



# Cyberbullying

*Experiences, impacts and coping strategies – as told by Australian young people Summary of the research findings*

*This report summarises the key findings of an online research project undertaken in 2009 among 548 young Australians who had experienced cyberbullying. The study sought to explore the nature of cyberbullying, its relationship with traditional schoolyard bullying, its impacts, and the use and effectiveness of offline and online coping strategies used by young people.*

## THE ISSUE OF CYBERBULLYING

Cyberbullying has become a ubiquitous phenomenon in Australia, impacting the well-being, schooling, family and peer relationships of many young people. Not only are victims affected, but many bullies also.<sup>14, 18</sup>

The term 'cyberbullying' refers to a form of bullying in which perpetrators use electronic means, such as the internet or mobile phone to aggressively and intentionally harm someone. Like 'traditional' bullying, cyberbullying typically involves repeated behaviour and a power imbalance between perpetrator and victim. It extends beyond hurtful messages sent via email or SMS to include things such as threats, social exclusion tactics, spreading rumours and circulating defamatory images of the victim. As the penetration and use of communication technologies grow, especially among young people, the potential for cyberbullying to increase numbers and severity of victimisation bears consideration.

Research on the prevalence of cyberbullying among young people is still blurred. Reports in literature range from 9% to 49% within a school year<sup>10</sup>, with the wide variance attributed to differences in research design and the type of technologies examined. Although rates are not as high as traditional bullying (with prevalence up to 70%)<sup>10</sup>, the spread of technology-mediated communication in recent years suggests increased potential for this form of bullying in the future.

Like 'traditional' bullying, the most common age for cyberbullying to occur appears to be in the transition ages from primary to secondary school. Cyberbullying is also common in the later years of high school.<sup>6</sup>

While many surveys suggest that young males tend to be the primary perpetrators and victims of 'traditional' bullying behaviour, there seems to be some contradiction where cyberbullying is concerned.<sup>2, 17</sup> Recent research has shown that cyberbullying appears to follow a gender pattern opposite to what occurs offline. That is, girls tend to report slightly higher involvement than boys in this form of bullying, both as bullies and victims.<sup>6</sup>

One of the key attractions of cyberbullying is said to be the perceived anonymity and disconnection the internet and other communication technologies can provide the perpetrator. It has been suggested that the virtual environment in which bullying can occur allows bullies to feel less inhibited and less accountable for their actions.<sup>9, 12, 21</sup> Interestingly, this more covert form of bullying has been found overseas to commonly occur in tandem with traditional bullying.<sup>15, 20</sup>

The short-term negative physical, psychological and social impacts of bullying are well documented, including feelings of fear, loneliness, anxiety, insecurity, depression and academic lethargy.





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Some studies have found these to be comparable between cyberbullying and traditional bullying.<sup>20</sup> Others, however, propose the impacts of cyberbullying may be more severe.<sup>4</sup> The wider audience in which public humiliation or embarrassment can occur, and the increased level of invasiveness enabled, specifically in being able to enter a victim's home and/or bedroom, are two reasons given. In support of this, data available from Kids Helpline<sup>3</sup> suggests that young people impacted by cyberbullying may be more likely to experience suicidal thoughts as a reaction to cyberbullying, more so than those experiencing traditional bullying. Although it would be problematic to develop generalised findings from this alone, it does raise a concerning issue.

One area which has received considerable focus in literature, particularly overseas, are the strategies used to address cyberbullying. The content is broad in scope and covers strategies at individual, school, community and legislative levels.<sup>4</sup> One concerning finding from the literature is that young people are rarely proactive in informing adults about being cyberbullied. Indeed one American study<sup>10</sup> found as many as 90% of victims claimed to have not told an adult. Other studies have yielded similar findings, attributing the inhibition to fears of humiliation and embarrassment; not being believed; concerns being trivialised; and/or having access to technology devices restricted.<sup>5, 19, 20</sup>

An acknowledged benefit of cyberspace is that it provides potential cyberbullying victims with a wider suite of coping tools not available offline. For example, victims can attempt to avoid receiving messages from suspected bullies by blocking their screen names from their computer, restricting buddy lists or changing their own avatar.<sup>10</sup> Whilst there is some literature suggesting that most young people appear familiar with such strategies,<sup>15</sup> usage varies greatly, ranging up to 67% depending on the particular strategy.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, the effectiveness of these strategies, and alternative coping strategies, are still largely unknown.

## **THE NEED FOR RESEARCH**

Although published data from Australia has increased in the past few years, it is still very much in its infancy. In particular, little is known about the coping strategies young people most rely on, and to what extent they have been effective.

