

Information Sheet

Bullying, Harassment and Physical Violence



We care.
We listen.



Children and young people's experiences of school-based bullying, cyberbullying and other physical violence and harassment.

Bullying is one of the major issues facing children and young people today¹. Its negative impacts have been found to affect not only victims, but bullies also^{1,2}.

Recent findings suggest that one in four Year 4 to 9 students are bullied every few weeks or more in Australia². Other studies indicate figures somewhere between 33% and 70%^{3 4 5 6}. Given that many victims of bullying do not report their experiences to parents or school authorities, even these figures may underestimate the prevalence of this problem.

The exact definition of bullying is contested. Historically, many have defined bullying as behaviour occurring either at school or in transit to/from school. However, peer group bullying can also occur outside these times, both in and out of the home. As the use of communication technologies rapidly grows among young people, various technological environments have also become an increasingly popular forum for bullying, known as 'cyberbullying'.

Despite varied definitions, it is generally agreed that three core elements exist in any bullying behaviour⁷. These include:

- A deliberate intent to harm
- A power imbalance between the perpetrator and the victim
- (Often) repeated behaviour.

Within this, peer group bullying can take many forms, including physical harassment and/or violence, property damage, direct or indirect verbal insults involving socially and emotionally hurtful rumour, innuendo, gesture, exclusion from friendship networks and other forms of negative social interaction (e.g. threats, extortion).

Cyberbullying specifically refers to the transmission of hurtful messages and images by SMS, email or internet, used to cause psychological and social harm to others⁸. Whilst reported rates of cyberbullying in Australia and abroad are not as high as reports of school-related bullying, the increasing use of communication technologies and their unique characteristics, make cyberbullying a notable and concerning form of bullying.

The negative physical, psychological and social impacts of bullying, harassment and violent assault are well documented. Whether it occurs in school, online or outside of school, all forms of bullying, harassment and violence have the potential to engender fear, depression, loneliness, anxiety, insecurity, decreased self-worth, academic lethargy and, in some cases, self-harm and thoughts of suicide. Additionally, physical harassment may provoke physical retaliation, which places victims at risk of further physical and emotional harm.

In the case of cyberbullying, many believe that the unique characteristics of this form of bullying can intensify impacts even further, because public humiliation or embarrassment can occur across a wider audience⁹. Moreover, cyberbullying has the ability to be more invasive as the bully is able to breach the privacy and security of their victim's home.

Children and young people can fall victim to bullying, harassment or assault at any age. However, the most common age for school-related bullying appears to be during the transition ages from primary to secondary school. For cyberbullying, studies show that incidence in later high school years is also common². For non-school related violence, the age trend is higher again, occurring mostly in later high school years, up to 25 years of age.

While many surveys suggest that young males tend to be the primary perpetrators and victims of 'traditional' school-related bullying behaviour, there seems to be some contradiction where cyberbullying is concerned^{10 11}. Recent research has shown that cyberbullying appears to follow the opposite gender pattern. Girls tend to report slightly higher involvement than boys in this more covert style of bullying, both as bullies and victims².

Interestingly, young people are often not exclusively classifiable as 'bully' or 'victim'. At various times they may be bullied, be the bully or act as a witness and bystander to a bullying episode¹². Similar to other research, a recent study conducted by Kids Helpline found that almost one third of cyberbully victims had also bullied others, either offline and/or via communication technology¹³.

The Kids Helpline Experience

Kids Helpline records data on a range of problems and issues facing children and young people. Up until 2008, all bullying-related contacts were classified as either 'School-related Bullying' or 'Harassment/Violent Assault' when occurring outside of a school context. In July 2008, an additional problem type named 'Cyber-Harassment and Bullying' was included. This was in recognition of the increasing number of contacts specifically relating to this new form of harassment. For the purpose of this report, data from all three problem types has been collectively referred to as 'Bullying/Assault'. Where data

relates only to a specific type of bullying or assault, this has been identified using the classifications above.

