



Hidden Behind the Screen

A comprehensive guide to cyberbullying
for schools and kura

Part Two

What is Cyberbullying?

Greater Christchurch Schools' Network

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GREATER CHRISTCHURCH
SCHOOLS' NETWORK

What is Cyberbullying?

Take Home Messages

- Cyberbullying is often considered bullying that occurs online, however, the nature of the Internet and social media warrants cyberbullying being considered a unique form of bullying
- Cyberbullying is more than banter between mates as it involves deliberate harm toward a victim
- Bullying involves intent to harm, repeated instances of harm, and an imbalance of power
- Cyberbullying is more complex than traditional bullying due to the nature of the Internet and social media
- Power imbalance comes in different forms, including technological expertise, anonymity, and social status/followers
- The anonymity and pervasiveness of harmful behaviour afforded by the Internet make cyberbullying particularly dangerous
- There are many different forms of cyberbullying involving the different ways that the Internet and social media are used for harm

Research has often grappled with the concept of whether cyberbullying is a distinct form of bullying or if it is just bullying that occurs online.¹ This is not simple to answer as the Internet has changed how bullying may occur, blurring the lines. The Internet and digital technologies have developed in scope and complexity, and defining cyberbullying has become more nuanced than simply applying the concept of traditional bullying to computers and the Internet.

Netsafe, an online resource for schools and kura, parents/caregivers, and other professionals, has defined online bullying and relevant examples of how it often manifests. They state that online bullying can be **private** (such as direct messages) **or public** (public posts or in online groups). It is an action that someone does online to another person to **cause them fear, distress, or another negative emotion**. This action is done **on purpose** and is not just a one-off event.²

¹ Evangelio, C., Rodriguez-Gonzalez, P., Fernandez-Rio, J., & Gonzalez-Villora, S. (2022). *Cyberbullying in elementary and middle school students: A systematic review*. *Computers & Education*, 176, 104356.

² Netsafe. (2018, October 16). What is Online Bullying? Retrieved December 8, 2023, from Netsafe: <https://netsafe.org.nz/what-is-online-bullying/>

Examples provided by Netsafe include:

- Trying to embarrass someone
- Calling someone names
- Spreading rumours and lies
- Spreading private information about someone
- Using fake accounts to make fun of someone
- Meme pages that embarrass someone
- Repeatedly sending you unwanted messages
- Purposefully excluding people from online groups, chats, events etc.
- Hacking or impersonating someone else online

There is an important distinction to make with other typical online interactions, including banter between mates. Young people will often engage in light jabs at one another, telling jokes, and engaging in humour at another's expense. Sharing a laugh is a normal part of most friendships, and in most instances, young people are equipped to handle banter among friends. Netsafe distinguishes online bullying from such activities as it is not intended to shame, upset, offend, or make someone feel uncomfortable.

Bullying is typically defined as intentional behaviour to harm another person. It is repetitive behaviour, and it is difficult for the victim to defend themselves. Bullying is based on a power imbalance and systematic abuse of power.³

There are common elements present in bullying instances:

1. There is an intention to harm
2. There are repeated instances of harm
3. There is an imbalance of power between the victim and the perpetrator

Where certain elements are missing, the behaviour may still be harmful or aggressive, but may not be considered bullying. Things are not always black and white, however. For example, repetition may be hard to define (e.g. how often), and a perceived or actual power imbalance can sometimes be difficult to identify in the context of bullying.

It can be difficult to apply the same definitional criteria to cyberbullying as with traditional bullying.

³ Slonje, R., Smith, P. K., & Frisé, A. (2013). The nature of cyberbullying, and strategies for prevention. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 29(1), 26-32.

Cyberbullying as a Distinct Form of Bullying

Similar to traditional bullying, cyberbullying is a behaviour that is performed through electronic or digital media by individuals or groups that repeatedly communicate hostile or aggressive messages intended to inflict harm on victims.⁴

Some typical features of cyberbullying are:

- Cyberbullying can quickly snowball due to the viral nature of content
- Anonymity is a common feature which may result in power imbalance
- Peer groups, popularity, and social following may be other forms of power imbalance
- Cyberbullying can reach a much wider audience
- Online material may be hard to remove or avoid^{5,6}

Power Imbalance is a common theme of bullying, as a perpetrator exerts strength or power over their victim. In traditional bullying, this could typically be considered physical strength or social status. With cyberbullying, however, the power imbalance may be broader. This includes technological expertise, anonymity, social status/followers, number of friends, or taking advantage of a marginalised group's position.⁷

Repetition may also not be black and white. Typically, we consider repetition as repeated actions that cause harm, and the targeting of these repeated attacks constitutes bullying. However, repetition online may include a single act that is repeatedly shared, spread, and maintained permanently on the Internet.

