On-line Victimisation of Youth 2000 &

2005' Finkelhor et al, showed a disturbing trend in the incidence of internet offences against children, with 19 percent subjected to an unwanted sexual solicitation in the past year, 25 percent subjected to unwanted exposure to sexual material and 6 percent subjected to harassment and bullying, a trend that we are now seeing here.

One of the key areas of concern for society in recent times is the apparent rise in the use of ICT by young people to stalk, bully and harass others. Indeed, Campbell (2005) writes that *peer bullying of young people using email, texting, chat rooms, mobile phones, mobile phone cameras and web sites has become a global phenomenon.* Despite this, she reports that the problem has yet to receive the attention it deserves, particularly in the academic literature (Campbell, 2005).

Many young people are being subjected to dangerous and inappropriate experiences on the internet. The offences and offenders are diverse and the primary vulnerable population is young people. A recent study by Edith Cowan University, Western Australia, showed that at least 10% of young people using the internet have been cyber bullied. Studies from the United Kingdom, report the figure at 25%. We know that most, if not all cyber bullying is conducted by peers; someone from school or the victims social/sporting circle, but often conducted with a belief that cyberspace can provide them with a degree on anonymity.

The issues of cyber bullying, online safety and the problematic nature of ICT has received a great deal of attention in the print and electronic

media following a number of high profile incidents including the digital filming and distribution via the sale of DVD's of the physical and sexual assault of an intellectually disabled Werribee teenager, the filming and distribution, via the video sharing site YouTube and MySpace, of a 15yo girl having sex in the shower with her then boyfriend and more tragically, the recent suicide of a young male from Melbourne who jumped off the Westgate Bridge after being the victim of cyber bullying. The trauma for the victim of the Werribee DVD has been further exacerbated with the release this week of a 'rap' song, allegedly by one of the male offenders in which he mocks the victim, her father and the law. This young girl is an example of the extreme nature of cyber bullying. The psychological effects will be substantial.

Whereas traditional school bullying occurred within the confines of the school grounds, cyberbullying has no such boundaries. Where once the victim could escape to the safety of their home, the bully now has uninvited, unlimited access their victim via technology. It is the invasiveness of the technology that deprives children of their privacy. This alone has been seen to have a significant psychological impact on a victim.

While Australian based research is scant, we do know from overseas research and our own anecdotal experiences that females are represented in slightly greater numbers as both offender and victim. This would follow on from the premise that historically it is females who

tended to engage in verbal bullying and males in physical bullying. Females are more involved in name calling and psychological bullying in real life so the move to the use of technology to facilitate this is an obvious outcome.

There is strong research evidence to suggest that adolescents in general and male adolescents in particular, are developmentally less able to make informed safety decisions about personal safety and security than are adults. The US National Institute of Mental Health (2001) reports that MRI studies are shedding light on how teens may process emotions differently than adults. These studies have shown the remarkable changes that occur in the brain during the teen years, and also demonstrate that the teenage brain is a very complicated and dynamic arena, one that is not easily understood.

The American Bar Association (ABA, 2004), Juvenile Justice Centre released a report that considered the new understanding of adolescent brain develop to explore the issue of criminal culpability. The article provides a useful and readily understandable précis of the latest research understanding of adolescent brain development and decision making. It also helps us to understand why adolescents and young people are more prone to partake in risky behaviours by potential victims, thus making it harder for likely offenders to be able to victimise the target. The final tack is to provide capable guardianship, which can

be understood as providing a police presence, or at the very least a perception of a police presence, in cyberspace.

The article quotes Jay Giedd, a researcher at the National Institute of Mental Health, who explains that during adolescence the *"part of the brain that is helping organization, planning and strategizing is not done being built yet.... It's sort of unfair to expect [adolescents] have adult levels of organizational skills or decision making before their brain is finished being built."* Dr. Deborah Yurgelun-Todd of Harvard Medical School has studied the relation between these new findings and teen behaviour and concluded that adolescents often rely on emotional parts of the brain, rather than the frontal lobe. She explains, *"one of the things that teenagers seem to do is to respond more strongly with gut response than they do with evaluating the consequences of what they're doing."* Also, appearances may be deceiving: *"Just because they're physically mature, they may not appreciate the consequences or weigh information the same way as adults do. So we may be mistaken if we think that [although] somebody looks physically mature, their brain may in fact not be mature."* This discovery gives us a new understanding into juvenile delinquency. The frontal lobe is "involved in behavioral facets germane to many aspects of criminal culpability," explains Dr.Ruben C. Gur, neuropsychologist and Director of the Brain Behavior Laboratory at the University of Pennsylvania. *"Perhaps most relevant is the involvement of these brain regions in the control of aggression and other impulses.... If the neural ubstrates of these behaviors have not reached maturity before*

