

INQUIRY INTO BULLYING OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Organisation: Inspire Foundation
Name: Ms Kerry Graham
Position: Chief Executive Officer
Date received: 16/03/2009

The Hon Robyn Parker MLC
 Committee Chair for the Inquiry into Bullying of Children & Young People
 General Purpose Standing Committee No.2
 Legislative Council
 Parliament House
 Macquarie St
 Sydney NSW 2000

Inspire
 inspiring young people

13th March 2009

Dear Hon. Ms Parker,

Re: Submission to the Inquiry into the Bullying of Children and Young People

Thank you for your invitation to make a submission to the **NSW Legislative Council's General Purpose Standing Committee No.2 Inquiry into the bullying of children and young people.** Please find attached the Inspire Foundations submission.

The Inspire Foundation is a national non-profit organisation established in 1996 in response to the then escalating rates of youth suicide. Inspire's vision is to have a global impact on young people's mental health and wellbeing by creating opportunities for young people to change their world through technology based programs.

The information and recommendations included in this submission have been developed as a result of Inspire's extensive experience in working with young people to develop effective technology based programs aimed at improving young people's mental health and well-being. The research into and implementation of Inspire's Str8Up project on online safety means organisation has a unique contribution to make to this inquiry in regards to cyber-bullying. Based on this research and experience Inspire considers the best practice approach to addressing cyber-bullying is a harm minimisation approach integrated with elements of the peer education model. Such an approach ensures the importance of technology and the internet in young people's lives are recognised and the measures proposed as considered credible.

We hope that you find the information and recommendations included in this submission of significant to use to this inquiry into this important issue. Please do not hesitate to contact me further should you wish to discuss our submission.

Kind regards,



Ms Kerry Graham
 Chief Executive Officer
 Inspire Foundation

National Office
 Inspire Foundation
 PO Box 1790
 Rozelle NSW 2039
 t. +61 2 8585 9300
 f. +61 2 8585 9349

Melbourne Office
 Inspire Foundation
 C/- River Capital
 Level 15, Como Office Tower
 644 Chapel Street
 South Yarra VIC 3141
 t. +61 3 9825 5177
 f. +61 3 9825 5178
 ABN 27 075 428 787
 DGR 442 641
 info@inspire.org.au
 www.inspire.org.au



Submission to the NSW Legislative Council General Purpose Standing Committee No.2

Inquiry into bullying of children and young people

The Inspire Foundation, March 2009

About the Inspire Foundation

The Inspire Foundation is a national non-profit organisation established in 1996 in response to the then escalating rates of youth suicide. Inspire's vision is to have a global impact on young people's mental health and wellbeing. With the mission to create opportunities for young people to change their world, Inspire serves young people aged 16-25 through two national, technology-based programs:

Reach Out! (www.reachout.com.au) provides information, support and resources to improve young people's understanding of mental health issues, develop resilience, increase coping skills and facilitate help-seeking behaviour.

ActNow (www.actnow.com.au) provides young people with opportunities to find out more about their world and take action on the issues they care about.

Young people are at the centre of all Inspire does — as partners in the development and delivery of all Inspire initiatives. Inspire uses innovative technology to reach young people and build trusted social brands that are a part of their landscape. Inspire's work is evidence-based and underpinned by research and evaluation, conducted in partnership with academic institutions and research centres including the ORYGEN Youth Health Research Centre at the University of Melbourne and the Brain Mind and Research Institute (BMRI) at the University of Sydney.

Introduction

The Inspire Foundation welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this inquiry into bullying of children and young people by the NSW Legislative Council General Purpose Standing Committee No. 2.

Based on the expertise and experience of the Inspire Foundation in working with young people to develop and deliver effective online programs aimed at improving young people's mental health and wellbeing, this submission will address the four of the inquiry's terms of reference in the following way:

No. 1: 'Nature, level and impact of bullying' Information on the nature and level of cyber-bullying among young people.

