



Hidden Behind the Screen

A comprehensive guide to cyberbullying
for schools and kura

Part One

An Introduction to Cyberbullying

Greater Christchurch Schools' Network

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GREATER CHRISTCHURCH
SCHOOLS' NETWORK

An Introduction to Cyberbullying

Take Home Messages

- Cyberbullying is a complex issue as schools and kura become increasingly reliant on digital technologies for 21st century learning
- While significant progress is being made on schools being digitally equipped, this comes with the risk of increased exposure to cyberbullying
- Cyberbullying often occurs beyond the knowledge of adults
- Acknowledgement of cyberbullying is important for schools and kura (and their governing bodies) to consider in terms of the Education and Training Act 2020 and the National Education and Learning Priorities (NELP)
- Māori ākonga are at a higher risk of being victims of cyberbullying
- Marginalised groups such as LGBTQIA+, those that are disabled, and neurodiverse ākonga are at a higher risk of being victims of cyberbullying
- Cyberbullying has numerous negative outcomes for victims including emotional, psychological, social, physical, and school-related outcomes
- Perpetrators are also at risk of emotional and behavioural problems, as well as leaving a damaging digital footprint that could limit opportunities in the future

Cyberbullying is an increasingly complex topic as digital technologies and social media grow in size, scale, and complexity. Learning in the 21st century is becoming increasingly reliant on digital technologies and connectivity to ensure that ākonga are prepared for life and work in the digital world. Schools and kura now find themselves at the crossroads of technological innovation and opportunity, and the challenges associated with social media and digital communications. One such challenge that has gained prominence in recent years is cyberbullying, the insidious form of bullying and harassment that transcends the physical boundaries of schools and infiltrates the online environments where ākonga spend much of their time.

Ākongā behaviour and related behavioural and social issues can be particularly challenging for schools and kura to proactively manage. Many factors influence behaviour and ongoing challenges that schools, households, and ākongā may face. Challenges such as COVID-19, increased cost of living, poverty, and others can have profound long-term effects on behaviour and the proliferation of bullying. The pervasive nature of technology, the exponential growth of social media, and the development of online trends place a large strain on schools and kura as they grapple with behaviour that cannot necessarily be detected or monitored, and they struggle to limit exposure to inappropriate materials and communications.

As such, many school leaders, teachers, support staff, parents, and caregivers, are faced with the problem of how to protect ākongā and encourage prosocial behaviour in online environments when ākongā are constantly connected to the Internet and exposed to much unknown content. Internet connectivity is a double-edged sword, and while it is essential to allow for learning and socialisation using digital technologies and the Internet, the risks are well-catalogued and continuously evolving. Now, our most used tools create potentially dangerous environments, and schools and kura deal with the fallout of misuse of such as tools.

Cyberbullying often occurs beyond the knowledge of adults such as parents, caregivers, and school/kura staff. This is worsened by the fact that many ākongā indicate they would not tell a parent or guardian, and even fewer would tell a teacher.¹ They must then grapple with dealing with behavioural problems beyond their recognition.

To understand cyberbullying and the impact it has on ākongā, school staff, and the wider climate and culture of schools and kura, it is important to consider how it is related to traditional bullying yet is its own unique form of bullying. Forms of bullying management that work with traditional bullying will not necessarily work with cyberbullying, and schools and kura have very little control over the platforms that ākongā use for cyberbullying perpetration.

This guide was written by the GCSN to support schools and kura, and the leaders, staff, and support staff who deal with problem behaviour, to understand cyberbullying and initiate some protections that may reduce some of the negative consequences associated with cyberbullying.

The chapters are designed to answer common questions around cyberbullying, such as:

- What is cyberbullying?
- How is it different from 'traditional' bullying?
- How does cyberbullying develop and perpetuate?
- Who is most at risk of cyberbullying, or who is worst affected?
- What can we do to discourage cyberbullying?
- How can we adequately respond to events and crises?
- How can we empower ākongā to be agents of change?

¹ Cassidy, W., Jackson, M., & Brown, K. N. (2009). Sticks and stones can break my bones, but how can pixels hurt me? Students' experiences with cyber-bullying. *School psychology international*, 30(4), 383-402.

This guide is intended to cover academic understandings of cyberbullying and help schools and kura understand how and why cyberbullying occurs. This information helps educators develop a culture of digital citizenship and address the ongoing safety of ākonga online and reduce instances of cyberbullying. Firstly, this guide addresses cyberbullying as a distinct concept from traditional bullying and how it is a unique form of antisocial bullying behaviour. Secondly, the antecedents of cyberbullying are explored to provide the necessary context for cyberbullying behaviour. The final sections address what schools and kura can do to promote citizenship, reduce instances of cyberbullying, and respond appropriately to incidents and crises as they occur.

Research and various resources have informed this guide which is not intended to replace any existing cyberbullying resources. It should also be noted that the contents in this guide, and much of the content surrounding cyberbullying, are not black and white or have one-size-fits-all approaches that will work across all schools and kura. The recommendations included are intended to provide schools and kura with realistic start points and areas for consideration and development. The content should be considered alongside the individual contexts and school and kura, including special characters, vision and values, communities, digital technologies curricula etc.

It is also important to note that cyberbullying can often go undetected. While schools and kura may feel that cyberbullying is not a prominent issue for them (or that other issues need to take precedence), the existence of antisocial online behaviour persists. Where possible, preparation and protection are preferable to minimise instances of cyberbullying, even if they are undetected by adults.