adulthood, it is unreasonable to expect the behaviors themselves to reflect mature thought processes. "The evidence now is strong that the brain does not cease to mature until the early 20s in those relevant parts that govern impulsivity, judgment, planning for the future, foresight of consequences, and other characteristics that make people morally culpable.... Indeed, age 21 or 22 would be closer to the 'biological' age of maturity." (ABA, 2004)

It is clear from this new understanding of adolescent brain development that children, adolescents and the developmentally impaired need extra protection from the dangers present in ICT.

On the 24th May 2007, the Minister for Education, Science and Training, the Hon Julie Bishop MP, launched National Safe Schools Week 2007, and announced funding of $200,000 for two important research projects into bullying.

"This important, annual week focuses on the outstanding achievements of our schools in providing a learning environment free from all forms of bullying, harassment, violence, abuse and neglect."

The National Safe Schools Framework was developed by the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs. It incorporates existing good practice and provides an agreed national approach to help schools and their communities address issues of

bullying, harassment, violence, and child abuse and neglect. It is a collaborative effort by the Australian Government and State and Territory government and non-government school authorities and other key stakeholders. It presents a way of achieving a shared vision of physical and emotional safety and wellbeing for all students in all Australian schools.

The school-based strategies would also better educate students about the extent and consequences of cyber bullying through a comprehensive information campaign.

The Minister said the filming and passing on of inappropriate material, for example, could be treated as an offence and would be dealt with in a serious manner by schools and relevant authorities. The new strategy supports recent moves by the Government to restrict student access to selected video sharing websites such as YouTube. (PS News Issue 70. 9 May 2007).

This approach is consistent with the findings of Campbell (2005), who writes that peer helper programs, buddy programs and transition programs all support the ethos of a school to help one another. Curriculum programs incorporating the direct teaching of values education, empathy training and the use of stories and drama embedded in the curriculum, as well as direct teaching of 'netiquette', could all help to reduce cyber bullying. In summary it would seem that the prevention

of cyber bullying could be very similar to the prevention of face-to-face bullying (Campbell, 2005)

One of the first reactions of many adults, teachers as well as parents, is to punish cyber bullies. In fact, both Education Queensland (Gregory, 2004) and New South Wales Education Department ('U R out!', 2004) have released policies on cyber bullying stating that punishments of suspension and exclusion are the only options for these bullies. While most research has shown that the no-blame interventions work best for face-to-face bullies (Young, 1998) the seemingly 'get-tough' approach is the one that is opted for, presumably to appease adults (Campbell, 2005).

The perceived anonymity and disinhibition provided by the impersonal interface that is the internet gives many young people a sense of 'bravado' and 'dutch courage.' The fact that they are not able to see a reaction from the victim adds to their sense that what they are doing is acceptable and not causing harm. Another salient point is that very few of the young people who engage in online bullying and harassment are even aware that they may be breaking the law and that they are leaving themselves open to prosecution if a report is made to police. Reports of this type of behaviour are increasing and as a child's technological ability will far outweigh their psychological development for many years, the wider community must take responsibility to assist and guide young people in relation to what is acceptable use of technology. Failure to do

so will result in a generation of young people with a skewed sense of reality, and increase in both offending and victimisation of and by young people and the resultant negative impact on society.

Educational programs must be put in place to address the needs of young people, schools, parents and the wider community. Internet bullying, harassment and the victimisation of young people through online solicitation must be openly and honestly discussed to ensure that prevention strategies are either included in any existing school based programs or subsequently form an integral part of any personal safety program. The whole community must be made aware of the potential dangers of the vast online environment, and opportunities for teachers and parents to be educated in this area will be paramount.

If not promptly addressed, Victoria and Australia will run the risk of raising a cohort of children who have a distorted view of legal and moral acceptability in relation to the issues raised by this paper.