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Bullying in a New Ground: Cyberbullying Among 9-16 Year Olds in Ireland

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Bullying in a new playground: Cyberbullying experiences among 9-16 year-old in Ireland.

Thuy Dinh, Brian O'Neill

This paper builds on the data collected in Ireland by the cross-national EU Kids Online II project- a large 25 country survey which investigated children's experiences of the internet, focusing on issues of use, activities, risks, and safetyⁱ. This article explores incidences, forms and consequences of cyberbullying among Irish children, as well as discussing possible prevention and intervention strategies.

Bullying is an age-old social problem, beginning in the schoolyard and often progressing to the boardroom (McCarthy, Rylance, Bennett, & Zimmermann, 2001). It may be defined as the abusive treatment of a person by means of force or coercion. It is aggressive behaviour that is repeated over time, is intentionally harmful and occurs without provocation (Peterson, 2001). Research shows that traditional bullying differs from cyberbullying in many ways, despite the fact that cyberbullying research and theorizing is largely guided by findings in the traditional bullying literature (Campbell, A., 2005) (Tokunaga, R., 2010).

The term "cyberbullying" is used widely nowadays not only in academic research but also more widely in the media and in public discourse. Cyberbullying is most often defined as "the use of electronic information and communication devices such as e-mail, instant messaging, text messages, mobile phones, pagers and defamatory websites to harass, threaten, embarrass, or target another person" (Slonje and Smith, 2008). In general, cyberbullying can be easy to recognise, but some aspects can be less obvious. Englander and Muldowney (2007) describe cyberbullying as an opportunistic offense, since it results in harm without physical interaction, requires little planning, and reduces the threat of being caught.

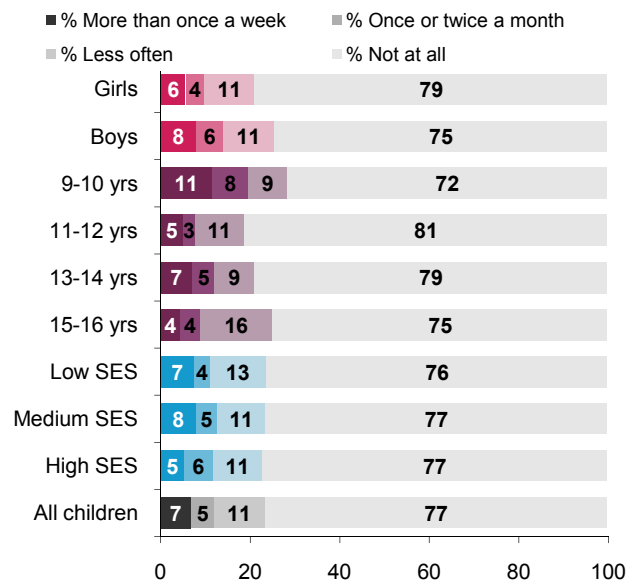
In spite of the fact that relatively few children are affected, cyberbullying ranks highest amongst parental concerns (Eurobarometer, 2008). This translates into high levels of restrictive mediation with a consequent high toll on children's access to online opportunities (O'Neill, B., Dinh, T., 2012). Overall, levels of restrictive mediation of children's internet use in Ireland are high (93%) compared to the European average of 85%. In Ireland, nearly one in four (23%) of 9-16 year olds experienced some form of bullying, online or offline. Bullying online or by mobile is less common (4%) than face to face. Levels of bullying in Ireland are a little above the European average (23% vs. 19%) but lower for cyberbullying (4% vs. 6%) (O'Neill, B., Grehan, S., Ólafsson, K., 2011). Across Europe, 6% of 9 to 16-year-olds who use the internet report having been bullied online while only half as many (3%) confess to having bullied others. Since 19% have been bullied either online and/or offline, and 12% have bullied someone else either online and/or offline, it seems that more bullying occurs offline than online (Hasebrink, Görzig, Haddon, Kalmus, Livingstone, 2011).

Children reported highest incidences of having been bullied in Estonia (44%) Romania (42%) while incidences are lowest in Southern European countries (Portugal, Italy, Greece). Broadly, bullying online is more common in countries where bullying in general is more common. This suggests online bullying to be a new-form, of a long-established problem in childhood rather than, simply, the consequence of a new technology (Livingstone, S., Haddon, L., Görzig, A., & Ólafsson, K. (2011).

Who is bullied?

In the EU Kids Online survey, children were asked if someone had acted in a *'hurtful or nasty way to you in the past 12 months'* either in person or via mobile phone or text, or on the internet, e.g. via email or social networking sites.ⁱⁱ

Figure 1: Child has been bullied online or offline in past 12 months



QC112: Has someone acted in this kind of hurtful or nasty way to you in the past 12 months? QC113: How often has someone acted in this kind [hurtful and nasty] way towards you in the past 12 months?