No.2: 'Factors contributing to bullying': Explanation of why technology and the internet are not contributing factors to bullying but rather enablers for young people's mental health and well-being.

No.3: 'Prevention and early intervention approaches to address bullying, including 'cyber-bullying'': Explanation and evidence of the harm minimisation approach and peer education model as the best practice approaches to addressing cyber-bullying.

No.5: Evidence-base for effective anti-bullying approaches: Evidence from Inspire's Str8Up project supporting the effectiveness of harm minimisation approaches and peer education models in preventing and addressing cyber-bullying.



The Nature, Level and Impact of Cyber-Bullying

Based on Inspire's experience working with young people in online environments and research into the issue, we define 'cyber-bullying' as a form of bullying, which is carried out through an internet service such as email, chat room, discussion group, online social networking, instant messaging or web pages. It can also include bullying through mobile phone technologies such as SMS.

Examples of cyber-bullying behaviour include:

- Teasing and being made fun of;
- Spreading of rumours online;
- Sending unwanted messages; and
- Defamation.

Cyber-bullying can happen to anyone and the bully can act anonymously if they want. People can also be bullied online by groups of people such as class groups or collective members of an online community.

The number of reports of cyberbullying to the NetAlert Helpline has been increasing, particularly since 2006. An online safety survey conducted by NetAlert and ninemsn in February 2007 found that:

- 16% of young people said they had been bullied online, while 14% were bullied through their mobile, with boys and girls experiencing similar levels.
- 56% thought it was easy to get bullied online.

Inspire therefore recognises cyber-bullying as a problem experienced by young people, however, emphasis that data suggests online bullying is less than offline bullying. As the following section will demonstrate, Inspire advocates for a measured and considered approach when looking at the role of technology and the internet in the bullying of children and young people.

Factors Contributing to Bullying: The Role of Technology in Bullying

While cyber-bullying is a significant concern, according to the United States Internet Safety Technical Task online risks 'are not radically different in nature or scope than the risks minors have long faced offline, and minors who are most at risk in the offline world continue to be most at risk online'. This position reflects Inspire's own experience of working with young people, with workshop facilitators from the Str8Up project on online safety observing that in terms of online harassment, it seemed many experiences were analogous or rooted in existing bullying/harassment dynamics – that is, they were not specific to the online environment.

As the following section will demonstrate, Inspire recognises the need to address cyber-bullying but advocates for a harm minimisation approach as opposed to an approach that restricts young people's access and use of technology and the internet. This position is based on evidence and experience of such restrictive approaches being ineffective and therefore not outweighing the negative impacts it has on technology and the internet's enabling characteristics for young people.



Harm Minimisation and Peer Education as Best Practice Approaches to Prevention and Early Intervention of Cyber-Bullying.

In 2007 Inspire conducted research on online safety in relation to young people by looking at current literature on young people's internet use and risk behaviours, reviewing existing internet safety resources and conducting consultative focus groups with young people and youth workers in South Australia. From this research Inspire found the following in relation to approaches to addressing cyber-bullying:

- Cyber-bullying/harassment is a key online risk area for young people;
- Many existing online safety programs emphasise a 'restrictive' approach to promoting online safety in which access to technologies is limited to minimise risk exposure;
- Few online safety resources adequately addressed cyber bullying;
- A large proportion of young people who participated in focus group discussions demonstrated relatively high awareness of online safety risks, and similarly, many reported already employing risk reduction strategies to stay safe online;
- Young people in the focus groups were dissatisfied with safety initiatives that restrict or limit Internet access;
- Approaches based on restriction to technology or the internet are considered by young people in the focus groups to be easily circumvented;
- Restrictive approaches may discourage young people from discussing online safety issues openly and/or reporting problems;
- A large number of young people reported experiencing (either as 'victims' or 'perpetrators') cyber bullying but also acknowledged that such behaviours are not exclusively products of the technology, but rather existing social norms and attitudes. This was reflected in the literature;
- There was a prevailing attitude amongst young people that teachers, parents and youth workers didn't really understand technology/how young people use the Internet and therefore weren't in a position to (credibly) advocate safe Internet practices.

