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



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Parent'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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- **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. Identifying Symptoms in the Home

2.1. Changes in Behavior and Emotional State

When a child is being bullied or cyberbullied, noticeable changes in their behavior and emotional state often emerge as primary indicators. Bullying, whether physical or digital, can significantly affect a child's mental health, leading to increased levels of anxiety, depression, or irritability. Parents may observe their child becoming withdrawn, showing signs of sadness, or experiencing frequent mood swings. Fredrick and Demaray (2018) emphasize that children who are bullied often exhibit emotional distress, such as persistent feelings of helplessness or low self-esteem, which may manifest in isolation from family and friends. Moreover, children may exhibit somatic complaints, such as headaches or stomachaches, as physical expressions of stress or fear about returning to school. Victims of cyberbullying are especially prone to experiencing emotional volatility. Since cyberbullying can be pervasive and ongoing, victims may feel like there is little reprieve, heightening their emotional distress. Hinduja and Patchin (2018) report that cyberbullying victims often suffer from sleep disturbances, fatigue, and chronic anxiety due to the persistent exposure to online

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harassment. Parents should be vigilant for signs of mental health issues, such as prolonged sadness, difficulty concentrating, or even suicidal thoughts, as these may be critical indicators of deeper struggles caused by bullying.

2.2. Changes in the Use of Electronic Devices and Social Networks

A significant change in how a child interacts with electronic devices can be another key sign of bullying or cyberbullying. If a child starts avoiding their phone or computer, becomes secretive about their social media activities, or deletes social media accounts, these behaviors could indicate that they are attempting to escape online harassment. Aura (2022) notes that cyberbullying victims often exhibit signs of fear or anxiety when receiving notifications on their phones or messages online, leading them to hide their devices or avoid using them entirely. Conversely, increased or obsessive use of social media, especially late at night, could signal that the child is constantly checking their accounts for harmful comments or threats.

In cases of cyberbullying, the 24/7 nature of online interactions can make it difficult for children to disconnect. Victims may feel a continuous need to monitor their online presence to avoid further attacks, leading to exhaustion and a decline in their overall well-being. Verywell Health (2022) also highlights that victims may create new accounts or profiles to escape their tormentors, though this often fails to provide lasting relief. Parents should remain attentive to these behavioral shifts and initiate conversations about the child's online experiences, reinforcing the importance of safe digital practices.

2.3. Changes in Social Relations and School Performance

A decline in social relations and school performance is another common symptom of bullying or cyberbullying. Victims may begin withdrawing from friends or social activities they once enjoyed, choosing instead to isolate themselves out of fear or embarrassment. StopBullying.gov (2023) identifies social withdrawal as a key sign of victimization, noting that children may suddenly lose friends or avoid social situations altogether. This isolation not only increases their emotional distress but also deprives them of the social support necessary to cope with bullying.

Academically, children experiencing bullying often show a noticeable decline in performance. They may lose interest in schoolwork, experience difficulties concentrating, or skip school altogether. Fridh et al. (2015) emphasize that absenteeism is a common response to bullying, as victims may feel too anxious or physically ill to attend school regularly. The combination of emotional distress and reduced school engagement can create a negative feedback loop, where poor performance leads to further bullying, exacerbating the child's challenges.

Parents should be mindful of these shifts in social behavior and academic performance. If their child starts avoiding friends, seems disinterested in hobbies or school activities, or if their grades begin to drop, it may be time to explore whether bullying or cyberbullying could be the underlying cause.

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3. Direct Intervention

3.1. Safe Use of Social Networking and Messaging Applications

The growing use of social networking and messaging applications among adolescents brings both opportunities and risks, especially when it comes to cyberbullying. As a preventive measure, teaching students how to safely navigate these platforms is critical to reducing their exposure to online harassment and promoting responsible digital citizenship. This education should cover not only technical skills, such as adjusting privacy settings, but also emotional and social skills that encourage empathy and respectful online behavior.

3.1.1. Privacy and Security Settings

One of the key elements of safe social media use is ensuring that students understand how to manage their privacy and security settings on various platforms. Many social networking sites and messaging applications have default settings that make users' personal information and posts visible to the public, potentially increasing their vulnerability to cyberbullying. Méndez et al. (2019) highlight how emotional intelligence helps adolescents regulate their behavior online, reducing the likelihood of both engaging in and falling victim to cyberbullying. This aligns with the importance of privacy settings, as students can learn to limit their exposure to harmful content. Additionally, Livingstone et al. (2011) emphasize the role of digital literacy in enhancing students' understanding of online safety, including privacy management.

