Cyberbullying resulting in suicides: How can schools respond?

Over the last three years a number of suicides linked to cyberbullying have hit the press. Jenni Whitehead explores the issues and advises how schools should respond

Over the last year a number of young people have committed suicide as a result of bullying online:

- In April 2013 Joshua Unsworth from Lancashire hanged himself.
- In July 2013, Daniel Perry, a 15-year old from Fife in Scotland, killed himself by jumping off the Forth Road Bridge.
- In August 2013, 14-year-old Hannah Smith from Leicestershire, England hanged herself.

All three of these young people committed suicide following bullying experienced on the website Ask.fm, a social networking site that allows members to post anonymous comments and messages. The site has also been associated with the suicide of 13 year old Erin Gallagher who hanged herself in October 2012. Two months later Erin's older sister Shannon also killed herself as a result of her sister's death.

Other suicides linked to online bullying have been reported from all over the world:

- 16-year old Jessica Laney, from Florida, was found dead in her home after bullying on Ask.fm. One commenter had even asked ‘can you kill yourself already?’ Others had called her ‘fat’ and ‘a loser’.
- 15-year-old Ciara Pugsley of Dromahair, Ireland, was taunted by anonymous posters who called her a ‘slut’ and ‘ugly’.
- 15-year old Canadian Amanda Todd took her own life after online and offline bullying and blackmail over inappropriate photos.
- In June 2015, 17-year-old Ronan Hughes from Coalisland, Northern Ireland, took his own life after tricked into sharing intimate photos by an organised gang, and subsequently threatened and blackmailed.

What is being done?

Following the death of Hannah Smith, Prime Minister David Cameron called for a boycott of websites that refused to accept any responsibility for dealing with cyberbullying occurring on their website and Ask.Fm has been heavily criticised for not accepting any responsibility for abuse perpetrated on their website. Recently the website announced improved safety for its users, consisting of safety advice and clearer reporting advice. However Ask.Fm retain anonymity for those who post unless the police are investigating a case.
Unfortunately we know that many children who experience bullying online do not come forward and their online activity may not be known to their parents and carers.

**Why don't children tell?**

There are many reasons for children to keep silent about cyberbullying:

- They may feel ashamed, especially if the bullies are within their peer group.
- It has become important to children that they are known to have many friends listed on their social networking sites and so to be shunned on such sites is very painful.
- The bullies may have threatened further abuse if the child tells.
- The child may fear that adults will take their phone away from them, completely removing them from online social networks. It is interesting that most children who experience cyberbullying do not turn off the phone as a way of avoiding the abuse. Perhaps they fear it would be even worse to not know what was being said about them and perhaps they simply hope to see a kind message or some indication that people have changed their mind about them.
- The child may feel that the adults around them do not understand new technologies so are unlikely to know how to help.
- The bullying may be linked to something embarrassing that they have done on the internet, ie posting pictures that an adult would not approve off. The child may feel that the adult would blame them for ‘bringing it on themselves’.

Schools need to accept that it is more than likely that there are children in their school experiencing cyberbullying and that if it is happening outside school it will be happening inside school as well. Openly acknowledging the existence of bullying can reduce the fear children feel about coming forward.

**No escape from bullying**

Cyberbullying is now recognised as different from offline bullying in that the victim gets no respite from it. As a child I was bullied simply for having ginger hair but I did at least know that once I got home I could shut the bullies out. New technologies allow bullies to carry on their harmful behaviour all day, every day and on sites that allow anonymity meaning the victim can quickly become overwhelmed by despair and depression.

I am afraid I do occasionally still hear professionals claim that the bullying is occurring outside school and therefore not school’s responsibility but we all know really that this behaviour does not get left outside the school gates.

Schools have a statutory duty to safeguard and promote the welfare of children and young people who are their pupils under the Welfare and Protection of Pupils Education and Libraries (NI) Order 2003 (Articles 17-19). This statutory duty does not allow schools to ignore abusive behaviour outside the school gates. If a school becomes aware of bullying occurring off premises it is required to take
action to safeguard the pupil and where the perpetrators are also pupils sanctions can be applied by the school.

I was told recently that a number of schools within my own LA had a problem with pupils putting up ‘hate sites’. I wasn’t convinced so went online to check it out. Within a few minutes I found sites put up by students from a number of secondary schools. These sites appear and disappear quickly and when I looked the following evening all but two of the sites had disappeared but there will be others created soon enough.

