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Artificial intelligence and digital educational tools for the prevention of cyber-bullying



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Contents

Contents

Contents

Student's Guide to Building Resilience to Cyberbullying 3

1. Definition of Cyberbullying 3

1.1. What is cyberbullying? 3

1.2. Differences and similarities between cyberbullying and traditional bullying 5

2. Factors Behind Cyberbullying 6

2.1. Risk factors 6

2.2. Protective factors 8

2.3. Risk online behaviours 9

3. Consequences of Cyberbullying 10

3.1. Victim of cyberbullying: 10

3.2. Perpetrator of cyberbullying 12

3.3. Legal consequences 13

4. Coping and Prevention Strategies 14

4.1. Understand and use digital tools properly 14

4.2. Develop a support network 14

4.3. Developing psychosocial skills 15

4.4. Be alert to the signs of cyberbullying 17

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Project No: 2023-1-ES01-KA220-SCH-000160237

Student's Guide to Building Resilience to Cyberbullying

1. Definition of Cyberbullying

1.1. What is cyberbullying?

There is currently a debate on how to define cyberbullying. Some authors say that it would be traditional bullying but that it occurs through electronic devices. Others consider that cyberbullying should have its own definition as it has specific elements such as anonymity and dissemination.

One of the most recent definitions could be the following:

'*Intentional harmful behaviour carried out by a group or individuals, repeated over time, using digital technology to aggress against a victim who is unable to defend him/herself*' (Campbell & Bauman, 2018).

As we can see from the definition, there are four key factors in cyberbullying (Smith & Norman; 2021):

- **Intention to harm**: the concept of cyberbullying entails aggression precisely because of this intentionality to harm. It is sometimes difficult to measure the intention to harm, given that not infrequently, some bullies often interpret their behaviour as 'non-harmful teasing' or 'playing to prod'. Added to this is the difficulty for bullies to understand the seriousness of their actions, even when they know they are causing harm. However, it is usually always perceptible to bullies that such behaviour is harmful or unpleasant to others. This element marks the difference between cyberbullying and other behaviour that towards others may be hurtful, but is not aggressive. Within this intentionality we can find two distinctions:
    - Proactive aggression: when this aggression is premeditated, 'cold-blooded', planned for a purpose. Bullying in general can be seen as a form of social status escalation through dominance of others or for the pleasure of doing harm. This type of behaviour would be the most identifiable type of aggression.
    - Reactive aggression: occurs in response to perceived provocation or threat and is usually impulsive behaviour. Some of these behaviours may not be defined as cyberbullying due to the occasional exchange of offensive comments between peers, for example. However, people who tend to engage in cyberbullying behaviours tend to engage in more proactive aggression and reactive aggression than people who do not engage in cyberbullying.

Questions to think about: Would it be cyberbullying if a powerful person engaged in repetitive behaviour that hurt another person emotionally, even though the harm was completely unintentional? Would it be cyberbullying if a person had the intention to harm and no matter how hard they tried, the alleged victim did not feel hurt in any way?

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Project No: 2023-1-ES01-KA220-SCH-000160237

- **Power imbalance**: As opposed to being an isolated case of human behaviour, cyberbullying is caused by group dynamics and contextual factors. This power imbalance usually occurs in adolescents due to numerical superiority, strength or the attack on a person's vulnerability, among others. In the specific case of cyberbullying, one form of power differential may be due to greater technological knowledge or possessing tools that place you in a certain position of superiority. Here we refer to both technological equipment and material (such as videos, photos or confidential information) that could do harm. Also relevant are issues such as anonymity, since the aggressor knows the identity of the victim, but the victim does not know the identity of the aggressor. Within the different types of cyberbullying, there is bias-based bullying, which is directed against individuals because of their membership of a social group (ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation or disability). The concept of power imbalance has some problems in defining the construct: what is power, how is an aggressive attitude towards one individual exercised from power as opposed to another who is not in power? If power exists in different dimensions, which one do we take into account to measure whether it is cyberbullying or not?

Questions to think about: Can you tell me three situations in which two individuals interact aggressively with each other without there being a difference in power? If a weak person harasses a very strong person online, should this difference in physical strength be taken into account? How does power function in an individual who is both harasser and harassed at the same time?

