

## **Cyber-Bullying – a problem for the future**

*Avinash De Sousa<sup>1</sup>*

<sup>1</sup>*Research Associate, Department of Psychiatry, LokmanyaTilak Municipal Medical College, Mumbai  
E-mail – avinashdes888@gmail.com*

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Bullying is an age-old societal problem, beginning in the schoolyard and often progressing to the boardroom. It may be defined as the abusive treatment of a person by means of force or coercion. It is aggressive behaviour that is repeated over time, is intentionally harmful and occurs without provocation [1]. Bullying may be physical, including behaviours such as hitting, punching and spitting, or it may involve language that is browbeating using verbal assault, teasing, ridicule, sarcasm and scapegoating [2]. It involves a minimum of two people, one the perpetrator and the other the victim. However, a large number of people may be involved in an indirect manner as an audience.

In recent years however, a new form of bullying has emerged which makes use of the diverse range of technology that is now available. Cyber-bullying, or bullying using technology, is a phenomenon that children and adolescents seem to be increasingly using to harm others [3]. Cyber bullying using email, text, chat rooms, mobile phones, mobile phone cameras and web sites, is surfacing as a new medium used by bullies. Methods include texting derogatory messages on mobile phones, with students showing the message to others before sending it to the target; sending threatening emails and forwarding a confidential email to all address book contacts, thus publicly humiliating the first sender. Others gang up on one student and bombard him/her with 'flame' emails. Another way to cyber bully is to set up a derogatory web site dedicated to a targeted student and emailing others the address, inviting their comments. In addition, web sites can be set up for others to vote on the biggest geek, or sluttiest girl in the school. In one incident an overweight boy was photographed by a mobile phone camera in the school change room and the picture posted on the Internet. Cyber bullying can also be carried out in chat rooms with the participants lagging a targeted student or continually excluding someone [4].

The Internet has been described as transforming society by providing person-to-person communication, similar to the telegraph and telephone as well as operating as a mass medium, like radio and television before it. Human behaviour on the Internet and related technologies, such as mobile phones, has been found to have both positive and negative consequences. Positive aspects such as socially-anxious individuals being able to communicate better and deeper self-disclosure between people have been claimed. However, negative consequences of this technology use, such as the encouragement of antisocial behaviour and increased loneliness, have also been reported. Speed of communication and accessibility of information are seen as beneficial, but the Internet also has a negative side with the availability of child pornography and the use of the technology for bullying [5].

In Indian schools, teachers and principals have also indicated that it is an increasing problem in schools and there is much anecdotal, though not as yet any research, evidence. With the number of adolescents who have access to the Internet and mobile phones expected to rise, it could be predicted that the number of incidents of cyber bullying will also rise. For face-to-face bullying most studies have shown that boys and girls report similar levels of victimisation. However, some studies report more boys being bullied than girls. In the case of cyber bullying it seems that girls could be more involved than boys, as they are more likely to communicate regularly by email and texting. However, there is no evidence as yet. While younger children in primary school report more face-to-face bullying by peers than do adolescents in secondary school, it would also seem that cyber bullies are older as younger children do not use the technology for communication with their peers as much as do older students [6].

The published literature on cyber-bullying, together with an increasing number of websites on the topic, has identified a number of features of cyber-bullying that often distinguish it from most traditional forms of bullying. One is the difficulty of getting away from it. Unlike traditional forms of school bullying, where once the victim gets home they are away from the bullying until the next day, with cyber-bullying the victim may continue to receive text messages or emails wherever they are. Another is the breadth of potential audience. Cyber-bullying can reach particularly large audiences in a peer group compared with the small groups that are the usual audience in traditional bullying. For example, when someone downloads a picture or video clip with intention to embarrass the person in the clip, the audience that may see these clips/videos can be very large. Another common characteristic of cyber-bullying is the invisibility of those doing the bullying. Cyber-bullying is not a face-to-face experience, and (like rumors preading) provides those doing the bullying with some degree of "invisibility" and at times anonymity. Following on from this, compared to most traditional bullying, the person carrying out cyber-bullying may be less aware or even unaware of the consequences caused by his or her actions. Without such direct feedback there may be fewer opportunities for empathy or remorse and there may also be less opportunity for bystander intervention. Most importantly we have reached a stage where mental health professionals must be aware of the problem while being equipped of means to deal with the same.

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