The Case for Cyberbullying Policy and Practice

It is essential for schools and kura to include policy and practice to minimise cyberbullying. This is captured in the [Primary Board Objectives](#) and [National Education and Learning Priorities](#).

The Primary Board Objectives are captured under section 127(1) of the Education and Training Act 2020. Specifically, section 127(1)(a)(i) states that one of the board's primary objectives in governing a school is to ensure that the school is a physically and emotionally safe place for all students and staff.

In terms of the National Education and Learning Priorities (NELP), the first of the eight priorities is Ensure places of learning are safe, inclusive, and free from racism, discrimination and bullying. This priority has three actions for schools and kura:

1. Ask learners/ākonga, whānau and staff about their experience of racism, discrimination and bullying, and use that information to reduce these behaviours
2. Have processes in place to promptly address and resolve any complaints or concerns about racism, discrimination and bullying
3. Create a safe and inclusive culture where diversity is valued and all learners/ākonga and staff, including those who identify as LGBTQIA+, are disabled, have learning support needs, are neurodiverse, or from diverse ethnic communities, feel they belong

According to both frameworks, schools and kura (and their governance bodies) need to take action to ensure that instances of bullying are reduced. While cyberbullying is a distinct form of bullying, it is captured within this definition and needs to be a priority for all schools and kura to make them physically and psychologically safe environments.

The Experience of Marginalised Groups

Research has shown that cyberbullying toward Māori is a significant problem for Aotearoa.² In a large sample (6,529) of Māori adults, researchers found that:

- Approximately one-fifth (19.3%) experienced a form of cyberbullying
- Cyberbullying was more prevalent in younger participants and decreased with age
- Women experienced more cyberbullying than men
- Those who identify as belonging to more than one marginalised group, such as those who were also LGBTQIA+ experienced greater cyberbullying
- Those with multiple ethnicities experienced greater cyberbullying

Relatively little research is specific to Aotearoa New Zealand, however, international findings suggest that marginalised groups can bear the brunt of cyberbullying. For example:

- LGBTQIA+ youth are at a higher risk for cyberbullying compared with cis-heterosexual peers³
- Young people with disabilities experience higher levels of cyberbullying compared with non-disabled peers⁴
- Neurodiverse ākonga, such as those with ASD, are at higher risk of being both perpetrators and victims of cyberbullying⁵

² Houkamau, C., Satherley, N., Stronge, S., Wolfgramm, R., Dell, K., Mika, J., ... & Sibley, C. G. (2021). Cyberbullying Toward Māori Is Rife in New Zealand: Incidences and Demographic Differences in Experiences of Cyberbullying Among Māori. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, 24(12), 822-830.

³ Abreu, R. L., & Kenny, M. C. (2018). Cyberbullying and LGBTQ youth: A systematic literature review and recommendations for prevention and intervention. *Journal of Child & Adolescent Trauma*, 11, 81-97.

⁴ Kowalski, R. M., & Toth, A. (2018). Cyberbullying among youth with and without disabilities. *Journal of Child & Adolescent Trauma*, 11, 7-15.

⁵ Hu, H. F., Liu, T. L., Hsiao, R. C., Ni, H. C., Liang, S. H. Y., Lin, C. F., ... & Yen, C. F. (2019). Cyberbullying victimization and perpetration in adolescents with high-functioning autism spectrum disorder: Correlations with depression, anxiety, and suicidality. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 49, 4170-4180.

The Impact of Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying can have dire consequences on ākonga, including:

- Anger and frustration
- Fright, feeling scared
- Depression and feeling down
- Embarrassment
- Anxiety attacks
- Loneliness and feelings of isolation
- Suicidal thoughts and behaviours
- Somatic symptoms (e.g. sleeping issues, headaches, stomach aches, poor appetite)^{6,7}

Cyberbullying can also affect school performance. This includes increased absenteeism, school grades, and leaving school early due to sickness.⁸ Victims can develop problems with the use of effective social problem-solving strategies and may begin to feel powerless over social issues and bullying. This can lead to further alienation from social relationships and people who may offer support, increasing feelings of isolation.⁹

Cyberbullying can also jeopardise the lives of perpetrators. For example, studies have linked cyberbullying perpetration to symptoms of depression, substance use and behavioural problems.¹⁰ Cyberbullies can create a negative digital footprint as messages, comments, screenshots etc. may be kept on the Internet and can jeopardise job opportunities, ruin reputations, and be used against them in the future. Ākonga sometimes do not understand that the actions they perform online are semi-permanent and cyberbullying incidents can be damaging for the perpetrator, as well as the victim.¹¹

⁶ Slonje, R., Smith, P. K., & Frisé, A. (2013). The nature of cyberbullying, and strategies for prevention. *Computers in human behavior*, 29(1), 26-32.

⁷ Nixon, C. L. (2014). Current perspectives: the impact of cyberbullying on adolescent health. *Adolescent health, medicine and therapeutics*, 143-158.

⁸ Giumetti, G. W., & Kowalski, R. M. (2016). Cyberbullying matters: Examining the incremental impact of cyberbullying on outcomes over and above traditional bullying in North America. *Cyberbullying across the globe: Gender, family, and mental health*, 117-130.

⁹ 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.

¹⁰ Marciano, L., Schulz, P. J., & Camerini, A. L. (2020). Cyberbullying perpetration and victimization in youth: A meta-analysis of longitudinal studies. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 25(2), 163-181.

¹¹ Subasi, S., Korkmaz, Ö., & Cakir, R. (2023). Cyberbullying, Digital Footprint, and Cyber Security Awareness Levels of Secondary School Students. *International Journal of Technology in Education and Science*, 7(2), 129-151.

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