- **Repetition**: One of the pillars of considering an attitude as bullying is that it is sustained over time. It has been found that the longer a bullying relationship lasts, the more depressive or anxious symptoms the victims show compared to students who only report one-off incidents. However, it is somewhat ambiguous when we can determine that the behaviour is repetitive. The number of behaviours in a given period of time is often used, with the cut-off point being '2-3 times a month'. Some authors point out the need to understand the concept of repetition also through the repeated transmission of the same act (e.g. the dissemination of explicit material of a person in a classroom), as well as to understand that the concept of repetition, like the imbalance of power, can be shared in the virtual world and in the school.

Questions to think about: If a person bullies 20 people, but does it one person at a time within a week of each other, can we say they are a bully? If you get sensitive information from someone and forward it to someone who forwards it to someone else and so on.... Should you be considered a cyberbully?

- **Virtual space**: the main difference between traditional bullying and cyberbullying is the mediation of new technologies and cyberspace that generates other different dynamics. Some of them we have seen in the previous key concepts, but we will develop the differences in the section '*Differences and similarities between cyberbullying and traditional bullying. Examples of cyberbullying*'.

Cyberbullying can take many forms. It can include harassment (insults or threats), spreading rumours, impersonation, outing and trickery (gaining an individual's trust and then using online media to distribute their secrets) or exclusion (excluding an individual from activities). These activities can be performed via e-mail, instant messaging, text message, social networking sites such as Facebook or Tumblr, and other websites (Peebles, 2014).

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Although different studies have more or less flexible ways of measuring cyberbullying, approximately 23% of young people have experienced a cyberbullying event in their lifetime, while 15% are those who have committed cyberbullying behaviour (Hamm *et al*., 2015), being worse in the LGTBQ population (Abreu & Kelly, 2017).

Regarding the gender of the victim and the aggressor, different studies suggest that each gender has a different way of manifesting and feeling cyberbullying. For example, girls tend to attack more in the form of rumours, while boys tend to attack through insults. Girls are often attacked for their popularity or appearance, or through exclusion, while boys are more likely to receive homophobic comments or ridicule for their physical abilities. The most common form of cyberbullying is insults, name-calling, spreading rumours or pictures, but the most painful form of cyberbullying is often the dissemination of multimedia content such as photos or videos (Hamm *et al*., 2015; Marinoni *et al*., 2023).

1.2. Differences and similarities between cyberbullying and traditional bullying

Some authors tend to share the same definition of bullying and cyberbullying, adding only the virtual component to cyberbullying. This is because people with bullying problems in real life often also have cyberbullying problems (some studies report up to 93%) and the predictors of this behaviour, as well as the consequences, are often very similar (Campbell & Bauman, 2018). While this may be true in the definition of the concept, there is a more complex issue associated with cyberspace.

Cyberspace entails a minimum of technical knowledge to have such electronic equipment connected to the internet and the use of digital platforms. This is why its emergence correlates strongly with the number of hours of use of mobile phones or social networks. Cyberspace also facilitates anonymity in the aggression, although normally in adolescence the aggressors know who their aggressors are. The physical distance means that aggressors are not aware of their victims' reactions, making them less remorseful.

Although cyberbullying does not usually involve physical interaction, it can be more painful than traditional bullying: while traditional bullying usually takes place at school with the home as a safe haven, cyberbullying often has an unlimited and timeless scope.

In traditional bullying, there are institutional professionals who watch out for this kind of behaviour, whereas in cyberspace there is no such figure. You only have the tools offered by the platform (often ineffective) and the power to tell an adult, something that is often mediated by young people's fear of losing a certain social status by being singled out as a 'whistleblower' (Peebles, 2014).

Here we illustrate some of the most common cyberbullying behaviours to facilitate their detection (Smith & Norman, 2021):

- **Harassment**: insults and threats, often sent to a person through private channels
- **Denigration**: the use of rumors, defamation, and altered material to spread information about a person that is untrue and damaging to his or her reputation.