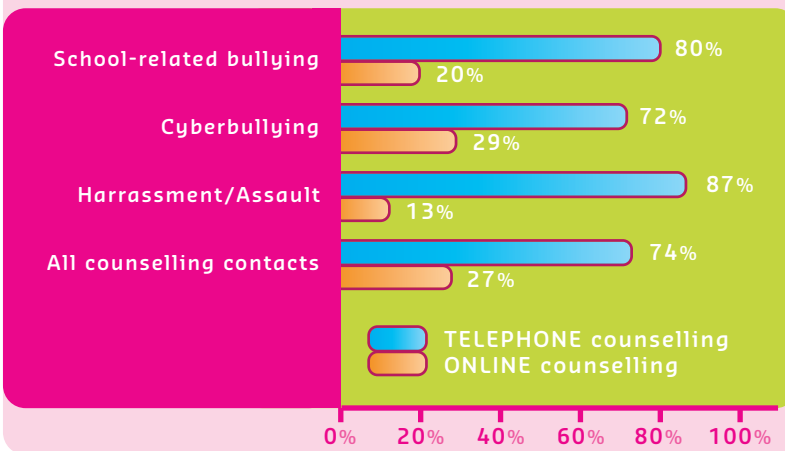
During 2009, a total of 2,498 Kids Helpline contacts reported bullying/assault related issues as their primary concern. This included 1,976 reports of school-related bullying, 200 reports of cyberbullying and 322 reports related to harassment/assault. A further 481 reported bullying/assault as their secondary reason for contact. In total, Kids Helpline counsellors engaged in 2,979 counselling sessions with young people reporting bullying/assault – approximately 57 contacts per week.

Between 2005-2009, Kids Helpline received a total of 14,471 counselling contacts where the primary purpose of the contact related to bullying/assault. Breaking a seven-year downward trend, the number and proportion of contacts related to bullying/assault during 2009 were consistent with 2008 help-seeking rates (representing 4.9% of counselling sessions in 2008 and 4.7% in 2009).

Mode of Contact

Kids Helpline provides counselling to children and young people via phone, email and real-time web. In 2009, phone was the preferred method for all bullying/assault related contacts (80% overall). Online methods were less common for contacts relating to harassment/violent assault (13%), as shown in the graph below.

figure 1 COMPARISON OF PHONE & ONLINE CONTACTS (Bullying to All Problem Types 2009)



Geographic Location

Consistent with the geographical breakdown of all Kids Helpline counselling contacts, the majority (69%) of bullying/assault related contacts in 2009 were from metropolitan areas. Contacts from New South Wales (NSW) represented the majority (34%), followed by Victoria (24%) and Queensland (21%).

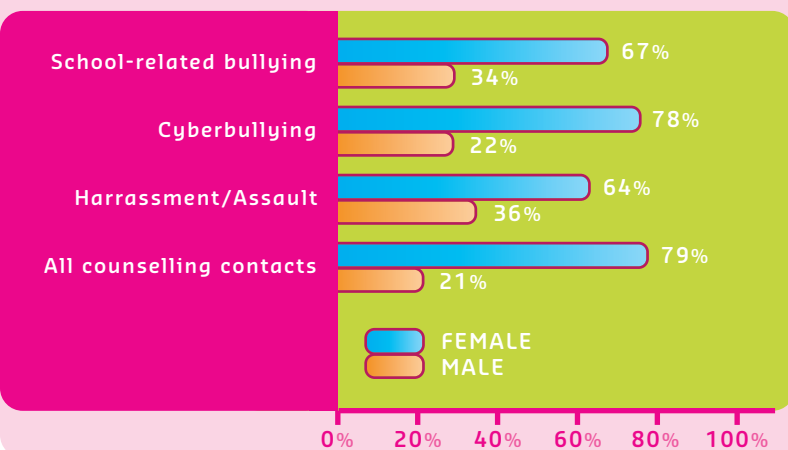
When looking specifically at cyberbullying, slightly higher contact numbers can be seen in NSW and the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) compared with overall Kids Helpline counselling contacts. Where NSW accounted for 33% of all counselling contacts in 2009, it accounted for 38% of cyberbullying contacts. Similarly, although the ACT accounted for only 2% of all counselling contacts, it accounted for 4% of cyberbullying contacts and 3% of harassment contacts.

Age and Gender

Despite research results that show young males are more likely than females to be perpetrators and victims of school-related bullying, young females are more likely than males to share their experiences with Kids Helpline. Additionally, females are more likely than males to be the target of cyberbullying¹¹. Both of these findings are depicted in the graph below.

Although still the minority, the proportion of males reporting school-related bullying or harassment/violent assault (34% and 36% respectively), is considerably higher than the proportion of all males contacting Kids Helpline (20%). In contrast, the gender breakdown of 2009 cyberbullying contacts is more in-line with the proportion of overall counselling contacts for the year, with only 22% represented by males.