3.1.2. Digital Footprints

Another critical concept is the permanence of digital footprints. Once something is shared online, it is often impossible to fully remove it. Adolescents must understand that their online actions and shared content can have long-lasting consequences, even if they are deleted. Mocanu et al. (2022) discuss how digital traces, once shared, can be exploited in cyberbullying, further highlighting the importance of cautious online behavior. This supports the need for teaching students about the long-term consequences of their digital footprints.

3.1.3. Empathy and Digital Etiquette

Empathy and responsible behavior online are essential to preventing cyberbullying. Hinduja and Patchin (2018) argue that fostering empathy through digital literacy programs can significantly reduce online harassment by raising awareness of the real-world impact of online actions. Training in digital etiquette can help students understand how to communicate respectfully and avoid participating in harmful online behaviors like trolling and spreading rumors. Livingstone et al. (2011) further support this by emphasizing how digital literacy programs can foster a culture of respect and empathy online.

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3.1.4. Security Measures

Educating students about password security, recognizing phishing scams, and protecting personal information online is critical. Faryadi (2011) explains that oversharing or failing to protect one's online accounts can make students more vulnerable to cyberbullying and other forms of online harassment. Similarly, Staksrud & Livingstone (2009) highlight the importance of security measures, noting how a lack of digital safety awareness often correlates with increased risk of cyberbullying.

3.2. Procedures for Reporting and Blocking Inappropriate Content

In addition to safe practices, students must be empowered with the knowledge and tools to address inappropriate content and cyberbullying when it occurs. Most social networking platforms and messaging apps provide users with mechanisms to report inappropriate behavior and block harassers, yet students often underutilize these tools due to a lack of awareness or confidence in their effectiveness.

3.2.1. Reporting Mechanisms

Reporting tools are available on almost all social media platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok, and allow users to flag content that violates community guidelines, such as harassment, hate speech, or explicit content. Livingstone et al. (2011) highlight that students need to be aware of and confident in these tools for managing online risks, including cyberbullying. While Fredrick and Demaray (2018) focus on peer victimization and mental health, incorporating sources like Livingstone et al. would more directly support the need for education around reporting tools.

3.2.2. Blocking Harassers

Blocking features allow users to cut off contact with someone who is engaging in bullying or other inappropriate behaviors. Hase et al. (2015) discuss how cyberbullying invades the victim's personal space, making the home, typically a place of refuge, another avenue for victimization. Teaching students to block harassers can provide a sense of control and protection. Additionally, Hinduja and Patchin (2018) emphasize that educating students on using blocking tools can effectively reduce emotional harm caused by persistent cyberbullying.

3.2.3. Escalating Issues to School Authorities

While social media platforms handle reports of cyberbullying, it is essential that students know when and how to escalate serious issues to school authorities or law enforcement. Fridh et al. (2015) stress that the support from schools and parents plays a crucial role in mitigating the effects of cyberbullying. This aligns with the need for clear reporting procedures in schools, enabling students to feel supported and secure when escalating serious online harassment.

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3.2.4. Parental Involvement

Parents play a vital role in monitoring and supporting their children's online activities. Ortega-Barón et al. (2019) highlight the importance of involving parents in cyberbullying prevention efforts, noting that parental guidance is crucial in helping children navigate online conflicts. Open communication between parents and children is essential to ensure that students feel comfortable discussing their online experiences.

3.2.5. Digital Detox and Mental Health Support

Encouraging students to take breaks from social media, or engage in a digital detox, can help reduce the emotional toll of constant online interaction. Méndez et al. (2019) suggest that students who can step away from their devices during stressful times are better able to manage the emotional impacts of cyberbullying. Similarly, Hinduja and Patchin (2018) emphasize the importance of providing emotional support to students affected by cyberbullying, noting that mental health resources such as counselling can help mitigate the risks of depression and suicidal ideation linked to cyberbullying.

4. Indirect Intervention

4.1. Guide to Safe Use of Social Networking and Messaging Applications for Parents

In an increasingly digital world, parents play a critical role in guiding their children on the safe use of social networking and messaging applications. Adolescents are frequently active on platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, WhatsApp, and Snapchat, which, while useful for communication and social engagement, also present significant risks, including cyberbullying, privacy breaches, and exposure to inappropriate content. Parents must be equipped with the knowledge and tools to help their children navigate these platforms safely.