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- Doxing: revealing sensitive or secret personal information to harass or expose the intended victim
- Gossip: Sharing information to damage a person's reputation/relationships

- **Impersonation**: The act of using someone else's profile, number, or account to pretend to be that person and to act in that person's name.
- **Outing and trickery**: a person is tricked into disclosing secrets or confidential information which is then shared with others or publicly without their consent
- **Exclusion**: excluding others from online groups or digital communications and interactions
- **Cyberstalking**: a combination of the behaviours above with the target fearing for his or her own safety or the safety of others. This form often results from disappointed romantic feelings of a former partner.
- **Flaming**: heated arguments and mutual insults of two persons of equal strength. This category is widely contested by cyberbullying researchers because it does not fulfill the definition criteria of power imbalance.
- **Happy slapping**: intentional physical attacks, which are perpetrated with the aim to film the attack and later distribute it online.
- **Sexting (unwanted or sextortion)**: the sending of nude or partly nude photos. This in itself is not cyberbullying unless adolescents get unwanted pictures of this type or unless these pictures are used to humiliate, embarrass, or blackmail a person, the recipient respectively.

Question to think about: Physical aggression is something that happens almost exclusively in traditional bullying and not in cyberbullying. can you tell me any of these behaviours that almost exclusively happen in social networks and not in the real world?

2. Factors Behind Cyberbullying

2.1. Risk factors

Cyberbullying, or cyberbullying, is a form of harassment that occurs through digital media, such as social networks, messaging applications or emails. This phenomenon affects both the victims, who suffer the harassment, and the aggressors, who perpetrate it. Over the years, research has identified factors that can increase the risk of experiencing or participating in cyberbullying, as well as factors that can protect adolescents from these negative experiences. The risk and protective factors identified are developed below (Cortés *et al*., 2019; Yudes *et al*., 2020; Sorrentino *et al*., 2023).

a) **Frequent computer and mobile phone use:** Adolescents who spend a lot of time using electronic devices, such as computers and mobile phones, are more likely to be exposed to cyberbullying. The more time spent online, the greater the opportunities to interact with others online, some of whom may be hostile. In addition, excessive use of these devices can facilitate inappropriate behaviour in the absence of constant monitoring.

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b) **High perception of anonymity on social networks:** The belief that anonymity is guaranteed on social networks acts as a risk factor for both perpetrators and victims. For perpetrators, this anonymity can facilitate offensive behaviour, as they feel less responsible for their actions. For victims, this helps them to share videos, photographs and personal information without realising how easily such material can spread online.
c) **Seeking support and ongoing interaction on networks:** Adolescents who rely heavily on social interaction through digital platforms may be at greater risk of victimisation. The need for acceptance or validation online can lead them to expose themselves to vulnerable situations, especially on networks where overexposure and competition for popularity is encouraged.
d) **Experiences of traditional bullying:** Those who have experienced bullying in person or have perpetrated it are more likely to engage in cyberbullying situations. This may be due to the continuity of behavioural patterns, where both the victim and the aggressor take conflicts from the physical to the virtual environment. For bullies, technology offers a new platform to continue harassment, and for victims, the bullying experience can be repeated in cyberspace. Moreover, the most predictive variable of being cyberbully is also having been bullied in real life or online.
e) **Truancy:** Truancy is associated with an increased likelihood of involvement in cyberbullying situations. Both bullies and victims may be absent from school for a variety of reasons related to bullying. For bullies, disconnection from the school environment may increase the likelihood of seeking validation or diversion through online bullying. For victims, absenteeism may be a consequence of suffering from cyberbullying or traditional bullying.
f) **Low self-esteem:** Low self-esteem is a major risk factor for cyber-victimisation. Being less confident in their social and personal skills, they may not know how to defend themselves or set boundaries when they are bullied, which can make them an easy target for bullies. This is often observed because victims often show their favourability towards the bully prototype, justifying their behaviours and blaming themselves as victims. Bullies also often have a very negative perception of themselves, leading to anger and frustration in their daily lives.
g) **Lack of social skills:** Adolescents who lack adequate social skills are also at greater risk of cyberbullying. These skills include the ability to communicate effectively, resolve conflicts or relate positively with peers. Lack of these skills can lead to situations of social isolation, which, in turn, increases the likelihood of becoming a victim of online bullying. In the case of bullies, it is possible to see difficulty in expressing their emotions (alexithymia), a shortage of empathy and a moral disengagement and/or distortion of the consequences of their behaviour. In addition, many cyberbullies also feel pressured by other cyberbullies to engage in or maintain this type of behaviour.
h) **Belonging to minority or marginalised groups:** Adolescents who are part of marginalised groups or who are considered "different" (because of their race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or any other characteristic) are more susceptible to cyberbullying. Bullies can use these differences as a justification for bullying, fuelling discrimination and hatred.
i) **Poor parental interaction:** Lack of parental control or supervision in the use of devices and social networks increases the risk of both being a victim and becoming an aggressor. An authoritarian parenting style can teach adolescents that the right way to interact is

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through violence. In addition, lack of open communication with parents can prevent victims from reporting bullying in time.

j) **Alcohol or drug use:** Adolescents who use substances such as alcohol or drugs are more likely to engage in aggressive behaviour online. Substance use can impair judgement and increase impulsivity, as well as be a consequence of poor social skills, leading to an illusion of maturity.