Base: All children who use the internet.

- Nearly one in four (23%) 9-16 year olds in Ireland say that someone has acted in this way towards them, online or offline, in the past 12 months. Slightly more boys than girls claim to have been bullied (25% vs. 21%).
- This is a regular occurrence for 12% of the sample: 7% say someone acts towards them in a hurtful or nasty way more than once a week and for 5% it is once or twice a month. For 11% it is less often, suggesting one or a few instances have occurred in the past year.
- Younger children, 9-10 years of age, claim to be bullied the most (28%), well above the European average of 17%.
- There are only slight demographic differences in that slightly more children from low and medium SES homes report more frequent forms of bullying.

Does cyberbullying correlate with higher levels of internet use?

To further our analysis in patterns of online use among Irish children based on levels of use and the range of online activities, six clusters or types were identified, ranging from 'low use/low risk' to more intensive forms of online activity. Table 1 analyses reports of being bullied within each of these clusters.

The six clusters reveal some interesting patterns in relation to experiences of being bullied.

1. **“Low use, low risk”**: most children fit into this category of low online use/risk and a small range of activities. Not surprisingly, it has the lowest prevalence of being bullied at all or face by face (19% and 13% respectively) though it does have the second highest proportion of repeated bullying of more than once per week.

2. **“Low-use, gaming/or entertainment-oriented”**: has a similar profile to cluster 1 with one in 5 having been bullied at all. This group has somewhat higher levels of online bullying (4% compared to just 1% in cluster 1).

Table 1: Child has been bullied online or offline in past 12 months by clusters

	CL1	CL2	CL3	CL4	CL5	CL6
In person face to face	13	14	15	15	17	31
On the internet	1	4	9	4	5	14
By mobile phone calls, texts or image/video texts	2	2	3	6	9	10
Has been bullied at all online or offline	19	20	25	24	28	39
Not at all	81	81	80	77	77	61
Less often	7	9	9	14	18	16
Once or twice a month	4	4	9	3	0	14
More than once a week	7	6	2	6	6	10

QC112: Has someone acted in this kind of hurtful or nasty way to you in the past 12 months? QC113: How often has someone acted in this kind [hurtful and nasty] way towards you in the past 12 months? QC114: At any time during the last 12 months, has this happened [that you have been treated in a hurtful or nasty way]? QC115: At any time during the last 12 months has this happened on the internet. (Multiple responses allowed)

Base: All children who use the internet

3. **“Learning-oriented”**: 1 in 4 of this group has been bullied and a higher proportion of this takes place online (9%).
4. **“Moderate-use, entertainment and communication”**: comprising a quarter of internet users, 1 in 4 of this group has also been bullied and 10% have been bullied either by mobile phone or online.
5. **“High-use, social networking oriented”**: this higher use cluster also has higher levels of being bullied at all (28%) with roughly similar amounts offline and online.
6. **“Focused social web use”**: this cluster has the highest level of children who have been bullied on the internet (14%) and both online and offline (39%). It also accounts for the highest percentage of children who have been bullied face to face (31%). This cluster is older in profile (13.9 year-old), and consists of slightly more boy than girls.

Looking at the prevalence of children who have been bullied both online and offline by cluster, there is a general tendency for face to face forms of bullying and cyberbullying to go hand in hand. It is important to note that the survey assessed children’s responses at one point in time only and we cannot conclude that the child who is bullied offline is more likely to become a victim online or vice versa.

The frequency of being bullied at all among clusters is also interesting. While cluster 6 has the highest percentage of children have been bullied more than once a week (10%), cluster 1 – with the lowest level of internet use - has the second highest level of being bullied repeatedly (more than once a week: 7%).

Who bullies?

Since bullying is an activity that occurs largely among peers, children may not only be bullied but they may also bully others, either on the internet or in other ways.