Through its counselling contacts with young people across Australia, Kids Helpline has collected data on traditional bullying for over 10 years, receiving more than 15,000 contacts about this issue in the past five years alone. In July 2008, Kids Helpline commenced the collection of additional data specifically relating to cyberbullying. This was in response to the increasing number of contacts specifically relating to this new form of harassment. To date, counsellors have responded to more than 277 contacts from young people where cyberbullying was the primary purpose of the contact. About a quarter of these were contacts made via email or real-time web counselling.

In 2009, BoysTown decided to conduct additional research into the area of cyberbullying in order to understand the issue further and to inform the service response of Kids Helpline counsellors.

The core objectives of the research were to:

- Understand the prevalence of different forms of cyberbullying
- Identify short-term impacts of cyberbullying
- Identify coping strategies used by young people (online and offline)
- Understand which strategies young people consider to be effective.

It was later hoped that this research may also provide evidence to inform young people, parents, schools and government on the nature of cyberbullying in Australia and what strategies can be taken to effectively address this issue.



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### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research used a mixed-method online approach, consisting of 18 web-based questions (16 quantitative and two qualitative questions). The online approach was chosen because of its inclusiveness, ease in reaching a national sample, familiarity to the target group and the conduciveness that its anonymity and privacy has with allowing young people to feel more comfortable in discussing sensitive issues.<sup>16</sup>

The analysis sample consisted of 548 self-identified cyberbully victims aged under 25 years (male=101). Participants were sourced primarily from Kids Helpline’s website and email counselling service, as well as other public youth media.

Youth who had experienced cyberbullying were invited to participate in order to improve the response of Kids Helpline’s counselling support. No parental consent was required because recruitment took place via the Internet and the survey was anonymous. It was believed that requiring parental consent may have discouraged some young people from participating, particularly those who feared their technology use may be monitored or prevented – potentially those most at risk of being cyberbullied. Although great caution was taken in the question design to ensure participants were not re-traumatised, contact details for Kids Helpline were included in the survey to offer support if needed. No contacts were reported.

Questions were designed for the purpose of this study, taking into consideration the nature of online research and the large variance in age, attention span and literacy levels of the target group. The language used in the survey and the emotional impact measures were developed in consultation with experienced Kids Helpline counsellors and clinical psychologists. Pilot testing was conducted online with 10 young people. The learnings obtained from qualitative responses were used to inform survey improvements.

With regard to data analysis, descriptive statistics were used to analyse the types and methods of cyberbullying, impacts and experiences with coping strategies. CHI-square analysis was used to test significance. Bayesian’s Odds Ratio calculation was

used to measure the probability distribution between males and females. Thematic coding was used to determine the main issues evident in free-text responses. Due to the fact that many of the questions were multiple responses, reported percentages often do not equal 100%.

The research was conducted between January and August 2009.

### PROFILE OF PARTICIPANTS

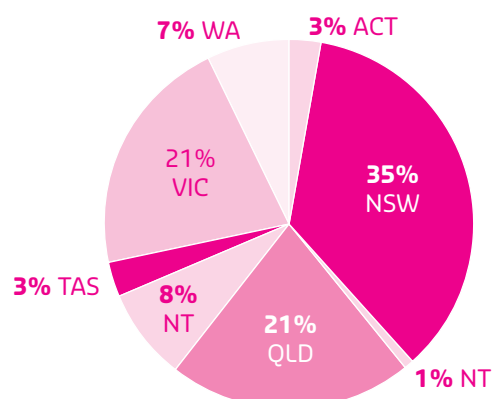
Of the 548 participants, the majority were aged 10-14 years (50%) or 15-18 years (42%). Table 1 shows the full breakdown of participants. The bias seen in both age and gender are largely reflective of the distribution of Kids Helpline’s national help-seeking trends.<sup>13</sup>

Table 1: Age and gender of participants

	Male	Female
5-9 yrs	2	6
10-14 yrs	70	204
15-18 yrs	29	203
19-25 yrs	0	34
<b>Total</b>	<b>101</b>	<b>447</b>

With regard to the geographic distribution of Australian youth (ABS 2006), a representative spread was achieved across the sample. With the exception of the Northern Territory, all other locations were represented by more than 13 participants.

Figure 1: Geographic spread of participants





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### RESEARCH FINDINGS

Overall, findings from the research indicate that cyberbullying can occur at multiple stages of a young persons' life, often with severe and negative impacts. A snapshot of the research findings has been listed below. Many of these appear consistent with contemporary international research.