Questions to think about: Let's say a friend of yours is a victim of cyberbullying. If he/she didn't tell you, how would you recognise him/her as a victim? How would you recognise him/her as the aggressor?

2.2. Protective factors

a) **Not having a computer and spending as little time online as possible:** The absence or limited use of electronic devices is associated with less exposure to cyberbullying. By spending less time online, adolescents are less exposed to online interactions, which significantly reduces the likelihood of being a victim or perpetrator of cyberbullying. This disconnection acts as a barrier to the hostile dynamics that can be generated on digital platforms. It also helps to develop in-person skills such as empathy and moral values.

b) **High perception that online activity is public and not private:** The belief that all online interactions can be observed by others acts as a protective factor, mainly to avoid aggressive behaviour. When adolescents perceive that their online actions can be monitored or seen by others (parents, friends, teachers), they tend to be more careful in their behaviour, which reduces the likelihood of engaging in cyberbullying activities. In addition, this helps them not to share sensitive information about themselves.

c) **Good self-esteem and resilience:** Having positive self-esteem acts as a protective factor against cyberbullying. Adolescents with good self-esteem are better able to resist bullying, as they have confidence in themselves and their abilities. They are also less likely to become bullies, as they do not feel the need to put others down in order to feel validated.

d) **Developed social skills:** Well-developed social skills, such as empathy, conflict resolution and effective communication, are key to avoiding both cybervictimisation and cyberbullying. Adolescents with these competencies are better able to manage online interactions in a healthy way, establishing positive relationships with their peers and avoiding hostile dynamics.

e) **Supervision and open communication with parents:** A family environment in which parents adequately supervise technology use and maintain open communication with their children can protect adolescents from cyberbullying. Adolescents who feel supported by their parents are more likely to share if they are being bullied online, which facilitates early intervention. In addition, moderate supervision of internet use can prevent access to risky situations.

Reflection questions: What activity could you do with your friends or family to enhance each of the protective factors?

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2.3. Risk online behaviours

Adolescence, as a particularly critical period in an individual's development, brings with it the confrontation of new behaviours and identities and a search for exciting activities. In this, new information and communication technologies present a vast world in which to explore and interact with others. In this search for new emotions, adolescents may put themselves in dangerous situations.

We call online risk behaviours any type of interaction on the Internet that greatly increases the likelihood of negative consequences for oneself or others, such as distress, victimisation, deterioration of social relationships or academic performance. This is a wide range of behaviours that affect individually or collectively, in legal, social, emotional terms... In adolescents, the most studied risk behaviours are problematic internet use and cyberbullying (Gámez-Guadix, M. *et* al., 2016).

Sometimes, even without engaging in risky behaviour, we can be harassed by colleagues or strangers. Here is a list of tips on how to avoid this type of situation:

- **Learn how to limit your social media account to strangers**: each platform has its own set of limitations, but it is generally a good idea to have a closed profile, where private content can only be seen by people you know. In addition to this, there are other ways to filter, such as preventing strangers from sending you messages.
- **Report offensive messages and people**: All platforms offer different tools to protect you and others from inappropriate behaviour. Report comments, report accounts that impersonate other people or that are trying to scam you, block people who repeatedly send you unwanted messages...
- **Don't give out your personal details on untrustworthy websites**: Many scams need your personal details to steal your money or blackmail you with sensitive information. Many social networking accounts ask for some information from you, but it is never mandatory to give your ID, your bank account/credit card number (or your parents'). It is not even necessary to post photos of yourself on any social network. Remember that all this information can be used by strangers to track you.
- **Don't open untrusted files or links**: Many scams to steal your social media account or infect your computer/mobile phone with viruses start by asking you to open a file or link. This is usually through websites or messages from strangers. It may even happen that a friend whose account has been stolen writes to you asking you to open a suspicious file. If in doubt, we recommend the VirusTotal website, where you can enter the link to a website or upload a file for free to find out if it is legitimate or not. https://www.virustotal.com/gui/home/upload
- **Have open communication with your parents:** Often adults will have answers or know how to solve problems that we will not be able to handle. Talking to them in an open and honest way helps to resolve the conflict. If we don't know how to act or have doubts about anything, such as the legitimacy of a website or a contact on our social networks, one of the best tools is to tell your parents. We know how difficult this step can be for some young people, so our alternative would be to tell a trusted teacher at our school.