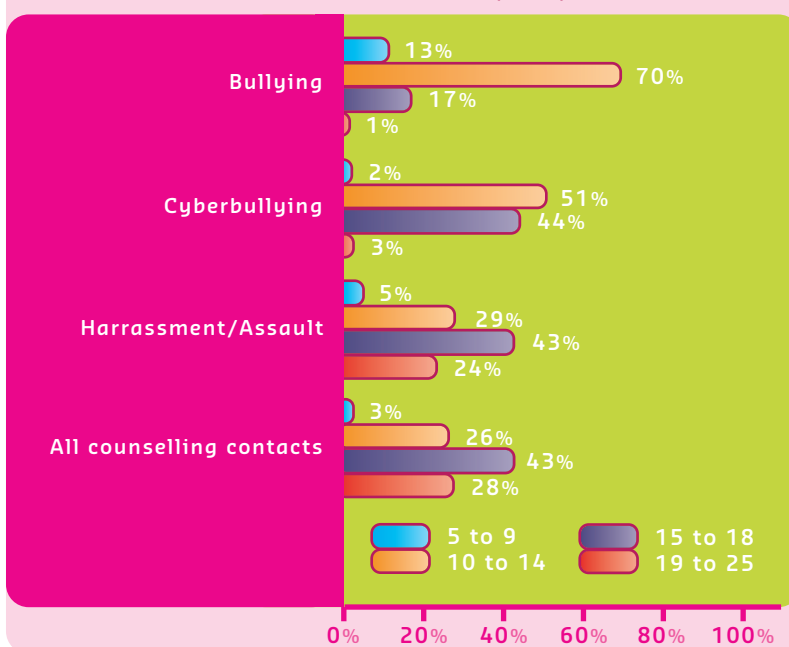
figure 2 COMPARISON OF GENDER
(Bullying to All Problem Types 2009)



Regardless of gender, young people aged 10-14 years made up the majority (70%) of 2009 contacts for whom school-related bullying was the primary concern. This reflects a five year trend at Kids Helpline despite the proportion of overall contacts trending towards an older client base.

Similarly, and consistent with other research², 10-14 year olds also represented the majority (51%) of cyberbullying contacts. However, contacts relating to harassment/violent assault were dominated by the older cohort 15-18 years. The following graph shows the full age breakdown of contacts.

figure 3 COMPARISON OF AGE DISTRIBUTION
FOR ALL PROBLEM TYPES (2009)



Cultural Background

The total number of all bullying/assault related contacts from Indigenous and Torres Strait Islander children and young people in 2009 was 145 (6%). Contacts from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds represented 15%.

Indigenous children and young people, although representing only 3% of all Kids Helpline counselling contacts in 2009, represented almost 5% of school-related bullying contacts and 10% of harassment/violent assault contacts.

Claudia, 10 years, was experiencing long-term bullying that left her with nightmares and a sense of dread about what she has been experiencing at school. She was feeling very stuck. Claudia was able to talk about her fears around going to school and even going to sleep at night. The counsellor let Claudia know it was not her fault that she was being bullied and she was really brave to take action to change things. They talked about letting the teachers know that the bullying hadn't stopped. Claudia decided she would need some help from her mum to talk to the teachers again so they also spoke about making sure that her mum knew about what was going on. The counsellor also made sure that Claudia knew that it was important to tell her mum that she had been having nightmares.*

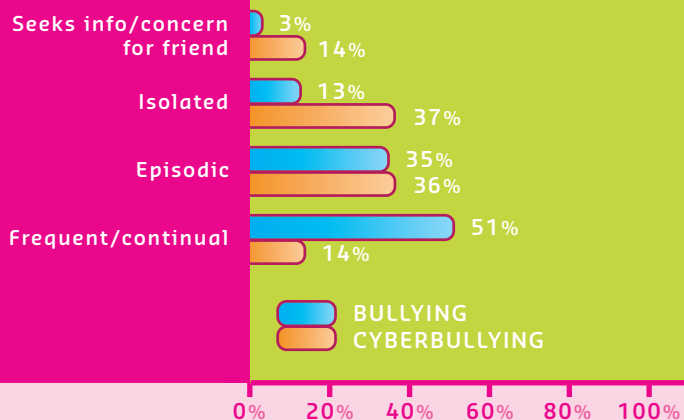
**names have been changed for privacy reasons*

Severity of Concerns

Counsellors rate all counselling contacts into five levels of severity. For school-related bullying and cyberbullying contacts these range from information seeking to a one-off experience to continual and/or frequent bullying. Contacts relating to harassment/violent assault also include threats and client injury as severity categories.

