Young victims of cyberbullying twice as likely to attempt suicide and self-harm

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Professor Ann John, lead author of the study. Credit: Swansea University

Children and young people under 25 who are victims of cyberbullying are more than twice as likely to self-harm and enact suicidal behavior, according to a study.

New research suggests that it is not just the victims of cyberbullying that

are more vulnerable to suicidal behaviours, but the perpetrators themselves are also at higher risk of experiencing suicidal thoughts and behaviours.

Cyberbullying is using electronic communication to bully another, for instance by sending intimidating, threatening or unpleasant messages using social media.

The systematic review study, led by Professor Ann John at Swansea University Medical School in collaboration with researchers from the Universities of Oxford and Birmingham looked at more than 150,000 children and young people across 30 countries, over a 21-year period.

Their findings, published in the *Journal of Medical Internet Research*, highlighted the significant impact that cyberbullying involvement (as bullies and victims) can have on children and young people.

The researchers say it shows an urgent need for effective prevention and intervention in bullying strategies.

Professor Ann John said: "Prevention of cyberbullying should be included in school anti-bullying policies, alongside broader concepts such as digital citizenship, online peer support for victims, how an electronic bystander might appropriately intervene; and more specific interventions such as how to contact mobile phone companies and internet service providers to block, educate, or identify users".

"Suicide prevention and intervention is essential within any comprehensive anti-bullying programme and should incorporate a whole-school approach to include awareness raising and training for staff and pupils".

A number of key recommendations have been made:

- Cyberbullying involvement should be considered by policymakers who implement bullying prevention (in addition to traditional bullying) and safe Internet use programmes.
- Clinicians working with children and young people and assessing mental health issues should routinely ask about experiences of cyberbullying and be trained to do so.
- Children and young people involved in cyberbullying should be screened for common mental disorders and self-harm.
- School, family, and community programmes that promote appropriate use of technology are important.
- Prevention of cyberbullying should be included in school anti-bullying policies, alongside broader concepts such as digital citizenship, online peer support for victims, how an electronic bystander might appropriately intervene; and more specific interventions such as how to contact mobile phone companies and Internet service providers to block, educate, or identify users.
- Suicide prevention and intervention is essential within any comprehensive anti-bullying programme and should incorporate a whole-school approach to include awareness raising and training for staff and pupils.

The study also found a strong link between being a cyber-victim and being a perpetrator. This duality was found to particularly put males at higher risk of depression and suicidal behaviours.

The researchers highlighted that these vulnerabilities should be recognised at school so that cyberbullying behaviours would be seen as an opportunity to support vulnerable young people, rather than for discipline.

It was recommended that anti-bullying programmes and protocols should address the needs of both victims and perpetrators, as possible school exclusion might contribute to an individual's sense of isolation and lead

to feelings of hopelessness, often associated with suicidal behaviours in adolescents and young people.

The research also found that students who were cyber-victimised were less likely to report and seek help than those victimised by more traditional means, thus highlighting the importance for staff in schools to encourage 'help-seeking' in relation to cyberbullying.

Provided by Swansea University

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