Reflection question: Have you ever had an uncomfortable interaction on the internet? Which of the tips listed above could have prevented that interaction? Can you think of any others?

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3. Consequences of Cyberbullying

Unfortunately, cyberbullying is a vicious circle that feeds itself. Most of the people who perpetrate cyberbullying are also victims and understand this way of interacting through social networks as "normal". These dynamics are often sustained over time, so it is normal that being a perpetrator or victim of cyberbullying is the main cause of being a perpetrator or victim in the future. The second cause is either being a perpetrator or a victim of traditional bullying in schools. Already with this we can see how there is a normalisation of violence as a form of interaction. But these are not the only consequences of cyberbullying. Here are the most important consequences of cyberbullying, both for perpetrators and victims (Barlett et al., 2023; Marciano *et al*., 2019):

3.1. Victim of cyberbullying:

a) **Anxiety**

Anxiety feels like having a constant worry that won't leave you alone. When someone is a victim of cyberbullying, they may start to feel nervous all the time.

The victim may feel fearful every time they receive a notification on their phone or when they have to go to school. This discomfort extends to other areas outside the internet. They may find it hard to concentrate on their homework or have difficulty sleeping.

b) **Depression**

Depression is more than feeling sad about a bad day. Victims of cyberbullying can develop depression because the constant bullying takes such a toll on their mood. They may start to feel worthless, due to the bully's undervaluing of them. They may lose interest in doing activities that used to bring them joy, such as going to an after-school activity or hanging out with a group of friends.

c) **Self-esteem**

Self-esteem is how we see and value ourselves. Cyberbullying can do a lot of damage to a person's self-esteem. When someone constantly receives negative messages or taunts, they may start to believe that these messages are true. The victim may start to think that they are worthless, unattractive, or unintelligent. They may start to doubt all their abilities and feel inferior to others. In addition, certain forms of cyberbullying lead to social exclusion.

d) **Drug use**

Sometimes people who are cyberbullied may turn to drugs or alcohol as a way of escaping their problems. If people have low self-esteem and find it hard to fit in with people their own age, they may become involved in drug use. Other people may offer friendship in exchange for using alcohol or marijuana together.

e) **Loneliness**

Cyberbullying can make a person feel very lonely, even if they are surrounded by people. The victim may feel that no one understands what they are going through or that they have no one to talk to

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about the problem. Sometimes, out of fear or embarrassment, the bullied person withdraws from friends and family. They may stop participating in social activities or avoid using the social networks where the bullying occurs.

f) **Poor health**

The stress of cyberbullying not only affects the mind, it can also affect the body. Being constantly worried and scared can weaken the immune system, which means that the person gets sick more easily. The victim may experience headaches, stomach problems, or feel tired all the time. They may also neglect their health because anxiety diverts attention away from taking care of themselves.

g) **Poor sleep hygiene**

Getting a good night's sleep is very important for health, but victims of cyberbullying often have trouble sleeping. They may spend hours tossing and turning in bed, thinking about the messages they have received or worrying about what will happen the next day. They may also develop a habit of constantly checking their devices at night, for fear of missing a message or anxious about whether they have received more harassment.

h) **Shame**

Shame is a powerful feeling that can make the victim of cyberbullying want to hide from the world. They may feel ashamed of the things the bully has said or shared about them, even if they are not true. This feeling can make the person not want to ask for help, thinking that it is somehow their fault or that they should be able to handle the situation themselves.

i) **Truancy**

Cyberbullying can make going to school feel like a nightmare. The victim may start skipping classes to avoid meeting their bullies or to escape the stares and comments of other students. This can lead to academic problems, as the person misses important classes or even changes schools, which can lead to decreased academic performance and problems socialising.

j) **Stress**

Cyberbullying stress is like being constantly in "fight or flight" mode. The body and mind are always on alert, waiting for the next attack. This can be exhausting and affect all aspects of a person's life. Constant stress can make it difficult to concentrate at school, enjoy activities or even perform simple daily tasks.

k) **Suicidal thinking and/or behaviour**

In extreme and very serious cases, cyberbullying can lead to suicidal thoughts or even suicide attempts. This happens when the victim feels that there is no way out and that the pain is too great to bear. It is very important to understand that these thoughts are the result of the intense emotional pain caused by the bullying, not a reflection of the person's worth.