In the past five years, the number of school-related bullying cases reporting the more extreme severity of frequent/continual harassment has increased from 39% in 2005 to 51% in 2009. The first full year of cyberbullying specific data shows the majority (37%) were reported as isolated events. As the graph below shows, this represented only a slightly higher incidence than contacts reporting episodic events of school-related bullying (36%).

figure 4 COMPARISON OF SCHOOL RELATED BULLYING & CYBERBULLYING SEVERITY (2009)



For harassment/violent assault contacts, the most frequent severities reported in 2009 were isolated incidents and threats of harm (32% and 33% respectively). Remaining contacts related to prolonged/frequent attacks (18%), injury (8%) and seeking information (9%).

Types of Bullying

Qualitative analysis of 1,127 school-related and cyberbullying contacts for which case notes were recorded identified a number of common types of bullying occurring in 2009. The most common of these include threats, name-calling/teasing, physical violence/assault, spreading rumours and exclusion from peer groups. In instances of cyberbullying, social networking sites and instant messenger were the most common methods used for victimising. SMS was also common.

In contrast, analysis of 170 contacts relating to harassment/violent assault showed quite different themes. Specifically, the most common types of this form of abuse were found to be:

- Physical assault
- Direct threat to personal safety
- Being followed / chased
- Verbal abuse

Impacts of Bullying

Qualitative analysis of client contact notes for all bullying/assault related counselling sessions in 2009 identified a number of common emotional and behavioural impacts. These findings are consistent with other research undertaken by Kids Helpline over the past decade.

Barwon*, 14 years, reported that he has been bullied at school for the past 12 months. He also said the bullying continues at home because the people ring him and send him text messages. Barwon is away on holidays at the moment. He said he doesn't want to go home because of the bullying. He has had thoughts in the past about suicide due to the bullying.

The counsellor first explored how Barwon was currently feeling to ensure that he was feeling safe and not considering ending his life. He indicated that he had been feeling much better while being on holidays as the bullies had not been able to reach him. Barwon was given a clear message that what has been happening is NOT his fault and that he had done the right thing to call. The nature of the bullying behaviour was discussed and Barwon recognised that sometimes his reaction to the bullying made things more difficult because the bullies "got a laugh" when he became angry and upset. They discussed how he might be able to react differently to take the "fun" out of the behaviour for the bullies. The counsellor also suggested the possibility of turning his phone off when he was at home, to give him time out. Barwon indicated that he would think about this.

**names have been changed for privacy reasons*



Overall, the most frequent impacts reported included feelings of:

- sadness
- anxiety
- low self-esteem and loss in confidence
- fear for personal safety
- anger and thoughts of revenge
- disengagement from school / class.

During 2009, counsellors also recorded whether children and young people contacting Kids Helpline had recently engaged in deliberate self-injury (as distinct from suicidality). In 100 of the bullying/assault related counselling sessions (4%), young people reportedly deliberately injuring themselves in a way they believed to be non-lethal. A further 50 contacts (2%) reported having current thoughts of suicide.

Factors Contributing to Bullying

Analysis of 1,297 bullying/assault-related contacts highlighted a number of differences between the contributing factors of school-related bullying (and cyberbullying), compared with non-school harassment/violent assault, as shown in the following table.

Factors Contributing to Bullying/Assault

School-related bullying/cyberbullying

- friendship breakdown
- high achievement (academic or other)
- differences in physical appearance
- ethnicity
- sexual orientation
- being new to an area or group

Andre's*, mother initiated the call after her 12 year-old son told her that he wanted to kill himself.

Andre said he is bullied at school by various kids because he has buck teeth. This involves being kicked and punched regularly. Andre said the teachers blame him for what happens, saying he is targeted because he reacts. His mother said Andre has had three violent outbursts this week and he picks on his younger sister regularly. Andre advised that he doesn't want to go back to school because he feels powerless over what is happening. The counsellor discussed a safety plan with Andre's mum to ensure he was monitored overnight and external assessment sought in the morning to help work out his anger and thoughts of suicide. Andre then spoke with the counsellor and discussed some options to assist him at school but agreed he call back after his appointment tomorrow to discuss this more. They decided it was most important that Andre look after himself first before trying to work on the problem at school.