4.1.1. Setting Boundaries and Monitoring Usage

One of the most effective ways parents can help their children use social media safely is by setting boundaries and monitoring usage. This involves establishing clear guidelines about which platforms children can use, the time they spend online, and who they can communicate with. Méndez et al. (2019) stress the importance of emotional intelligence in adolescents' ability to manage online interactions and navigate social situations without resorting to or becoming victims of bullying. Parents can help by fostering these skills at home, guiding their children in recognizing emotional cues and respecting boundaries in their online interactions. In addition to guiding their children, parents should understand the risks of oversharing on social media. Adolescents often share personal information online without realizing the potential consequences, including identity theft or exploitation. Faryadi (2011) warns that oversharing can make children vulnerable to cyberbullying and other forms of online harassment. Parents should educate their children about the importance of protecting personal

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information, such as phone numbers, addresses, and school details, and help them adjust privacy settings on their social media accounts to limit visibility to trusted contacts only.

4.1.2. Age-Appropriate Platforms and Content Filters

Another important consideration is ensuring that children are using age-appropriate platforms. Many social networking sites have minimum age requirements to protect younger users from exposure to inappropriate content or interactions with strangers. Parents should verify that their children are adhering to these guidelines and consider using content filters to block access to inappropriate websites or materials. Mocanu et al. (2022) highlight the importance of limiting access to high-risk platforms and ensuring that children are protected from harmful content that can exacerbate issues like cyberbullying. Parents should also engage in regular discussions about online etiquette and responsible behavior. Hinduja and Patchin (2018) argue that empathy and respect are key factors in reducing cyberbullying, as understanding the emotional impact of online behavior can deter harmful interactions. By modeling respectful communication at home and encouraging open dialogue about online experiences, parents can help create a culture of empathy and responsibility that extends into their children's digital lives.

4.2. Procedures for Reporting and Blocking Inappropriate Content (Parental Control)

Parents need to be proactive in helping their children understand the mechanisms available for reporting and blocking inappropriate content. Many social networking platforms and messaging applications have built-in tools that allow users to flag offensive content or block individuals who are engaging in bullying or harassment. By teaching children how to use these features, parents empower them to take control of their online interactions and protect themselves from harm.

4.2.1. Understanding Reporting Mechanisms

On platforms like Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and WhatsApp, users can report inappropriate content directly to the platform's moderators. Fredrick and Demaray (2018) suggest that educating children on how to use these tools provides them with a sense of agency when they encounter harmful content. Parents should guide their children through the steps of reporting, including how to select the type of violation (e.g., bullying, harassment, explicit content) and how to submit a report.

4.2.2. Blocking Users

Blocking is an essential tool for managing negative interactions online. When children are harassed or bullied through messaging apps or social media, blocking the aggressor can offer immediate relief. Hase et al. (2015) emphasize that one of the most detrimental aspects of cyberbullying is the invasive nature of the harassment, which can follow victims into their homes through constant messaging. Teaching children how to block unwanted users helps them regain control over their online environment and cut off further contact with bullies.

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4.2.3. Parental Control Software

Many parents find it helpful to use parental control software to monitor and manage their children's online activities. These tools allow parents to set limits on the time their children spend on social media, monitor who they are communicating with, and block access to certain websites or apps. Ortega-Barón et al. (2019) suggest that parental involvement, combined with technical tools, can significantly reduce the risk of exposure to harmful content and cyberbullying. Parental control tools such as Net Nanny, Qustodio, and Norton Family provide monitoring and blocking capabilities that give parents greater oversight of their children's online interactions while allowing for flexibility as children mature.

4.2.4. Open Communication

Although parental control tools are effective, they should be complemented by open communication between parents and children. Fridh et al. (2015) stress the importance of building a supportive environment where children feel comfortable discussing their online experiences, including any negative interactions. Parents should make it clear that their children can come to them if they experience cyberbullying or are exposed to inappropriate content, and that they will support them in addressing the problem.

4.2.5. Recognizing Signs of Cyberbullying

It is also crucial for parents to recognize the signs of cyberbullying, which can include changes in behavior, such as withdrawal from social activities, anxiety about using digital devices, or a sudden drop in academic performance. Méndez et al. (2019) emphasize the connection between emotional intelligence and resilience in coping with bullying. Parents can foster emotional resilience by teaching children how to manage their emotions and seek help when needed.

4.2.6. Mental Health Support

If a child experiences cyberbullying, parents should ensure they have access to mental health support. Hinduja and Patchin (2018) argue that cyberbullying can have severe mental health implications, including depression and suicidal ideation. Parents should work with schools to ensure that appropriate support systems, such as counsellors or mental health professionals, are available to help children process and recover from the emotional impact of cyberbullying.

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