

# Cyberbullying in young people: An overview of it's nature and impact

## Peter K. Smith

**Definitions.** Peter Smith begins his lecture by presenting the traditional definition of bullying and comparing it to cyberbullying. Bullying is a subcategory to aggression, usually defined as an act with intent to cause harm. For it to be bullying the aggressive acts should be carried out repeatedly over time and there should be an imbalance of power that makes it hard for the victim to defend him-/herself. There can be just one as well as several perpetrators. In cyberbullying the aggressive acts should furthermore be carried out by ICT for instance mobile phones or on the internet. Currently it is common that cyberbullying occurs on social networking sites.

**Differences.** There are a number of differences between cyberbullying and traditional bullying. The first one is that the imbalance of power can differ in cyberbullying. In traditional bullying the imbalance is most often based on physical strength, level of self-assurance and the number of people involved, which are as that are not completely applicable to cyberbullying. There could furthermore be unique factors in cyberbullying such as technical expertise and anonymity. The second difference is that the bystander roles are more complex to define in cyberbullying. One difference is that both perpetrators and victims can be seen as bystanders as well, when bullying occurs in for example social media. The third difference is that the number of potential bystanders is greatly increased and that it is much more difficult to get away. The victims of traditional bullying have had a potential safe haven in, among other places, their home. The bullying can today occur anywhere as long as the victim has a mobile-phone or is connected to the internet. Peter Smith emphasises the fact that the internet and mobile-phones are such important parts of young peoples lives that they can hardly be assumed to give them up.

**Challenges for researchers.** The above mentioned differences between cyberbullying and traditional bullying, especially the phenomenon of anonymity, constitute research challenges. More work on the definition of cyberbullying is necessary to be able to capture the phenomenon as well as to relate it to traditional bullying. It is nevertheless important to remember that traditional bullying and cyberbullying often occur interconnected. There is an ongoing debate about how the criterion of repetition is to be understood, when for example a picture can be posted once, but seen several times. Another challenge is that the phenomenon can change so rapidly due to technological development.

**How common is Cyberbullying?** Research findings differ greatly concerning the prevalence of cyberbullying. He thinks the main reason is the fact that some studies ask if the respondents have ever been the victims of an aggressive act on the internet and others ask whether it has happened repeated times over time. Taken together, research indicates that no substantial increase of cyberbullying has taken place in recent years. Different uses of new technologies for cyberbullying have however increased rapidly as the technologies themselves have come to common use.

**Participation.** Research establishes a large correlation between the predictive variables for cyberbullying and traditional bullying; anti-social tendencies, lack of empathy and moral disengagement predict involvement for perpetrators. There are also some family factors; greater care-giver child conflict, lower parental support, and lack of communication with parents.

The anonymity could be assumed to affect the influence of perpetrators empathy and moral reasoning, but it has not been indicated by research. There are inconsistent findings from different studies regarding gender differences in cyberbullying involvement. But girls may be relatively more interested in cyberbullying than traditional bullying. Especially now when so much cyberbullying is via social networking sites, which girls are more interested in.

**Consequences.** According to most research the effects of cyberbullying are mainly the same ones as for traditional bullying. It correlates with depressive symptoms, psychosomatic symptoms, suicidal ideation and poorer grades. The negative consequences for the victims of both forms of bullying as well as for bully-victims are greater. Children are more often looking for help from peers or parents than from teachers. Peter Smith says that should be an alarm clock to the teachers that they most often will not know when someone is being cyberbullied.