**names have been changed for privacy reasons*

Factors Contributing to Bullying/Assault

Harrassment/violent assault

- relationship conflict
 - > partners (primarily boyfriend)
 - > friendships
 - > neighbours/work colleagues
- public settings (initiated by strangers)

Strategies Used by Children and Young People

Children and young people use a variety of strategies to try to cope with bullying. Methods such as ignoring, blocking, avoiding and retaliation were commonly reported, with varied reports of effectiveness.

In approximately two-thirds of bullying/assault-related contacts in 2009 for which case notes were recorded, young people had not told an adult about the incident, either because they felt they couldn't or because they chose for Kids Helpline to be their first contact. Fear that speaking out may worsen the problem and increase retribution from the bully was a common reason given.



Hannah*, 10 years, said she is troubled by bullies at school and at home as they live down the road. They are calling her names and hitting her, leaving bruises. She has complained to the teacher and principal but nothing has been done. Teacher has told her to ignore them and to try not to provoke. The counsellor let Hannah know that she believed her, that it was not okay that she was being bullied and that together they would try to work out a way to make sure Hannah is safe at home and at school. Hannah had thought it might be helpful to try to write down all of the things that had happened to her in the last month and try showing her teacher as well as letting her dad know about the problems she is having with the kids at home. The counsellor indicated that she might like to try this. They also worked out a plan for Hannah to play near where the teacher was 'on duty' at school so that she would not be hurt there.

**names have been changed for privacy reasons*

For cyberbullying in particular, fear that telling an adult would result in the child having their access to communication device(s) restricted is another common deterrent found in Kids Helpline data and other research⁹.

Of those young people who had told an adult, qualitative analysis showed two groups emerging. The first includes those who report that speaking out has been supportive and helpful. Their contact to Kids Helpline is to talk further about the issue and get additional assistance, ideas and strategies.

The second group includes those who are experiencing ongoing bullying despite having told parents and/or teachers. These young people are contacting Kids Helpline feeling very powerless, and often facing some significant impacts. In 2009, they sadly represented at least 10% of contacts who reported telling an adult.

A trap many parents, teachers and other carers working with children and young people reportedly fell into was to ignore, minimise and/or unintentionally blame the victim. Often there is an inherent message that it is their fault and they should actively do something about it⁹ – an approach that can often just intensify their emotional hurt regarding the bullying.

BoysTown's Response to the Issue of Bullying, Harassment and Physical Violence

Based on its own data and that of other contemporary research, BoysTown recognises that bullying is widespread and, in many cases, severe. In our experience from working with thousands of young people who have experienced bullying, we believe that engendering respect and the valuing of diversity needs to be key ingredients in any effective anti-bullying strategy. More specifically, BoysTown believes:

- All children and young people deserve the right to grow up in an environment free from bullying, harassment and violence
- Victims of bullying should never be made to feel that they are to blame – it is not their fault
- School and community environments should encourage and support care, respect, inclusion, diversity, cooperation and nonviolent resolution of conflict
- All children and young people should be encouraged to speak out and be supported to ensure their safety once they have spoken out

- Contemporary communication behaviour of children and young people including their preferences for help seeking should be respected in the delivery of support services. As well as face-to-face psychological support, telephone and online counselling together with interactive and informative web sites are critical in supporting children and young people to overcome the impacts of bullying and other harassing behaviour.

BoysTown actively advocates for the implementation of effective anti-bullying prevention and intervention strategies. In recent years, we have contributed knowledge to relevant government inquiries and industry forums. In 2009, BoysTown also undertook a specialised research project to further understand the issue of cyberbullying, particularly its impacts and the effectiveness of current interventions. It is intended that the findings of this research will be communicated to government, educators, service providers and the community to assist in minimising the impact that cyberbullying can have on the lives of young people.

In direct response to children and young people impacted by bullying, harassment and/or assault, Kids Helpline counsellors continue to offer strength-based empowerment counselling support, advice and referrals. Information and tips are also provided on the Kids Helpline website for both young people and adults seeking support and advice.

Helpful links / resources

www.kidshelp.com.au
www.talktoyourkids.com.au
www.bullyingnoway.com.au
www.cybersmart.gov.au
www.cybernetrix.com.au
www.wiseuptoit.com.au

Suggested citation

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