INQUIRY INTO BULLYING OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

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Invited submission to Inquiry into the bullying of children and young people.

What to do about cyberbullying?

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Cyberbullying is bullying through technology. Many people (including teachers) confuse cyberbullying with anything bad about children using the Internet. I am often asked to speak about cyber safety issues as if this was the direct opposite of cyberbullying. So if cyberbullying is only one bad thing that can happen through technology, should we concentrate on the bullying or the technology? People these days want a quick fix and it is tempting to consider a quick technological fix for cyberbullying. Schools can block sites such as MySpace and Bebo and YouTube but as most cyberbullying is done outside of school then unless parents also do not allow students to access these sites then it will not stop cyberbullying. In the same way some parents think that by blocking pornographic sites that will stop cyberbullying. Or having a Net Nanny will stop students sending threatening and bullying emails or ostracising in chatrooms. A device which when inserted into a mobile phone records all text messages and is admissible in court evidence is sometimes advocated to stop cyberbullying. Advice such as not talking to strangers online and not giving out your password is good for cyber safety but won't work for cyberbullying. I don't believe technological solutions are the complete answer for cyberbullying because cyberbullying is one form of bullying and we shouldn't be so concerned with the technology but the bullying.

Is cyberbullying a problem or a media beat up? Is it increasing? It is very hard to tell if it is from good research studies. This is because of the short length of time that researchers have been looking at the problem, the inordinate length of time between collection of data and publication and the fact that some studies are not defining bullying but rather asking if young people have ever had a nasty text message sent to them. This completely inflates any prevalence of so-called bullying. What can we do? The first thing is to know and recognise all forms of bullying and understand the seriousness of the consequences. It has been shown that teachers recognise physical bullying and feel they should always intervene. In fact, teachers often don't discriminate between any physical aggression and bullying. Not that either is right, but teachers often don't believe that bullying is an intentional, unprovoked act of harm with an imbalance of power which is usually repeated. However, research has shown that verbal and relational, or social, bullying has greater detrimental consequences than physical bullying. It is harder to detect and people think it is not as serious. Then take cyberbullying, almost impossible to detect and perhaps adults are totally shocked by it. Remembering that students' distress could come from bullying, especially if there is a change in behaviour, slipping grades, more absenteeism, or they are more anxious and upset.

The second strategy is how we treat the victims of cyberbullying. We won't usually know, so that mostly the victims will tell us. That is very unusual as victims are embarrassed and humiliated, feel they won't be believed and think that adults will make it worse by punishing the bully who will then retaliate. Instead of grilling them

about who did it and what did they do, perhaps a better approach is acknowledge their courage in telling you, that you are pleased that they chose you to help them and then ask how would they liked to be helped. This empowers a disempowered student. Some teachers think that is dangerous. It isn't but it does take more time.

The third strategy is how we help cyberbullies. There are usually two points in time when children start to bully. Either they start very young to aggress to get their own way and about Year 4 discover that vulnerable children are easier to bully. If their behaviour goes undiscovered they learn by high school to be very good bullies. These students are very difficult to help. The other point is early adolescence when students are searching for their own identity and finding their place socially. They often "try on" bullying behaviours. This is when the incidence of all forms of bullying peaks. Educative measures and not just sanctions need to be implemented.

I have also attached 3 published papers I have written.