Anti-bullying training helps children stand up to cyberbullies

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A recent YouGov poll found that two-thirds of teachers had seen pupils trolling and bullying each other on the internet, demonstrating an urgent need to teach children to stay safe online.

Other studies show that young people who witness another child being bullied are likely to stand by and watch it happen.

However, research by Dr Nicola Abbott, from Canterbury Christ Church University's School School of Psychology, Politics and Sociology, found that children do want to help - they just don't know the right way to go about it.

Dr Abbott presented her findings at the Economic and Social Research Council's (ESRC) 2014 Festival of Social Science. She showed that simply teaching children in school about what they can say to bullies can have great results, with children receiving this training being much more likely to stick up for others when they see cyberbullying take place.

Young people often fear that they may say the wrong thing, or perhaps make the bully turn on them. This is unfortunate, as observational research shows that when people do stand up for someone else, the bully tends to stop within just 10 seconds.

To improve the awareness and education around this issue, Dr Abbott led an anti-bullying programme for children of 12-13 years of age. Using role-play, this programme taught students how to stand up for victims if

they saw someone being bullied and showed them what sort of words they could use. Afterwards, the young people used a chat room simulation where they observed another person being picked on by two other users. The children who had participated in the anti-bullying program were far more likely to intervene on the behalf of victim, and were also quicker to intervene than a control group.

"My research suggests that given the right advice and tools, children can be empowered to stand up to bullies," says Dr. Abbott.

"Chat rooms are the ideal place to start because not seeing someone face-to-face could make young people feel less anxious about defending someone."

The positive side of technology and online chatrooms is rarely dwelt on, yet this research suggests that we could be just as likely to be helpful online as we are to be negative. As part of an event for the ESRC Festival of Social Science, Dr Abbott and other researchers will be challenging the idea that technology is solely having a harmful effect on young people.

"There is a lot of fear about the use of technology in young people," says Dr Abbott.

"People get a bit scared, I think, when they hear about cyberbullying or see infants using iPads sometimes better than they do themselves. However, this event will shed some light on what social science can tell us about both the positive and negative effects of young people's technology use. For example, how technology can support positive psychological development and combat negative behaviours, such as cyberbullying."

Provided by Canterbury Christ Church University

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