



Ontario Centre of Excellence  
for Child and Youth  
Mental Health

Centre d'excellence de l'Ontario  
en santé mentale des  
enfants et des adolescents

**Bringing People and Knowledge Together to Strengthen Care.  
Rassembler les gens et les connaissances pour renforcer les soins.**

## Evidence In-Sight: Cyberbullying and mental health

Date:

October 2015

The following Evidence In-Sight report involved a non-systematic search and summary of the research and grey literature. These findings are intended to inform the requesting organization, in a timely fashion, rather than providing an exhaustive search or systematic review. This report reflects the literature and evidence available at the time of writing. As new evidence emerges, knowledge on evidence-informed practices can evolve. It may be useful to re-examine and update the evidence over time and/or as new findings emerge.

Evidence In-Sight primarily presents research findings, along with consultations with experts where feasible and constructive. Since scientific research represents only one type of evidence, we encourage you to combine these findings with the expertise of practitioners and the experiences of children, youth and families to develop the best evidence-informed practices for your setting.

While this report may describe best practices or models of evidence-informed programs, Evidence In-Sight does not include direct recommendations or endorsement of a particular practice or program.

This summary report was researched and written to provide a brief overview of the effects of cyberbullying, its connection to mental health and possible interventions and solutions.

## 1. Summary

Cyberbullying is a growing concern affecting over 25% of children and youth across Ontario (Paglia-Boak, Adlaf & Mann, 2013). Interpersonal conflicts in peer groups are usually difficult, but they can be especially problematic online where adults may have less influence on children and adolescents, and youth feel more uninhibited.

Cyberbullying comes in many different forms:

- Flaming: electronic transmission of angry or rude messages
- Harassment: repeatedly sending insulting or threatening messages
- Cyberstalking: threats of harm or intimidation
- Defamation: put-downs, spreading cruel rumours
- Catfishing: pretending to be someone else and sharing information to damage a person's reputation
- Outing: revealing personal information about a person that was shared in confidence
- Exclusion: maliciously leaving a person out of a group online, such as a chat line, game (Schenk & Fremouw, 2012).

Most bullying occurs between the ages 13 and 14 then usually decreases around ages 15 to 16, both for bullies and victims (Brown, Cassidy & Jackson, 2009). Social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram have become communication hubs for adolescents and have led to an increase in cyberbullying among this population (Hinduja, Patchin, n.d.).

### **Cyberbullying and mental health:**

There is a strong association between bullying and mental health issues. Bullying can cause mental health problems and/or young people may experience bullying because of their mental health issues (Fekkes, Pipjers & Verloove-Vanhorick, 2005). Young people who experience bullying show higher levels of depression, anxiety, psychosomatic symptoms, suicidal thoughts and low self-esteem (Fekkes, Pipjers & Verloove-Vanhorick, 2005). Though research on

cyberbullying is still emerging, studies show similar correlations between cyberbullying, low self-esteem and depression (Tokunaga, 2010).

**Cyberbullying and suicide:**

Studies show that bullying causes major emotional distress for young people who have survived a suicide attempt (Fekkes, Pipjers & Verloove-Vanhorick, 2005). While bullying is often discussed alongside youth suicide, the evidence does not support the assumption that bullying specifically causes youth suicide (Kim & Leventhal, 2008). Media outlets often declare that bullying led to a youth taking their life, but there are usually more variables involved. Bullying is not thought to be part of normal development and exposure to bullying is known to be harmful and can increase the risk of suicidal ideation and behaviours in youth (Kim & Leventhal, 2008), even though it does not cause suicide on its own.

**Cyberbullying interventions:**

It is essential to address bullying and cyberbullying at individual, peer group, school and community levels. Community efforts should aim to foster positive relationships among young people and create a community environment that is responsive to bullying incidents and intolerant of bullying behaviour (Pepler, n.d.). While strategies to address cyberbullying are still emerging, many school and community-based programs use education and awareness initiatives to inform children and youth about online dangers, the consequences of participating in cyberbullying behaviour and strategies to block offensive material and involve adults (Snakenborg, Van Acker & Gable, 2011). Parents are advised to monitor their children's online activities regularly and encourage open discussion with their children around safety and responsible internet use (Hinduja & Patchin, 2014). More information on resources and supports can be found in the additional resources section at the end of this summary.

**Solutions to cyberbullying:**

Although there is no final solution to cyberbullying, Brown, Cassidy, and Jackson (2006) have several suggestions for encouraging solutions when bullying is an issue:

- Develop programs to educate students about cyberbullying and its effects.
- Set up an anonymous phone line that students can use to report cyberbullying.
- Have a zero tolerance policy towards cyber-bullying (e.g. If a student is caught cyberbullying a peer, s/he would be suspended from school).
- Bring parents, students and school staff together to talk about solutions.
- Develop a positive school culture where students learn to be kind to each other. In a supportive and positive environment:
  - Students, staff members and parents feel safe, included and accepted (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013).
  - All members of the school community show respect, fairness and kindness to one another, and build healthy relationships that are free from discrimination and harassment (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013).
  - Students are encouraged and given support to be positive leaders and role models in their school community (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013).
- For more information on how to encourage a positive and supportive culture in schools, review [Promoting a Positive School Climate](#), prepared by the Ontario Ministry of Education

- Offer multiple extra-curricular activities so students may have less time using technology and therefore less time to cyberbully (Brown, Cassidy, and Jackson, 2006).
- It is important to work on building self-esteem in adolescents. Self-esteem can be developed through the use of language that recognizes the importance of self-esteem, discussions around appropriate and inappropriate social behaviours and interactions, and encouragement and reassurance that being themselves is exactly who they should be (Brown, Cassidy, and Jackson, 2006).