If you ever have these thoughts, it is crucial that you seek help immediately. Talk to a trusted adult, call a helpline, or seek emergency medical attention. Remember: there is always hope and help available, even when there seems to be none.

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Reflection question: Can you tell me one observable behaviour of each of the consequences of cyberbullying?

3.2. Perpetrator of cyberbullying

a) **Anxiety**

You may have had that feeling of being constantly on edge. When someone engages in cyberbullying behaviour, their brain goes into conflict mode, which generates an alert and nervous response that becomes normalised each time they engage in these dynamics.

The stalker may always be worried that they will be found out or that someone will take revenge. It can also be stressful to lead a double life, acting one way online and another way in real life. While venting to someone online can create a false sense of relief, in the long run it can also backfire on the perpetrator.

b) **Depression**

Depression is more than being sad. It is as if there is a grey cloud over you all the time. When someone is cyberbullying, they may start to feel bad about themselves. This happens because, although at first they may feel powerful, over time they start to realise that what they are doing is wrong. The person may start to feel guilty or ashamed of what they have done. It also often happens that people who are already depressed try to make themselves feel better by engaging in these powerful behaviours, but this causes their social circle to degenerate, preventing them from creating healthy relationships where they can break out of their depression.

c) **Drug use**

As we have mentioned before, cyberbullying can be a quick and illusory escape from real problems. Sometimes, cyberbullies start using drugs or alcohol in search of those intense emotions they find in violent online conflicts. This often creates a false sense of maturity in adolescents,

d) **Low self-esteem**

Self-esteem is what we think of ourselves. When someone cyberbullies, their self-esteem can go way down. Although at first, they may feel powerful for bullying others, over time they begin to see themselves in a negative light. This happens because the person realises that their actions are not good and may even feel excluded from certain areas because of their behaviour. In addition, because they use ineffective strategies to solve their emotional problems, they not only maintain those problems but may find themselves ineffective in solving any problem**.**

e) **Poor sleep hygiene**

Getting a good night's sleep is very important for health, but people who cyberbully often have trouble sleeping. Because cyberbullying is associated with excessive internet use, people who cyberbully are likely to stay up late at night on their mobile phones or playing video games, which helps to exacerbate problems such as depression or anxiety.

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f) **Poor health**

Cyberbullying not only affects the mind, it can also affect the body. Being stressed and worried all the time can make it easier for the body to get sick. As we have already mentioned, sleeping or taking drugs can make it easier for people to encounter illnesses that would have been easily avoidable.

g) **Behavioural problems**

When someone gets used to being aggressive online, they may start to behave badly in other parts of their life. As we have already seen, there is a close relationship between cyberbullying and bullying at school. By being more aggressive in their behaviour, they do not adapt in certain environments and tend to create discomfort for others in order to reinforce this dynamic. When asked about the justification for these acts, many believe that by doing so they elevate their social status.

Reflection question: Can you tell me one observable behaviour of each of the consequences of perpetrating cyberbullying?

3.3. Legal consequences

Due to the offensive and harmful nature of cyberbullying, legislation in all countries has been adapting to this new phenomenon in order to prosecute it from different approaches. In some places, cyberbullying is punishable under the same laws as other traditional crimes, such as insults, defamation, persecution or hate speech. In other countries, cyberbullying has become a separate crime, with more severe penalties and specific procedures.

This is intended to protect the fundamental rights of the individual such as dignity, privacy and security. Like traditional bullying, cyberbullying has dire consequences for people's mental health, causing anxiety and depression and in extreme cases suicide (Janković & Stošić, 2022).