The titles of such sites are very worrying, for example one was called, ‘Sluts from [name of school]’. These sites appear to consist of derogatory comments made about individual students and embarrassing photographs of pupils posted by other pupils. Now while I didn’t come across death threats or requests that the target pupil kill themselves as in the cases described above, the comments were particularly hurtful and a form of bullying likely to cause great distress to those on the receiving end.

Hate sites are just one example of bullying that can take place off premises so what should schools do to try to tackle such incidents?

Recognising the signs of bullying
The following list of signs and indicators might be seen in children and young people who are being bullied. The list is obviously not diagnostic but these signs certainly should raise concerns and should result in action.

- Increased isolation from the peer group
- Anxiety and depression
- Restlessness and inability to concentrate
- Tiredness due to sleepless nights
- Changes in eating patterns including the development of eating disorders
- Self harm
- Paranoid behaviour, constantly looking round to see who is nearby
- Absolute panic at the loss of their phone
- Loss of trust in others causing secretive behaviour and a reluctance to discuss problems when approached
- A change in route taken between home and school or stopping travel on school transport
- Mid-term requests to change school without explanation
- Secretive behaviour when using the computer or phone, for example switching screenshots when approached by adults.

Keep up to date with technology
Demonstrate your school’s understanding of how technologies work and how they can be abused by ensuring that key staff are kept up to date with new developments in technology and how it can be used to abuse others. Key staff are not just the IT staff. Cyberbullying is a safeguarding issue so at least one of your named persons for safeguarding should be offered training on how to manage such cases.
CEOP’s ThinkuKnow training is offered on a fairly regular basis at venues across the country so there isn’t really an excuse for not having at least one person attend this free training. Be aware that many ‘Safer schools’ police officers have been trained by CEOP to be able to deliver the ThinkUKnow programme to young people.

**Peer mentoring**

It is recognised that many children find it easier to talk to older young people than to adults about cyberbullying and the development of peer group mentoring or counselling has proved very successful. Schools must, of course, offer mentors clear guidance, support, supervision and resources for such schemes to work.

**Ensure staff know how to handle disclosures and take the issue forward**

Take seriously any disclosures of cyberbullying and concerns or complaints from parents. This means ensuring that all staff understand how to manage such disclosures and the action they need to take in response because a complaint or disclosure could be made to anyone.

Make sure staff feel confident in managing incidents of cyberbullying. They should not be telling the victim to simply turn off their phone. They should be advising the victim not to respond in any way to abusive texts or emails but to keep the messages so that they can be used as evidence. Young people may need help with this and the school can download the messages for storage rather than have the young person keep them on their phone or computer. If the perpetrator or perpetrators are identified schools can seek advice from their ‘Safer schools’ officer about whether incidents of cyberbullying constitute criminal offences and what action to take.

Make sure parents of both the victim and the perpetrator are kept fully informed of the incidents and action that will be taken.

Ensure the victim is supported and has someone to go to for advice and offer help in developing new friendships or in mending old ones. Go at the child’s pace in this, all bullying is an abuse of power and children need to be re-empowered by being taken seriously and listened to.

**Offer helpful resources**

Build up your library of resources so that your school is equipped to offer anti bullying teaching across all year groups. The Thinkuknow teaching programme has been developed taking into account different age groups and can provide resources suitable for 5-7 year olds, 8-11 year olds and 12-16 year olds.

Let’s fight it together is a very useful programme of teaching and learning that focuses directly on cyberbullying. This resource was developed by ChildNet and follows a boy who becomes a target of
cyberbullying and takes the audience through from the start of the bullying to a point where he is saying ‘I just can’t stand it anymore. The video is very emotive and schools that have used this resource have reported back that it has proved very powerful in getting young people talking about the issues. Young people are reported to have said, ‘I didn’t realise how bad it could be for someone to be on the receiving end’. Not seeing the reaction of the victim can allow some children to minimise the likely effect on the victim. ‘I didn’t realise how they were feeling; it all started as a joke’ is a comment frequently fed back to me by teachers who have used the video.

The resource is available on the Digizen website and all of the videos included in the original resource pack are also available on the Childnet website or on Youtube.

A very useful resource for young people and parents is produced by the Lucy Faithful Foundation: ‘What’s the problem? A guide for parents of children and young people who have got into trouble online’.

For more information on online bullying read Alan Mackenzie’s advice on how to understand ‘trolling’ and ‘online dis-inhibition’ or learn more about young people’s opinion of cyberbullying in our interview with Adrienne Katz on the Cybersurvey [http://www.optimus-education.com/talking-about-cyberbullying-cybersurvey](http://www.optimus-education.com/talking-about-cyberbullying-cybersurvey)

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