#### Prevalence and forms of cyberbullying

Of the 548 young people surveyed, cyberbullying was found to most commonly occur during the transitional stages between primary and high school. Specifically, 49% were cyberbullied when 10-12 years, 52% during the ages 13-14 years and almost a third (29%) when aged 15-16 years. The percentages reflect the multiple age groups at which an individual can experience cyberbullying.

The most common situations for cyberbullying to occur were:

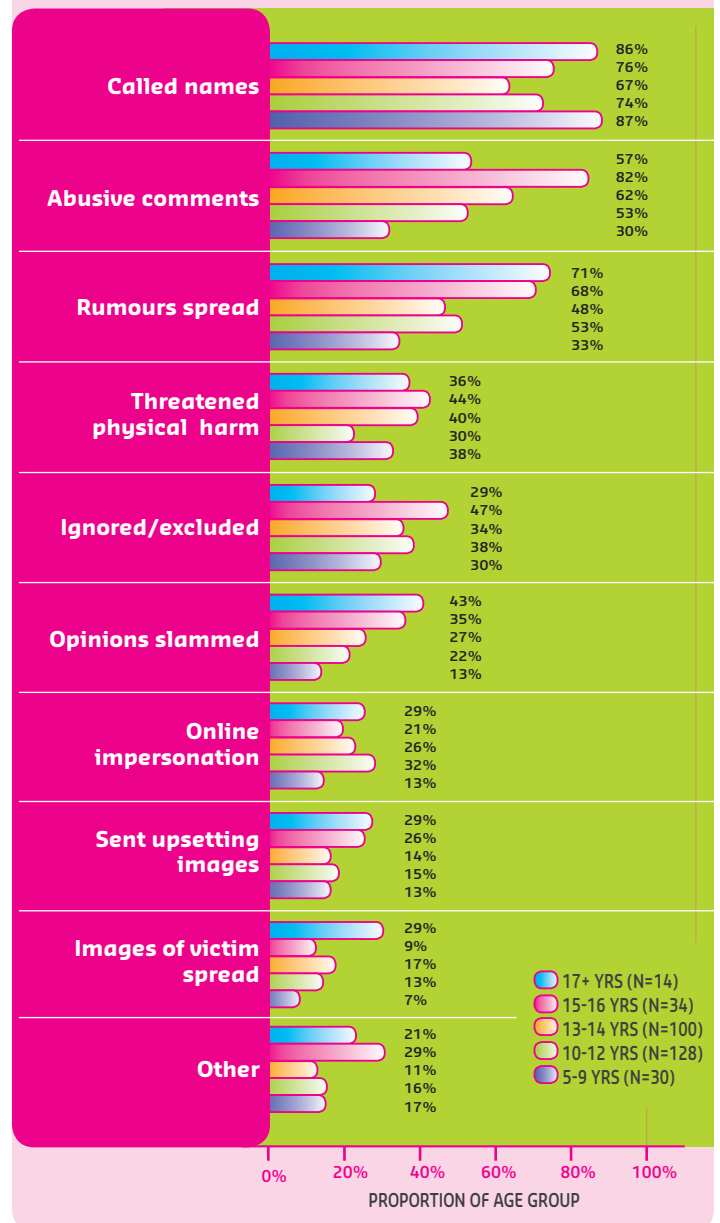
- email (46%)
- online chat rooms (44%)
- social network sites (43%)
- mobile phones (41%)

Analysis by specific age of bullying experience found that social network sites became the more dominant form of cyberbullying in victims aged 13 and older, increasing in prevalence from 13-14 year olds (41%) to 15-16 year olds (53%), and highest among 17-18 year olds (57%). For 10-12 year-olds, chatrooms and email were most common, impacting 48% and 41% respectively. Analysis by gender showed chatrooms to be the most common vehicle reported by male participants (52%), whereas females showed a more even distribution, specifically across emails (47%), mobile phones (43%), social network sites (46%) and chatrooms (42%).

Across the sample, the most prevalent forms of cyberbullying were name calling (80%), abusive comments (67%) and spreading rumours (66%). Whilst name calling showed little difference by age or gender, abusive comments were found to be significantly more common among victims aged 15-16

years ( $X^2(1, 134)=4.77, p<0.05$ ), and among females compared to males ( $X^2(1, 548)=12.43, p<0.001$ ). Females also reported significantly higher levels of being victimised by spreading of rumours ( $X^2(1, 548)=6.70, p<0.05$ ) and having their opinions 'slammed' online ( $X^2(1, 548)=4.96, p<0.05$ ). Figure 2 shows the frequency of different cyberbullying methods broken down by age group.

