

DR JULIAN DOOLEY FROM EDITH COWAN UNIVERSITY SPEAKS ABOUT CYBERBULLYING.

Part One

Dr Dooley, I thought we'd commence by asking you to comment on this media release from the Paley Centre for Media in New York City; "As we all increasingly live our lives in the digital space cyberbullying has reached epidemic proportions. Schoolyard fights have turned into MySpace taunts and derogatory instant messages. More than one-third of teens report being victimized online".

The first point to make is the distinct cultural differences in the rates of cyberbullying. Certainly in Australia it is not as high as what's been reported in the US. Even in the US I would not consider that cyberbullying is at epidemic proportions, nor is it emerging in a form that is replacing face-to-face bullying nor is it more prevalent. In fact our research data in Australia, and certainly in other countries, is that the rate of face-to-face bullying is still higher than cyberbullying (although the rate of cyberbullying is increasing).

The following is an extract from an ABC radio program earlier week:

Two adolescent girls have been forced out of one of Sydney's elite private schools because of cyber bullying. The girls were taken out of Ascham school after they published material about their classmates on the MySpace social networking site. The material included rumours about the girl's sexual activity and their drug and alcohol use. A parent of one the girls targeted says his daughter was horrified when strange boys began approaching her in public.

ABC radio presenter Leigh Sales (May 7th 2009).

Dr Dooley, are we seeing a transformation in the form of bullying, but not necessarily in the nature of bullying?

One of the interesting things is that for this young age group their identity is being formed both online and offline. For example, we use terms such as *online* and *offline*, young people don't tend to use those terms because there is no *offline*. A big part of their social life and social development is played out online, in addition to being played out offline. Now whether the web is replacing the bathroom wall – my sense is that social interactions are as much played out online as offline.

Why is there so much emphasis on cyberbullying at the moment?

Well, that's a really good question. One of the issues is really how cyberbullying is being portrayed (not necessarily accurately) in popular media, which is that cyberbullying goes hand-in-hand with self-harming, suicidal ideation and suicidal acts. And that's certainly not the case (although it has happened in very rare cases). I think, unfortunately, that there has been a couple of high profile and very tragic cases that have been held up as the quintessential outcome of cyberbullying incidents. While I wouldn't in any way minimize the effect, I think in a number of ways [the media] overdramatises the real effects of cyberbullying. So we need to be very cautious about how we think about what cyberbullying is and the effects of cyberbullying. We must recognize that it is really about the behaviour in another form. It is bullying manifested in another environment - that is through technology, such as internet, mobile phones etc.

As for "why is there so much interest in cyberbullying now?" There is so much interest in how we interact with technology and the role that social networking sites hold for young people, that there is a little bit of fear about it too. These get played out in the information that is going around currently.

So cyberbullying doesn't occur in a vacuum, more it exacerbates the physical bullying?

You're absolutely right in the first point. It doesn't occur in a vacuum except in really quite rare cases. There is quite a significant overlap between those young people who are experiencing cyberbullying behaviours and those experiencing face-to-face bullying behaviours. The research to date is telling us that the effect of cyberbullying does exacerbate existing face-to-face bullying. Given the role that technology plays and the use of technology by young people today; cyberbullying can occur at any time of the day or night, and can be used to exacerbate the effect of physical bullying or preemptively worsening the potential for physical or face-to-face bullying. For example some kids are getting SMS messages saying, "I'm going to get you tomorrow at school". Mobile phones and the internet are such social tools for young people, in terms of cyberbullying the offshoot of that is, any content can reach a potentially limitless audience, being able to be passed on and on and on. Whereas, face-to-face bullying was primarily restricted to the schoolyard and limited to those who were there on the day.

Traumatic experiences are cumulative. The greater the number of exposures to traumatic events, the greater the risk of developing posttraumatic mental health issues. Cyberbullying thus increases this risk?

We've come across this in our work, as have some of our colleagues in Poland. The cumulative effect of cyberbullying – for example somebody posts an embarrassing video or picture on the internet in a MySpace page (or any where on the web) where it is potentially viewed by a limitless audience. Knowing that X number of people have seen it, or are going to see it, can be quite traumatic. For example one girl, who had an embarrassing video taken of her at a party that was then posted on the web, watched the counter, going up and up and up – in a sense relieving that moment over and over again.