Here are some examples of countries that are pursuing these practices:

a) **England**: In the UK, cyberbullying is not criminalised as a separate offence. Instead, various laws apply, such as the Protection from Harassment Act (1997) and the Malicious Communications Act (1988), which punish the transmission of harmful messages.
b) **United States**: In most US states, cyberbullying is a separate crime. In states such as Louisiana and Arkansas, fines or prison sentences apply for stalking minors or for electronic communications with the intent to intimidate or harm others.
c) **Austria**: In 2016, Austria amended its criminal code to specifically punish cyberbullying, with penalties of up to one year in prison, and up to three years if the victim attempts suicide due to the bullying.
d) **Italy**: Italy passed a law in 2017 prohibiting online harassment, especially aimed at protecting minors. This legislation allows for the swift removal of offensive content on the internet, although it does not impose direct criminal sanctions on harassers.
e) **Germany**: Cyberbullying in Germany is not criminalised as a separate offence, but is punishable under laws that protect against insult, persecution or unauthorised distribution of images. However, efforts are being made to adapt legislation to the reality of online harassment.
f) **Spain**: The Spanish Penal Code does not specifically criminalise cyberstalking, but places special emphasis on the offence of cyberstalking. Harassment of a person is found in Article

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Project No: 2023-1-ES01-KA220-SCH-000160237

172 ter; sexting without consent in 197.7 and contact with minors to commit offences against their sexual integrity in 26.904 of the Penal Code.

4. Coping and Prevention Strategies

What can I do to avoid becoming involved?

To avoid becoming involved in cyberbullying, whether as a victim, witness or perpetrator, scientific studies recommend:

4.1. Understand and use digital tools properly

Be careful about public exposure

Learn to protect your personal data, particularly on social networks, by using appropriate confidentiality settings and avoiding sharing personal information, including photos.

Restrict access to your posts: make sure that your posts are only visible to people you trust.

Avoid interacting with strangers on social networks and the telephone: they may be likely to seek confrontation. Don't hesitate to delete or block messages from strangers or people behaving in a problematic way. By not contacting them, you can protect your privacy! Finally, many platforms offer the option of reporting inappropriate behaviour, which can reduce exposure to cyberbullying.

Be careful how you communicate

Limit the use of instant messaging, and in particular avoid copying and sending a private conversation to other people without their consent, spreading a rumour, relaying a threatening message, sending photos to humiliate someone, sharing an Internet link to make fun of someone, taking part in heated online debates.

Adopt respectful online communication, making sure that your words cannot be misinterpreted (ambiguity, aggression, provocation). Irony and humour are not easily identifiable online and can often be interpreted as aggression. Oral communication is the best way to ensure that your words are understood and to correct any misinterpretations.

4.2. Develop a support network

Many of you are afraid to report cyberbullying to an adult or someone you trust. However, support, both online and offline, is essential if you are to cope with the stress generated by these situations.

Support from friends, teachers and family

Have confidence in yourself and in those around you, who can be a source of support, is a way to reduce the risk of being involved in cyberbullying, whether as a victim or aggressor.

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Develop a variety of social links (friends, educational team), in different contexts (school, extracurricular activities, online games, etc.), but also to maintain good relations with one's family is important to be able to prevent cyberbullying.

Communication is key! This means expressing your feelings, fears and limits to someone you trust, but also listening to those around you, because you are also someone you trust.

Learning prosocial behaviour

This means showing concern for others and offering help and support, both online and offline, to reduce cyberbullying behaviour. A close-knit, caring community will help limit disruptive behaviour.

Promote and practise self-help online or offline, whether through encouraging messages or by taking a stand against harassment.

Showing your disagreement and disengaging from online discussion groups that tolerate or convey disrespectful messages.

4.3. Developing psychosocial skills

These skills enable people to interact better online, manage conflicts and protect themselves from risky situations. A number of psychosocial skills can be developed to avoid becoming involved in cyberbullying situations. Here is an overview of the skills that limit the risk of becoming a perpetrator, victim or passive witness of cyberbullying and the factors that encourage their development:

Empathy

Educational programs focusing on empathy have been shown to be effective in the prevention of bullying. These programs include:

Understanding and sharing another person's emotions allows us to better perceive the impact that our actions or those of others may have online, thereby reducing the likelihood of becoming a victim or perpetrator of cyberbullying.

Become aware of the consequences of words or actions (sharing a photo, for example) on the person receiving the message or who is going to read it: a joke can sometimes be perceived as mockery, an insult, a betrayal, etc.