Anonymity is an important feature of cyberbullying, though it is not necessarily unique to cyberbullying. Traditional bullying, for example, can involve anonymous threats, letters, and rumours, but the Internet and social media have opened a multitude of avenues through which bullies may target victims. Such attacks will often follow the victim (as they take their phone and computer with them) and spread easily through the Internet and messaging channels. The perpetrator often won't see the victim or the immediate effect, meaning there are fewer opportunities for remorse.⁸

⁴ Tokunaga, R. S. (2010). Following you home from school: A critical review and synthesis of research on cyberbullying victimization. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 26, 277–287.

⁵ Slonje, R., Smith, P. K., & Frisén, A. (2013). The nature of cyberbullying, and strategies for prevention. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 29(1), 26-32.

⁶ Dooley, J. J., Pyżalski, J., & Cross, D. (2009). Cyberbullying versus face-to-face bullying: A theoretical and conceptual review. *Zeitschrift für Psychologie/Journal of Psychology*, 217(4), 182-188.

⁷ Evangelio, C., Rodriguez-Gonzalez, P., Fernandez-Rio, J., & Gonzalez-Villora, S. (2022). Cyberbullying in elementary and middle school students: A systematic review. *Computers & Education*, 176, 104356.

⁸ Slonje, R., Smith, P. K., & Frisén, A. (2012). Processes of cyberbullying, and feelings of remorse by bullies: A pilot study. *European Journal of Developmental Psychology*, 9(2), 244-259.

Cyberbullying may also be particularly **pervasive**, as victims continue to be targeted in their own homes and safe spaces as long as they have access to a digital device. The online environment is accessible 24/7 and continuous accessibility means that victims may be cyberbullied at any time. This may intensify the emotional toll and make escape for the victim much more challenging.

Key differences between traditional and cyberbullying include:

1. Cyberbullying relies on some degree of technological expertise
2. Primarily, cyberbullying is indirect compared with traditional face-to-face bullying, thus may be anonymous
3. The perpetrator does not usually see the reaction of the victim in the short-term
4. There are more complex roles of bystanders in online environments compared to in-person bullying
5. Cyberbullying perpetrators lack physical witnesses and are less motivated by attaining power
6. The breadth of the potential audience is much higher for cyberbullying
7. It is difficult to escape cyberbullying as it can follow wherever the victim is⁹

While cyberbullying appears to be a type of bullying that occurs online, it is important to consider how it presents differently and transcends the physical boundaries of school.

The following table outlines the different types of cyberbullying.

| Type | Definition | Example |
|--------------------|---|---|
| Harassment | Persistent, unwanted online communications such as direct messages, comments, or e-mails intended to distress the victim. | A student sends another student repeated messages and comments on their posts that are offensive to them, persistently seeking to upset them. |
| Flaming | Sending hostile and/or inflammatory messages with the intent to provoke the victim into an emotional response. | Participating in an online comment section and deliberately posting offensive comments knowing that it will get a rise from someone. |
| Denigration | The spread of false and harmful information about someone online without consent. This may include sensitive details about their identity, sexuality, or other private matters. | Creating a social media update that contains false rumours about a student, harming their reputation and social standing. |

⁹ Smith, P. K. (2012). Cyberbullying and cyber aggression. *Handbook of school violence and school safety: International research and practice*, 2, 93-103.

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|-------------------------------|---|--|
| Outing | Revealing personal or private information about someone without their consent. This may include sensitive details about their identity, sexuality, or other private matters. This is a common occurrence for LGBTQIA+ ākongā. | Writing a post about another student regarding their sexual orientation, knowing it will cause them distress or further harassment. |
| Exclusion | Deliberately excluding someone from online groups, social media circles, or online activities intending to isolate or marginalise them. | Forming a group chat and purposefully excluding an individual, causing them to feel isolated. |
| Impersonation | Creating fake profiles or using someone's identity online to deceive or harm others. | Creating a fake social media profile to engage in discussions with others and harm their reputation. |
| Cyberstalking | Engaging in persistent, unwanted online attention. This includes excessively monitoring or following someone online, often with the intent to intimidate or cause them fear. | Continuously monitoring someone's posts and commenting on everything, hoping to cause them fear and unease. |
| Trolling | A popular term for posting provocative or offensive messages online to incite emotional responses or provoke people. | Joining a forum just to post controversial and offensive comments to disrupt the conversation. |
| Doxing | Publishing private for personal information about an individual without their consent which may cause significant harm and distress. This includes information such as their address, phone number, or financial details. | Publishing another student's address and contact number to cause them fear and expose them to further potential harm. |
| Flashing | Sending unsolicited explicit images or content to someone without their consent. | Sending unsolicited pictures that are sexual in nature without the consent of the recipient. |
| Dissuasion | Threatening someone online in order to discourage them from certain activities, expressing their opinions, or pursuing their interests. | Making rude comments on another student's social media posts with the purpose of discouraging them from sharing more content or expressing themselves. |
| Cyberbullying by proxy | Enlisting others to engage in cyberbullying behaviour on behalf of the perpetrator, often by means of peer pressure or coercion. | Conspiring with friends to spread rumours on behalf of the perpetrator, using peer pressure to coerce them into participating in the cyberbullying. |

References

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