

Face-to-face bullying more common than cyberbullying among teenagers

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Despite the growth of social media, the internet and their central role in modern childhood, traditional bullying – such as name-calling or being excluded by others – remains considerably more common than cyberbullying, according to the largest study of its kind published in *The Lancet Child and Adolescent Health* journal.

The study estimates that less than 1 percent of 15 year olds in England report only being bullied online regularly, while more than one in four (27 percent) experience only face-to-face [bullying](#) methods.

With nine out of 10 of the teenagers who are bullied online also facing regular traditional bullying, the researchers suggest that cyberbullying is an additional tactic in the bullies' arsenal, and that both forms must be tackled together to prevent bullying and improve teenagers' resilience.

Concerns have been raised that cyberbullying has the potential to cause more harm than traditional bullying due to the relative anonymity of perpetrators in many cases, larger audiences, increasing prevalence, and permanence of posted messages. However, in the study, experience of

only cyberbullying was found to have a very small association with well-being and life satisfaction when compared with traditional bullying alone.

Cyberbullying involves repeated personal attacks using instant messaging, social media postings, emails, text messages and websites.

'Despite common perceptions and the growth of the online world for teenagers, our study finds that cyberbullying, on its own, is relatively rare, with face-to-face bullying remaining most common among teenagers,' says lead author Dr Andrew Przybylski from Oxford University's Oxford Internet Institute. 'Cyberbullying is best understood as a new avenue to victimise those already being bullied in traditional ways, rather than a way to pick on new victims.'

The study used confidential questionnaires to assess bullying and mental well-being over a two-month period in more than 110,000 15 year olds across England – representing a total of one in five 15 year olds in England.

The teenagers were asked to rate how often they faced certain types of bullying in the past two months, with at least two or three incidents a month being classified as regular bullying. These included being called mean names, made fun of, or teased in a hurtful way; being left out of things on purpose, excluded from a group of friends, or completely ignored; being hit, kicked, pushed, shoved, or locked indoors; having lies or false rumours spread about them to make others dislike them; being made fun of because of bodyweight; facing sexual jokes, comments, or gestures; being sent mean instant messages, social media postings, emails and text messages, or being the subject of a website that made fun of them; and, having unflattering or inappropriate pictures taken and shared online without permission.

Nearly a third (30 percent, 33363 teenagers) of all

teenagers in the study reported experiencing some form of regular bullying – including one in three (36 percent) girls and one in four (24 percent) boys.

Focussing on frequent bullying, the researchers found that one in four teenagers (27 percent, 29302 teenagers) reported facing traditional bullying only, less than 1 percent (406 teenagers) reported cyberbullying only, and 3 percent (3655 teenagers) were regularly bullied in both ways.

Combining the number of bullying incidents from teenagers who faced frequent online, traditional and both types of bullying, the most common forms were being called mean names or teased (12 percent, 12740 teenagers) and having lies or false rumours spread about them (9 percent, 10305 teenagers). Physical bullying and cyberbullying were least common (2 percent, 2672 teenagers reported physical bullying; 2 percent, 2225 teenagers reported being sent mean online messages or websites; and, 2 percent, 2404 teenagers reported having pictures taken and shared online without permission).

Teenagers' well-being and life satisfaction declined in line with how much they were bullied, and those who faced both types of bullying were five times more likely to report the lowest levels of well-being. However, the authors note that people with poor [mental health](#) or low levels of well-being may also be more at risk of being victimised.

Given these detrimental effects on teenage well-being, the researchers call for evidence-based methods to address both types of bullying.

'Bullying is a major public health problem, and our findings support the urgent need for interventions that target both forms of bullying in adolescence. Initiatives that help teenagers become resilient in everyday and online contexts will be important if we are to help them overcome the negative mental health impacts bullying may have, such as an increased risk of poor mental well-being and lower life satisfaction.' says co-author Professor Lucy Bowes.

The authors note that their study does not include estimates on whether [cyberbullying](#) is becoming

increasingly common. The study used self-reported data on bullying and [mental well-being](#) but did not include formal diagnoses of mental health problems, and did not include other forms of abuse or neglect. It controlled for gender, socioeconomic status and ethnicity due to their association with higher levels of bullying.

The full paper, 'Cyberbullying and adolescent well-being in England: a population-based cross-sectional study', can be read in *The Lancet Child and Adolescent Health* journal.

More information: Cyberbullying and adolescent well-being in England: a population-based cross-sectional study. *The Lancet Child and Adolescent Health*. DOI:

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