What to tell a child or youth if they are experiencing cyberbullying or might be a bully themselves:

- If someone sends a mean or threatening message, don't respond. Show it to an adult.
- Never open emails from someone you don't know or from someone you know who is a bully.
- Don't send messages when you are angry. Before hitting "send" ask yourself how you would feel if you received the message.
- Help other kids who are bullied online by not joining in and showing bullying messages to an adult (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013).

## 2. Next steps and additional resources

### Together to live: Bullying and cyberbullying

- <http://www.togethertolive.ca/bullying-and-cyberbullying>

### The Centre for Suicide Prevention

- <http://www.suicideinfo.ca/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=U9Oo1Hz3LCs=&tabid=516>

### The American Humane association: Cyber Bullying Prevention and Intervention facts:

- <http://www.americanhumane.org/children/stop-child-abuse/fact-sheets/cyber-bullying-prevention-and-intervention.html>

### Cyberbullying Research Centre: Cyberbullying Fact Sheet

- [http://cyberbullying.org/cyberbullying\\_fact\\_sheet.pdf](http://cyberbullying.org/cyberbullying_fact_sheet.pdf)

### Puresight Online Child Safety: What should I do if my child is a cyberbully?

- <http://www.puresight.com/Cyberbullying/cyberbullying-puresight.html><http://www.puresight.com/Cyberbullying/what-should-i-do-if-my-child-is-a-cyber-bully.html>

### Registry of Resources for Safe and Inclusive Schools

<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/safeschools/registry.html>

The Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health has a number of resources and services available to support agencies with implementation, evaluation, knowledge mobilization, youth engagement and family engagement.

For more information, visit:

<http://www.excellenceforchildand youth.ca/what-we-do> or check out the Centre's resource hub at

<http://www.excellenceforchildand youth.ca/resource-hub>.

For general mental health information, including links to resources for families: <http://www.ementalhealth.ca>

## References

- Brown, K., Cassidy, W., & Jackson, M. (2006). Cyber-bullying: Developing policy to direct responses that are equitable and effective in addressing this special form of bullying. *Canadian Journal of Educational Administration and Policy*, 57. Retrieved September 20, 2011 from [https://umanitoba.ca/publications/cjeap/articles/brown\\_jackson\\_cassidy.html](https://umanitoba.ca/publications/cjeap/articles/brown_jackson_cassidy.html)
- Fekkes, M., Pipjers, F.I., & Verloove-Vanhorick, S.P. (2005). Bullying: Who does what, when and where? Involvement of children, teachers and parents in bullying behaviour. *Health Education Research*, 20, 81-91.
- Hinduja, S. & Patchin, J. W. (2014). Cyberbullying fact sheet: Identification, Prevention, and Response. Cyberbullying Research Center. Retrieved October 29, 2015 from [http://cyberbullying.org/Cyberbullying\\_Identification\\_Prevention\\_Response.pdf](http://cyberbullying.org/Cyberbullying_Identification_Prevention_Response.pdf)
- Kim, Y. S., & Leventhal, B. (2008). Bullying and suicide. A review. *International Journal of Adolescent Medicine and Health*, 20, 133-154.
- Paglia-Boak, A., Adlaf, E. M., & Mann, R. E. (2013). Drug use among Ontario students – Detailed Ontario student drug use and health survey findings 1977–2013.
- Pepler, D.J. (n.d.). Scaffolding and Social Architecture: A Framework for Interventions to Promote Healthy Relationships. Retrieved from: [http://www.kidsmentalhealth.ca/documents/Res\\_Pepler.pdf](http://www.kidsmentalhealth.ca/documents/Res_Pepler.pdf)
- Ontario Ministry of Education. (2013). Promoting a positive school climate: A resource guide for schools. Retrieved from: <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/parents/IntroDocEng.pdf>
- Schenk AM, Fremouw WJ. *Prevalence, psychological impact, and coping of cyberbully victims among college students. J School Violence* 2012; 11: 21–37.
- Snakenborg, J., Van Acker, R., & Gable, R. (2011) Cyberbullying: Prevention and intervention to protect our children and youth. *Preventing School Failure: Alternative Education for Children and Youth*, 55, 88-95. Retrieved from: [http://journals1.scholarsportal.info/details.xqy?uri=/1045988x/v55i0002/88\\_cpaitpocay.xml](http://journals1.scholarsportal.info/details.xqy?uri=/1045988x/v55i0002/88_cpaitpocay.xml)
- Tokunaga, R. (2010). Following you home from school: A critical review and synthesis of research on cyberbullying victimization. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 26, 277-287. Retrieved from: [http://journals1.scholarsportal.info/details.xqy?uri=/07475632/v26i0003/277\\_fyhfsasorocv.xml](http://journals1.scholarsportal.info/details.xqy?uri=/07475632/v26i0003/277_fyhfsasorocv.xml)