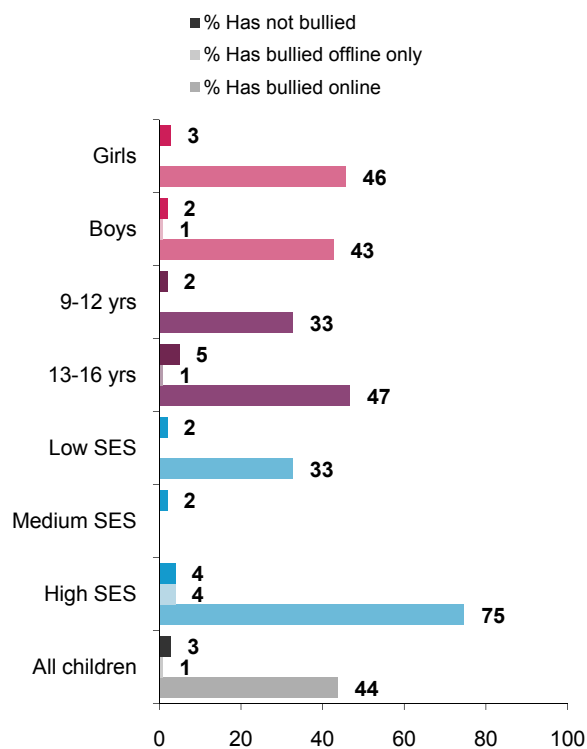
- 14% of all children say that they have bullied others or had acted in a hurtful or nasty way in the past 12 months compared to the 23% of children who have been bullied in the past year
- Bullying others is more common among 15-16 year olds (24%) and among boys (19%). There are few differences by SES in reports of bullying others.

Again, most bullying takes place in the offline world and notably rises with age. Those that had bullied others online were almost exclusively older teenagers.

Does being bullied make some children retaliate by bullying others?

Figure 2 examines the Irish data and asks whether children have been bullied online for three separate groups: those have not bullied others at all; those that have bullied others offline only; and those that have bullied others online.

Figure 2: Which children are bullied online?



QC 115: At any time during the last 12 months has this happen on the internet? QC125: Have you acted in a way that might have felt hurtful or nasty to someone else in the past 12 months? QC127c: In which of the following ways have you acted like this?

Base: Of all children using the internet: only children who have not bullied at all, have bullied face-to-face and not online, have bullied online

- The most striking pattern to emerge shows that of children who have bullied others online, 44% have themselves been bullied online. This suggests that online bullying, in many cases, is a reciprocal process in which children both bully and are bullied by others.
- It appears that children from higher SES backgrounds, older teenager and slightly more girls are more likely to be both bullies and to have been bullied themselves online.
- By contrast, of children who have not bullied others, just 3 per cent have been bullied online. Among those who have bullied others offline only, only 1% have themselves been bullied online (a much lower rate compared to the European findings, at 10%).

What form does cyberbullying take?

The most common form of bullying is in person, face to face: in fact, offline bullying is 4 times more common than online or bullying by mobile phone or text. 15% say that someone has acted in a hurtful or nasty way towards them in person, face to face compared with 4% who say that this happened on the internet or by mobile phone calls or messages.

The reason for looking at the different forms cyberbullying may take is to identify whether particular applications such as chatrooms or social networking sites provide contexts in which bullying behaviour can occur.

- The majority of bullying takes place face to face with just 4% online. Younger children are more likely to have been bullied face to face while cyberbullying is much more a phenomenon for teenage years.
- Most cyberbullying takes place by mobile phone or text (10%), followed by some form of online bullying (9%), mostly related to use of social networking sites (6%).
- However, email, gaming websites and chatrooms do not appear as significant threats for online bullying.

Gender is also a factor in the different forms that bullying takes. There are more boys than girls reported being bullied face to face especially in the younger age group. On the contrast, more girls than boys report being bullied online or by mobile phone or text, especially in the teenage group.

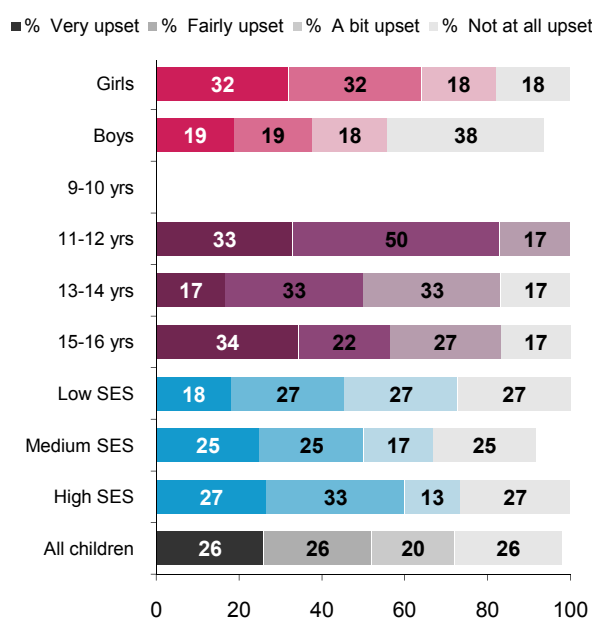
The impact of cyberbullying

Thus, one of the key finding was that cyberbullying did not happen as frequently as media stories would have us believe. Nevertheless, a further important finding was that a small proportion of children had, indeed experience negative impacts of cyberbullying.