Figure 2: Forms of cyberbullying by age





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The research found that victimisation can encompass multiple environments, both online and offline. Furthermore, young people are not restricted to exclusively being ‘bully’ or ‘victim’ – they can be both. Twenty-seven percent of participants had not only been a victim of cyberbullying but reported they had also bullied another. In addition, 71% of participants reported knowing who their cyberbully was and 51% reported having also been bullied ‘face to face’ by their cyberbully.

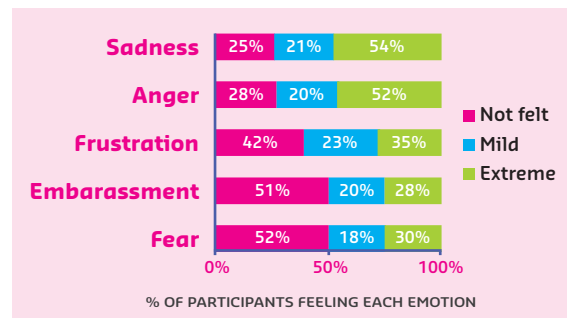
*“This girl told everyone i called her a slut but i didn’t. She printed out a fake msn conversation and showed all my friends as ‘evidence’. Then another girl started msging all her friends saying bad stuff about me. They made me look like a complete idiot to many, many people. They say that they will hurt me and they do. They make sure I feel alone”*

### Impacts of cyberbullying

The majority (86%) of participants reported that the cyberbullying had impacted them in some way. The most common areas of impact included self confidence (78%), self-esteem (70%) and friendships (42%). Notably, 35% reported a negative effect on their school grades, school attendance (28%) and family relationships (19%). On average, 2.39 effects were reported per participants (males: M=2.18; females: M=2.99).

The emotional response of young people varied among participants. Of the emotions tested, sadness and anger were most common (75% and 72% respectively). The prevalence of other emotional responses measured are shown in Figure 3. In addition to these, 30% of participants reported experiencing other emotions including loneliness, confusion, anxiety, betrayal and guilt. Furthermore, 3% reported having suicidal thoughts and 2% claimed they engaged in self-harming behaviour as a result of cyberbullying.

Figure 3: Emotional response to cyberbullying



*“I felt like I was ugly and worthless”*

*“I felt confused, alone, stupid... like I’d done something wrong”*

*“It made me feel scared to go back to school”*

*“I felt like I wanted to be dead... like I wasn’t worth anything”*

### Use and effectiveness of coping strategies

Almost 80% of participants had tried at least one strategy to cope with the cyberbullying, many of whom had tried a number of different strategies across their lifetime (M=2.8 strategies per participant).

Online interventions were found to be a common and effective response to cyberbullying. More than 75% of participants had used a form of online intervention to try to stop the cyberbullying (e.g. blocking, removing friends, changing own account name). Among them, blocking was found to be most effective, followed by removing the bully from their friends list (reported helpful in 76% and 66% of cases, respectively).

Offline, the use of coping strategies were not as common, nor predictable. Despite their reported efficacy, telling a friend or an adult about the issue were strategies used by less than half of the participants (39% and 44% respectively). Males used this strategy much less than females. Table 1 provides a summary of the various offline strategies and their reported effectiveness.



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Table 2: Use and effectiveness of strategies

Strategy	% who tried	% who rated some degree of helpfulness
Told an adult	44.3%	76.0%
Confronted bully	44.2%	31.8%
Told a friend	39.4%	68.5%
Stayed offline	32.3%	62.9%
Stopped looking	29.7%	59.3%
Did nothing	27.0%	35.5%
Retaliated	16.1%	51.7%

Qualitative analysis and thematic coding of the advice young people claimed they would give to others experiencing cyberbullying found some contrasting recommendations, as well as many similarities. Interestingly, speaking out was one of the more common themes, despite its low usage. Overall, the key themes identified (listed in order of prevalence) included:

- (i) speaking out
- (ii) ignorance
- (iii) avoidance
- (iv) positivity, and
- (v) retaliation.

### DISCUSSION

This study explored the phenomenon of cyberbullying from a youth perspective. It shows that numerous adolescents repeatedly fall victim to cyberbullying through name calling, abuse, harassment, exclusion, impersonation, threats of physical harm, defamation and public humiliation. Although the study revealed a high proportion of female victims compared to males, it is unclear if this is truly indicative of the gender split or a reflection of national help-seeking trends and related sampling bias. That said, past research has shown similar female bias<sup>2</sup>. That is, where boys tend to be the primary perpetrators and victims of traditional bullying, online it is girls who dominate the statistics on both victims and bullies.