As a result of this research, and its experience with the Str8Up workshop which was modelled on this research, Inspire considers the best practice approach to prevention and early intervention to address cyber-bullying to be a harm minimisation approach, integrated with elements of the peer research model.

Harm Minimisation

The harm minimisation model has been successfully applied to a range of health issues (most notably in sexual health promotion and alcohol and other drug prevention and intervention). A harm-minimisation approach considers the actual harms associated with online practices and focuses on how these harms can be minimised or reduced. It recognises that some practices are, and will continue to be, a part of our young people's online experience. Hence, it focuses on empowering individuals to make informed decisions about risk behaviours.

Based on research and experience Inspire advocates for the harm minimisation approach in regards to the prevention and early intervention of cyber-bullying for 3 main reasons:

- 1) Young people are much less responsive to, and may in fact circumvent or dismiss, approaches that limit access or advocate against interacting with people online;



- 2) Emerging evidence (Ybarra et al., 2007) that online safety promotion messages that contradict or fail to recognise widely accepted online behaviours may lack credibility with young people;
- 3) Technology and the internet are enablers for young people in regards to social interaction, identity formation, education and self-directed learning, mental health and well-being and civic engagement. The opportunities, on which restrictive approaches would negatively impact, far outweigh the risks to cyber-bullying, which could be addressed through harm minimisation.

The Str8Up project is an example of how the harm minimisation approach and peer educator model can be translated into practices that aim to prevent and address the issue of cyber-bullying for young people. The project involved:

- Face-to-face training with young people and youth workers in youth centres;
- The production of print based resources including an information and referral card for young people and an 'online cheat sheet' for youth workers;
- Information and tips for young people about how to stay safe online and the resources and support available should an incident occur. These are posted online sites at which the interaction occurs therefore making them easily accessible to those most likely to need them.

The aim of any practice or program aimed at preventing or addressing cyber-bullying should be to:

- Increase knowledge of online safety risks;
- Increase knowledge of strategies to reduce online risks;
- Increase awareness of online safety and support resources;
- Increase skills for effectively responding to online safety risks.

Such objectives addresses the issue of cyber-bullying by providing young people and adults involved in the care of young people with the necessary resources to prevent and address the problems without restricting access to the opportunities technology and the internet provide.

As the last section demonstrates, the above approach to preventing and addressing cyber-bullying is based on the experience of Inspire with the development and implementation of the Str8Up project, the evaluation of which provides evidence for this best practice approach.

Evidence-Base for Effective Anti-Bullying Approaches

Process and Impact evaluation of Inspire's Str8Up project was very positive and the project sparked interest from other agencies about ways to integrate Str8Up into their own online safety programs. Program reach and quality were assessed using attendance logs and facilitator observations. Post-workshop questionnaires were also used to measure participant satisfaction and the extent to which the workshop met key objectives (impact). The following findings support Inspire's argument for the harm minimisation approach to cyber-bullying implemented through face-to-face training and information resources. From the post-workshop questionnaire it was demonstrated that workshop participants had:

- An increased understanding of online risks as a result (83%);
- Developed skills for preventing potential online safety issues (75%);
- Developed skills for responding to online safety issues (90%);
- Learnt where to go if they needed more information about an online safety issue (90%);



- Improved confidence in reporting an online safety issue if something happened (90%).

Also noteworthy is that a significant number (26%) of participants rated the content of the workshop as 'too basic'. This may be indicative of some young people's high (existing) awareness of online safety issues such as cyber-bullying. However, based on facilitator's observations, there were also a significant (but smaller) number of young people who demonstrated very limited awareness of safety issues (with some reporting engaging in risky behaviours). This reinforced the importance of employing a tailored approach, in which the diverse needs between and within groups are considered. For instance, in groups where participants reported engaging in both unsafe and safe behaviours, facilitators leveraged the experiences and perspectives of participants who were practicing safer online behaviours in order to both affirm their actions and encourage constructive reflection on risk behaviours. The role of peer educators is therefore central to leveraging off the knowledge and experience of cyber-bullying of some of the young participants in order to benefit other young people who are at risk but have not yet experienced or learnt to negotiate the issues and practices associated with cyber-bullying.