Figure 3 presents findings for those that been bullied online, how upsetting this experience was, if at all, the last time this occurred.

- The impact of online bullying is striking. Even the overall incidence is low, but its impact is felt as upsetting by nearly three quarters of children bullied. Over half (52%) say they were either very upset or fairly upset by the experience.
- Among 15-16 year olds, 34% were very upset and a further 22% fairly upset underlining the severity of the impact. Girls (32%) are more likely than boys (19%) to say they were very upset after being bullied online.

Figure 3: How upset the child felt after being bullied online (only children who have been bullied online in past 12 months)



QC118: Thinking about the last time you were [sent nasty or hurtful messages on the internet], how upset were you about what happened (if at all)?

Base: All children aged 11-16 who have been bullied on the internet in the past 12 months.

- The duration of impact after being bullied online also varies, the study shows that over half of children 'got over it straight away' (56%), indicating that online bullying was not something that had a lasting impact. However, for the remaining 44%, cyberbullying is something that has a more enduring effect. Almost 14% were more deeply affected for a couple of months or more. This is a very high level of impact compared to the equivalent European finding (2%). The data shows longer lasting effects for the youngest group, girls and low SES groups.

Coping strategies

Building resilience and enabling young people to cope with online problems that may bother or upset them is an important objective of internet safety education. In addition to asking about the risks they encountered, EU Kids Online also examined three types of coping strategies young people adopted in response to online threats.

- In relation to being bullied (online or offline), most (28%) tried a proactive solution by trying to fix the problem themselves. A further quarter of those that had been bullied (23%) adopted a more fatalistic response and hoped the problem would go away by itself. However, 19 percent felt guilty about what went wrong, adding to their sense of victimisation and vulnerability and 27% did not do any of these things.
- The second type of coping strategy asked about was in relation to seeking some form of social support. Most do in fact talk to somebody about having been bullied online (71%) and in nearly half of cases (42%), this is a friend, followed by one of their parents (36%). Notably very few (just 6%) speak to a teacher about what had happened. Given the importance of schools in reinforcing

positive messages about internet safety and in promoting effective strategies to deal with bullying, this low finding is of concern.

- The third type is the use of any technical solutions, in which the most common responses for young people to employ were 'blocking the person' who sent the hurtful message (48%) and deleting messages from those who had sent them (40%). Nearly a quarter (23%) stopped using the internet at all for a while, which though it helps to remove the source of upset also means losing out on online opportunities. Given that most online bullying takes place on social networking sites this would appear to be an appropriate step to take. However, only one third of those who did change filter or contact settings found it helpful. Few (just 15%) reported the problem using an online reporting tool or contacted an online advisor whose job it is to deal with such problems.

Conclusion and recommendations

Public debate often omits that most children have positive experiences with new digital skills and that many digital skills developed online can turn into a great benefit for children in real life. Furthermore, a certain exposure to risks is needed for building resilience and effective coping strategies. EU Kids Online has found that while cyberbullying is not the most prevalent risk that young people encounter online, it is the one that has the most severe impact. Findings show that it particularly affects teenagers, is closely associated with more intensive internet use and happens mostly on social networking sites. Alongside the extensive recommendations made by the Anti-Bullying Working Group reporting to the Minister for Education and Skills (2013), the following are some specific recommendations arising from the findings of this study.

- Improving communication between parents and children should be a priority given the high gaps in awareness. Awareness-raising efforts should focus on encouraging dialogue between parents/carers and children about cyberbullying and how to deal with it.
- Awareness of the opportunities for peer mediation support and positive interventions should therefore be developed given that it is to friends that young people will first turn.
- Given that so few turn to teachers in seeking support in cases of cyberbullying, updated school policies, continuing professional development for teachers and new resources to support the implementation of the personal safety aspects of the Social Personal Health Education curriculum are needed.
- Service providers need to develop and make available more effective reporting mechanisms. Very few young people use an online facility to report abuse. Blocking mechanisms are used and prove helpful when available but this only partially deals with the problem.
- Social networking sites, where the majority of cyberbullying takes place, need to improve technical support facilities. Young people do try to use filters and contact settings to manage their online communication but less than a third find this helpful.

ⁱ Details of the questionnaire and project methodology are available on the project website: www.eukidsonline.net

ⁱⁱ See Livingstone, S., Kirwil, L., Ponte, C. and Staksrud, E. (2013). *In their own words: What bothers children online?* LSE, London: EU Kids Online

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