Only WORDS?

The most effective way for schools to tackle the complex and serious issue of bullying in a digital age, is to empower young people to negotiate cyberspace with confidence, suggests **Sal McKeown**…

Action for Children reports that one in five British young people have been victims of cyberbullying, receiving hurtful comments via text message, on social network sites or online forums. Ofsted puts the number at 40%. The numbers don't matter but the impact on vulnerable young people does.

While there is no such thing as a typical cyberbully, researchers claim that a high proportion of them are bright, articulate girls aged 10 –14, who see cyberbullying as a way of rebelling and exercising control over others.

Teenagers can be fickle and friendship groups often change. Most young people keep mobile numbers on their phone long after a friendship has finished and can be tempted to send spiteful messages. Texts such as, 'i dont understand how something so ugly was created. UR fat and a fake. Evry1s laughing at you.' can have a devastating effect on girls in their adolescent years. Some cyberbullying goes further and contains obscenities, vicious insults and threatens the victim's personal safety.

Children are vulnerable to text bullying as soon as they own a mobile phone but Web2 exacerbates the problem. According to Stephen Carrick-Davies, author of a new report Munch Poke Ping, social media is the 'single most important activity many vulnerable young people rely on to give them identity, connection and a sense of community.'

He claims that over half of all teenagers own a Smartphone and in the majority of cases it is a BlackBerry. This device is very popular because of the private message system BBM, which is always available and is free. This lets young people share pictures, audio and broadcast personal information to an entire network of BBMers. BBM is an addictive activity and many of those in Carrick-Davies' focus group reported that they 'only fell asleep at night when the last person stopped pinging.' More worryingly, girls as young as 13 are being pressurised into sending sexually explicit photographs of themselves via their mobile.

Carrick-Davies says, 'The idea of telling children not to give out personal details online has been turned on its head as the whole raison d'être for social media is that you connect personally, with a resulting loss of privacy – a reasonable trade off to many young people.'

39%

OF TEENS CLAIM TO HAVE SENT SEXUALLY EXPLICIT TEXT MESSAGES

⭐ ABOUT THE EXPERT

SAL MCKEOWN IS A FREELANCE SPECIAL NEEDS JOURNALIST AND AUTHOR OF BRILLIANT IDEAS FOR USING ICT IN THE INCLUSIVE CLASSROOM (ROUTLEDGE) AND A BOOK FOR PARENTS, HOW TO HELP YOUR DYSLEXIC AND DYSPRAXIC CHILD (CRIMSON PUBLISHING)

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There are frequent posts on parenting forums like Mumsnet complaining that schools don't do enough to protect children and that policies are not backed up by action. One father reported: 'We ran into the 'if we can't see it happening then we can't take action' argument – even though we made it clear that the bullying was out of sight of teachers and much of it was via email and 'cyber''. Cyber-bullying is a safeguarding issue. Schools are expected to take responsibility for what children do on their premises but often do not have the technological tools for surveillance. Once children access information via 3G and 4G networks, the school's filtering systems cannot monitor their activity.

All or nothing?

It is easy to see why schools such as Burnage Media Arts College have banned pupils from using mobile phones anywhere on campus. 'These devices are too much of a temptation for young people,' said head teacher Ian Fenn. 'Children are distracted and waste time playing games or sending pointless texts when they should be concentrating on lessons.'

Any boy at the school using a mobile will have it confiscated; his parents will be called in and he may be excluded. In the last 15 months the College has only had to impose sanctions on two pupils. Staff at the boys' school say the difference in behaviour has been 'dramatic' and some of the pupils support the ban as they found that illicit texting in classes was a disturbance.

Stephen Carrick-Davies believes banning is futile, however. 'It is clear that the banning and restricting of personal mobile devices within education settings is difficult, and without body scanners near impossible.' Children are crafty and will hand over a phone but have another one concealed. As one teacher described it 'You just create an arms race between trying to block and restrict and it becomes an unwinnable war.'

Carrick-Davies believes in making children more robust and encouraging them to look after themselves and look out for others in their use of social media, 'We do children a terrible disservice if we retreat to our comfort zone and don't take the time to learn from them; recognise what they bring to technology, trust and support them and find ways of understanding and harnessing the technology together.' So what can schools do to support pupils?

Peer pressure

Horbury School in Wakefield has been closely involved in CyberMentors, an initiative organised by Beatbullying to help young people aged 11-17 stay safe, both on and offline. The programme trains young people so they are clear about acceptable and unacceptable online behaviours and understand how they can deal with bullying and other issues affecting their wellbeing.

The charity went into the school and trained a group of 25 pupils in face-to-face and online mentoring so they could support young people in trouble in other parts of the UK. The CyberMentors project was very successful and pupils formed a committee, organised parents' evenings, recruited volunteers, raised money and set up their own CyberMentors Twitter account. The initiative has not continued in the same form because of the amount of time participants had to commit to it but it provided a kick-start for other work in the school. These days at Horbury they focus on face-to-face work rather then being involved in supporting others outside the school.

'There is nowhere that is free from bullying and that includes the workplace too' said Jacky Mason, Student Support Manager at Sir Jonathan North School in Leicester. 'Schools must be proactive and not just reactive.'

The school has established Friends against Bullying and Discrimination (FABAD), a peer support group for students, run by trained anti-bullying leaders. They also use Text Someone, a system where pupils or their parents send a text to a special number where one of the school staff will pick it up and deal with it straightway before the problem escalates. They introduced Text Someone in a series of assemblies and gave out cards with the number of the dedicated phone line. While it has not been extensively used, Jacky is very pleased that they have it. 'One girl was being bullied on the bus every morning by pupils from another school. When she reached the end of her tether and could not deal with it any more, she texted from the bus and we were able to deal with the incident right away.'

Jacky also recommends Incoming Message, a hard-hitting film made by Orange, available on YouTube. It lasts ten minutes and is ideal for KS3 PSHE lessons. It shows the impact of text bullying, both on the victim and the perpetrator, and will stimulate discussion.

Cyberbullying is a criminal offence under section 1 of the Malicious Communications Act 1998 and young people need to know this. While schools will never eradicate bullying, they must take steps to protect all those in their charge and make sure that pupils know that spur of the moment, ill-judged comments could have very far-reaching consequences.

5 THINGS SCHOOLS CAN DO

> **Set up a peer mentoring group**
> **Provide a dedicated text number for reporting bullying or use Text Someone**
> **Involve pupils in developing an Acceptable Use Policy that covers mobiles too**
> **Mobiles have played their part in football violence and rioting so make sure your pupils know that anything they text can be traced**
> **Get a copy of the Safeguarding Handbook produced by BeatBullying in partnership with Securus Software.**