Taking part in role-playing exercises or discussions that encourage the other person's perspective helps to reinforce this skill.

Critical thinking

Knowing how to analyse online information, assess its veracity and make informed decisions will help you avoid sharing or amplifying harmful or defamatory content. Learning to evaluate sources of information and to ask critical questions about the validity of content can help avoid the dissemination of harmful content.

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Be able to **detect and resist the influence of disinformation** or provocation. This will avoid responding to conflict in a balanced way without becoming aggressive or submissive.

Observe the context in which the communication takes place (who, when, how, why these messages?) to identify a possible problem or better understand the situation. Courses on the confident and critical use of digital tools can help to better understand or observe problematic situations online.

Assertiveness and decision-making

Defending your rights or those of others without being passive or aggressive enables you to respond calmly and effectively to provocation or abusive behaviour without resorting to aggression or escalating the conflict.

Becoming aware that inaction can increase the problem or conflict: deleting or modifying a message; apologizing; replying by indicating that you disagree with what is being said; reporting a problem to someone you trust/an adult, etc.

Solving problems and managing conflicts

Communicating in a non-violent way, for example, start by expressing the situation that is bothering you, then learn to formulate your needs and limits clearly and respectfully. And, of course, you must be prepared to listen to people who tell you about situations in which you are involved that are bothering them and take their feelings into account. This will help you to resolve disputes peacefully.

Dealing with disagreements and tensions online in a constructive way, rather than letting the situation degenerate into harassment. Disagreement between people is normal and legitimate: you have the right to disagree with others as long as you explain your disagreement and avoid aggressive messages when you disagree.

Moral courage and the ability to intervene

It is important to intervene when you witness cyberbullying, rather than remaining a passive bystander. This pro-social behaviour is essential to limit the impact of cyberbullying and protect victims. Here there are some key to react as witness:

Intervention often discourages the aggressor and supports the victim. If you don't feel ready to act on your own, you can ask an adult or your friends for help.

Participate in programs that encourage people to take a stand against injustice, even online.

Practice intervention strategies, for example, reporting harassment to moderators or supporting the victim.

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Project No: 2023-1-ES01-KA220-SCH-000160237

Use your emotions appropriately

Knowing how to recognize, understand and control your emotions can help you avoid becoming a perpetrator or victim of cyberbullying. Emotions such as anger or frustration can lead to impulsive behaviour online, which can degenerate into cyberbullying.

Practicing stress management techniques, such as deep breathing or mindfulness, can help to better manage negative emotions in tense online situations.

Self-control

Knowing how to inhibit impulsive behaviour, such as not responding instantly to online provocations, is essential to avoid participating in increasingly aggressive exchanges, which can easily lead to cyberstalking.

This skill also helps victims to avoid over-reacting and contributing to the escalation of conflicts.

Learn to manage impulsiveness, such as taking the time to think before responding!

4.4. Be alert to the signs of cyberbullying

It's not always easy to identify a cyberbullying situation. That's why it's important to:

Recognize the signs of cyberbullying

Be alert to the first signs of harassment, such as derogatory or repeated comments.

Intervening quickly, either by withdrawing from the situation or by reporting the behaviour, can prevent it from escalating.

Ask for help quickly

Victims who seek help quickly from friends, family or platform moderators have a better chance of putting an end to the situation before it escalates.

The role of those who observe and understand the situation (known as 'witnesses') is also essential in putting an end to these situations quickly: when in doubt.

The help of an adult can help relay the request.

Make others aware of cyberbullying

By informing your friends and family about the dangers of cyberbullying and how to protect yourself, you are helping to create a safer online culture.

It's also important to **support victims** by highlighting the seriousness of the situation.

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Cyberbullying is a complex phenomenon, but a number of strategies validated by research can help prevent it.

By developing skills in the use of digital tools, adopting respectful communication and using the safety tools available, it is possible to significantly reduce the risk of being involved in cyberbullying situations.

In addition, psychosocial skills such as emotional regulation, empathy, assertiveness and critical thinking play a fundamental role in preventing cyberbullying. Scientific research shows that by cultivating these skills, individuals not only become more resistant to cyberbullying situations but also more inclined to adopt supportive behaviour online.

Vigilance, education and awareness remain the key elements in this fight.

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