

# Cyber Bullying



It is well known that children with special needs are more likely to be bullied in the traditional sense. There is little research on the incidence of cyber bullying, which is the 'new wave' of bullying. A recent study looked at the prevalence of both traditional and cyber bullying in children with Asperger syndrome and ADHD, the effects of bullying, and their parents' understanding of it.

## Traditional Bullying versus Cyber Bullying

Traditional bullying can be defined as trying to harm the other person, and is repeated over time. There is typically a power balance between individuals. Cyber bullying differs from traditional bullying in that it is not face to face, many victims do not know who the bully is, and it can occur at any time of the day or night. It occurs through the internet or by cell phone. In the case of traditional bullying, victims often do not want to report the bullying because they are scared they will be further victimised. However, victims of cyber bullying do not want to report the bullying because they are scared the technology will be taken from them.

Victims of bullying can experience effects such as anxiety, depression, low self esteem, and physical health symptoms such as headaches and stomach upsets.

## The Study

The children and adolescents in the study were 24 males and 18 females from the US, diagnosed with ADHD and/or Asperger syndrome. They were asked many questions about how much they used the internet and how safe they felt

using it; whether their parents had established internet rules and discussed how to be safe on the internet; their experiences of traditional and cyber bullying; and, about the physical and psychological effects of bullying. The parents of the children in the study were given the opportunity to complete a questionnaire about their own internet use, their child's internet use, and questions about bullying.

## Sources of Cyber Bullying

Cyber bullying was most likely to happen when the children were using instant messaging (e.g., MSN Messenger) or social network sites (e.g., Facebook). Twenty percent of cyber bullying occurred through using cell phones.

## Effects of Bullying

Traditional and cyber bullying had similar effects on psychological and physical health. Victims and those who had bullied others showed higher levels of anxiety and depression, and lower levels of self esteem than those were not involved in bullying.

## Incidence of Bullying

The study found that 57% of the children had been victims of traditional bullying in the previous two months, and for 19% of these children this had occurred several times per week. Thirty eight percent admitted to themselves being bullies in a traditional sense in the same time frame. Twenty one percent of the children reported having been cyber bullied in the previous two months, and 5.8% admitted to cyber bullying others.

While the incidence of cyber bullying was lower than the incidence of traditional bullying, over one in five children reported that they had experienced cyber bullying. This incidence may have been underestimated by the children in the study, who, due to poor social skills, may not recognize some online behaviour as cyber bullying. Cyber bullying has been found to have the same negative effects on physical and psychological health as traditional bullying. In addition, children with special needs may spend much time online due to difficulties they experience with face to face interaction. This means that cyber bullying is a serious problem that needs addressing.

### **Parents' Role in Preventing Cyber Bullying**

Almost half of the children said that their parents never or rarely talked to them concerning internet safety issues. Some of the parents had never set any rules regarding the internet and most of the parents felt that their children were moderately safe using the internet. Overall, parents were uninformed of their children's experiences of bullying, especially with cyber bullying.

This suggests that parents need to educate themselves about cyber bullying and internet safety and should be more aware of what their children are doing online. Parents should learn about the dangers of the internet, ways to prevent cyber bullying, and relay this information to their children, along with rules about how to safely use the internet.

### **Summary**

Cyber bullying is a recently developed form of bullying and an area that is lacking in research. It occurs through the internet or cell phone, can happen at any time of

the day or night, and has the same negative effects on physical and psychological health as traditional bullying. Although this study found rates of cyber bullying to be lower than that of traditional bullying in children with ADHD and/or Asperger syndrome, more than one in five children had experienced cyber bullying. The parents of the children in the study were lacking in knowledge of internet safety, cyber bullying and the experience of cyber bullying among their children. Parents should communicate with their children about internet safety and cyber bullying, and create rules to ensure the online safety of their children.

### **Reference**

Kowalski, R. M. & Fedina, C. (2011). Cyber bullying in ADHD and Asperger Syndrome populations. *Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders*, 5 (3), 1201-1208.