Additional insights based on facilitator's observations include:

- Risk areas that young people demonstrated lower levels of awareness about included where to report online harassment and cyber-bullying.
- In terms of addressing online harassment, it seemed many experiences were analogous or rooted in existing bullying/harassment dynamics – that is, they were not specific to the online environment. It is therefore recommended that any strategies addressing online bullying/harassment incorporate existing anti-bullying strategies that have proven successful in offline environments.

Peer Education

The peer education and discussion oriented approach was particularly effective in engaging young people during the workshops. During formative/consultative discussions, young people expressed feeling that existing Internet Safety programs and resources were unrealistic, boring or 'talked down' to young people about risks that they were already very aware of. By enabling participants to share their existing knowledge and encourage critical discussion about online risk behaviours and associated problems such as cyber-bullying, Str8Up sought to overcome this. One young person remarked that hearing their peers challenge attitudes and beliefs about online risks was much more credible than hearing about it from adults who she exclaimed 'don't know anything about what we do on the net'. The role of peer education in addressing cyber-bullying is therefore important in ensuring the measures advocated appear reasonable in light of the importance and role of technology in young people's lives, and is also credible.

Recommendations

Based on its research into and experience of programs to address cyber-bullying Inspire makes the following recommendations in relation to best practice approaches to the prevention and early intervention to address bullying of children and young people:

- Cyber-bullying be seen as analogous to or rooted in existing bullying/harassment dynamics and strategies addressing online bullying/harassment incorporate and evaluate existing anti-bullying strategies that have proven successful in offline environments;
- Technology and the internet be seen as enablers of young people's mental health and wellbeing and approaches advocating restriction of access be reconsidered in light of opportunities outweighing the risks;



- The importance young people place on technology and the internet should be considered when developing programs and policies to address cyber-bullying;
- Increasing knowledge about the online risks associated with cyber-bullying, strategies for reducing such risks, safety and support resources available and skills necessary for responding to cyber-bullying should be the aim of programs, practices and policies aiming to address cyber-bullying and restrictive approaches avoided;
- Peer education models should be considered an effective tool in ensuring the recognition of the value young people place on technology and the internet are translated into program delivery and the measures appear credible to the young people whom the program targets;
- Harm minimisation should be adopted as the best practice approach to the prevention and early intervention to address bullying, including cyber-bullying.

References

Campbell, MA 2005, 'Cyber bullying: An Old Problem in a New Guise?', *Australian Journal of Guidance and Counselling*, vol. 15, no. 1, pp. 68-76.

Livingstone, S & Bober, M 2005, *UK Children Go Online: final report of key project findings*, Economic & Social Research Council, London.

Livingstone, S 2001, *Online freedom and safety for children*, Citizens Online & Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR), London.

Palfrey, J., Sacco, D. boyd, d., DeBonis, L. *Enhancing Child Safety & Online Technologies: Final Report of the Internet Safety Technical Task Force*, Harvard University, Berkman.

Ybarra, Y, Mitchell, KJ, Finkelhor, D, & Wolak, J 2007, 'Internet Prevention Messages – targeting the right online behaviours', *Archives of Pediatric Medicine*, vol. 167, pp. 139-145.

National Office
Inspire Foundation
PO Box 1790
Rozelle NSW 2039
t. +61 2 8585 9300
f. +61 2 8585 9349

Melbourne Office
Inspire Foundation
C/- River Capital
Level 15, Como Office Tower
644 Chapel Street
South Yarra VIC 3141
t. +61 3 9825 5177
f. +61 3 9825 5178
ABN 27 075 428 787
DGR 442 641

info@inspire.org.au
www.inspire.org.au