One of the most interesting findings is that cyberbullying most commonly occurs within the transitional years between primary and secondary school. Whilst it must be noted that the majority of the sample came from this age band (10-14 years), reports from older participants still support this claim. Parents, community and schools would do well to recognise this finding and ensure support and guidance is given during these critical years.

This research provided support to a number of international findings. Firstly, findings support the claim that ICT does not necessarily protect a perpetrator’s identity<sup>10</sup>. Indeed, in many cases the bully is known to the victim and technological platforms are just one of multiple environments they may be using to bully their victim.<sup>11</sup> Additionally, this research further confirmed that young people are often not exclusively classifiable as ‘bully’ or ‘victim’, but rather at various times they may be bullied, be the bully or act as a bystander to bullying.<sup>7, 8, 14, 22</sup> Such strong inter-relatedness between the various forms of bullying and also the dynamics between the role of bully and victim suggest that school and government interventions need to focus not only on cyber-safety but also the quality of peer relationships.

With regard to short-term impacts, the high number of victims reporting negative effects on their self-confidence, esteem, relationships, school grades and attendance highlight that cyberbullying should not be ignored. The levels of extreme sadness and anger reported, and associations made to self-harming and suicidal thoughts undoubtedly support this finding. Moreover, they reinforce the importance of ensuring that cyberbullying complaints are not minimised, and that strength-based support and guidance is provided to young people.



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One of the challenges in providing support is the fact that only a minority of victims are choosing to speak out to either adults or peers about their experience. This is in spite of these strategies' reportedly high efficacy and the fact that many claim it is the advice they would give others. Although not explored in this research, one could assume based on previous research<sup>5</sup> that reluctance to talk with adults may be due to barriers discussed earlier in this report, including the fear and perceived effectiveness of speaking out. It may also be that young people need further information regarding the benefits of seeking help, how to and who they can safely turn to for support. Peers, parents and schools can all play a role in encouraging this behaviour. Further research may do well to investigate what strategies are currently in place to encourage victims to speak out, and how to engender this behaviour. Consideration should also be given to young people who are using retaliation as a coping strategy. Although only a minority of the participants reported trying this measure, their reports of high efficacy raise alarm bells around the message this may send and the impact its use may have on breeding further bullying behaviour.

Lastly, with regard to online strategies, the majority of young people were found to be familiar with, and active users of, online intervention tools. A finding which echoes earlier research.<sup>10, 15</sup> Of the various online tools, the high use and efficacy of blocking techniques suggest that reinforcement of this response is likely to be a fruitful strategy for parents and schools, particularly as it is less disruptive and 'punishing' for victims than some other alternatives. Additionally, given the heavy role that social network sites were shown to play in participants over 13 years, it is suggested that specific strategies need to be given to this age group around how to protect themselves on this medium.

### Limitations

Whilst this study provides a number of interesting insights into cyberbullying there are several limitations to consider when interpreting these results. Firstly, due to the sample bias towards females and young people aged 10 to 18 years, generalisability of the results should not extend beyond this group.



Similarly, the samples' selection bias towards help-seekers means that we can not say for certain that the help-seeking behaviours reflected in this report are indicative of young people nationally. If anything, however, one would expect that the levels of help-seeking reported here may be higher than average given most the sample were recruited whilst in the act of seeking information and/or support. Thirdly, the potential for recall bias among those who reported cyberbullying experiences earlier in their life (at least half the sample) is a factor for consideration.

Lastly, while the use of an online data collection method is believed to have benefited the study, its inflexibility around survey instruments and its inability to verify authenticity of self-reported anonymous surveys must be considered.

### Conclusion

The current study provides a good basis for understanding cyberbullying in Australia, particularly in regard to the use and perceived effectiveness of coping strategies used by young people. The findings reveal both reassuring and concerning aspects of cyberbullying, highlighting that a critical response to effectively addressing cyberbullying relies on both increasing the help-seeking behaviour of victimised young people and improving the efficacy of those they speak to.



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Whilst evidence suggests that cyberbullying presents its own unique set of characteristics, it is also important to remember its heavy inter-relatedness with traditional bullying, hence the need for interventions to focus on improving peer-relations in general. The authors believe that future research may do well to qualitatively explore the current coping strategies in place – what they are, reasons for their efficacy (or lack of), and how inadequacies can be overcome. This will further assist the development of effective response strategies for government, schools, parents and peers.

Suggested citation: BoysTown (2010). Research Summary Report: Cyberbullying experiences, impacts and coping strategies. Sourced from [www.kidshelp.com.au](http://www.kidshelp.com.au)

For further details regarding the research please contact BoysTown's Strategy and Research Team.

A full copy of the published research report can be obtained via the Australian Clearinghouse for Youth Studies.

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