Part Two

What can we do about cyberbullying? What can teachers do, what can parents do, what can the media and lawyers do?

Working backwards:

There isn't any legislation specifically in existence targeting cyberbullying. Although in Victoria some aspects of cyberbullying behaviour does fall under the laws covering cyberstalking – that being the repeated acts of trying to threaten or intimidate.

With the media from a research and clinical perspective, it is important that we convey, and they disseminate, what are *likely* effects and the *actual* state of affairs. There is a huge amount to be gained through technology from a social perspective for young people. The one thing we don't want and the one thing that isn't beneficial is a kind of knee-jerk reaction in which parents are very afraid of potentially deadly things that could occur and then removing the technology or access to the technology. So in many ways that's like removing a social limb for them [the young person]. Denying them the mobile phone is in some ways worse for them, we have heard from young people that they would rather put up with cyberbullying behaviours than lose a mobile phone. A lot of young people won't tell their parents that they are being cyberbullied simply because they don't want to lose the technology.

So what is it then that we can do with parents? From our research, parents are asking for: (i) information regarding what cyberbullying is all about and (ii) help with their level of technical knowledge. A lot of parents will tell us they don't even know where to start talking about cyberbullying with their children because they don't really get what Facebook's about, they don't really get what MySpace is all about, they've never even heard of Twitter. So it is difficult to interact and engage with their children in a conversation about cyberbullying because they don't even have a place where they can start.

So one of the things we feel is very important, is educating parents in what technology is all about and encouraging them to have a conversation with their son or daughter about: (i) how

they use technology, (ii) how important technology is for them and the role it plays in their lives, and (iii) getting an open discussion about technology use; what's appropriate and what's inappropriate and what's acceptable and not acceptable. To do that in a way so that is quite clear to the young person that there are rules and there are guidelines and consequences for breaking those rules. But, that these are negotiable and the young person does have a voice and input into how that's structured – really engaging them in the process.

Is there a difference between how mental health professionals should approach cyberbullying from the face-to-face bullying?

At the end of the day, yes. Because although there are lots overlaps of course between cyberbullying and bullying – at their core they are both behaviours that need to be addressed – the difference is that they occur in a very different environment. So there will be overlap in how one manages the impact, it will vary just a little bit. At the present time there are plenty of cyber-safety programs available. Unfortunately, very few have been rigorously and empirically tested. So it is difficult to know which parts of an intervention or education program work specifically for cyberbullying versus regular face-to-face bullying. A lot of the work that we're doing at the Child Health Promotion Research Centre here at Edith Cowan University is to develop interventions and education programs to address cyberbullying and cyberbullying behaviours. I think at a basic level a similar approach is most appropriate – engaging kids in the process and talking about the role technology plays.

I think we need to realize as a community, as a group of clinicians, professionals, teachers, schools and parents, that it is the young people today that have the skills that we need in order to help minimize the short term and long term effects of cyberbullying. Until we engage them in the process and get them involved in developing our intervention programs (which we at the Child Health Promotion Research Centre are doing) ...

It's about collaboration and engagement rather than prohibition

Yes, and until we do that we limit ourselves and run the risk of developing intervention strategies that aren't appropriate or by the time they're implemented are not targeted to the right issues.

Dr Julian Dooley is Senior Research Fellow and Scientific Director of Cyberbullying at the Child Health Promotion Research Centre at Edith Cowan University. His current research focuses on the relationship between technology and behaviour, primarily investigating the nature and consequences of cyber-bullying. In addition, he is currently involved in a number of projects to design, implement and evaluate cyber-bullying intervention programs. Dr Dooley completed his PhD in Psychology at the University of Melbourne in December 2007. His PhD work was in the area of social cognitive neuroscience and investigated the relationship between social cognitive functioning and aggression / bullying in adolescent boys with traumatic brain injuries and his research work has been published in high impact scientific journals.



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