Submission to the Queensland Anti-Cyberbullying Taskforce

Australian Psychological Society

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1. **Summary and Recommendations**

The Australian Psychological Society (APS) acknowledges the serious and wide-reaching impacts of cyberbullying, which involves repeated, hostile online behaviour intended to inflict harm or discomfort on others, and commends the Queensland Government’s establishment of an expert Taskforce to develop proposals to address this complex and pervasive issue.

The serious psychosocial consequences of cyberbullying include fearing for one’s safety, impaired social and emotional adjustment; poor academic achievement, anxiety, depression and suicidality; poorer physical health; higher absenteeism; and increased loneliness and low self-esteem, and in some cases suicidal ideation.

The APS is aware that the digital environment is changing so rapidly that new challenges to cybersafety are evolving exponentially, and likewise the need for agile and innovative responses at all levels. This submission focuses on the context and impacts of cyberbullying, and recommends multi-level strategies to prevent and respond to cyberbullying of young people in particular, as follows:

*Recommendation 1*: Governments need to take the lead in developing better governance, regulation and protection for children in cyberspace to protect them from the harms of cyberbullying. This could include age verification and restriction, child safety filters, legislation that makes hate speech a crime, and the implementation of cyberbullying algorithms to detect the presence of cyberbullying.

*Recommendation 2*: The Queensland Government, through the Taskforce, should work with the Federal Government, particularly the office of the E-Safety Commissioner, to address cyberbullying on a national as well as state level.

*Recommendation 3*: Cyber-safety strategies at all levels should be designed to build on existing strategies that are addressing other forms of bullying and discrimination (such as racism, homophobia or sexual violence), and in school contexts these strategies should form part of a broader student wellbeing, respectful relationships and anti-discrimination policy framework.

*Recommendation 4*: Schools need to be supported and resourced to develop whole-school online safety policies, in collaboration with their students, and to implement evidence-based strategies to address online safety and bullying (e.g., classroom lessons in developing responsible online citizens, teacher training to deal confidently with e-safety concerns, appropriate disciplining, respectful school culture).
Recommendation 5: Online safety should be considered within a child and adolescent development framework, whereby the development of respectful and positive relationship skills among young people is encouraged and supported.

Recommendation 6: Enhancing online safety for children and young people therefore involves supporting the development of young people as competent online citizens, promoting online literacy, and fostering young people’s ability to critique information and use socially responsible behaviour in communicating online.

Recommendation 7: An engagement strategy to involve young people in understanding cyber-threats and in designing, implementing and evaluating cyber-safety initiatives should be developed to ensure children and young people have meaningful input into decisions and policies that affect them.
Introduction

The Australian Psychological Society (APS) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Queensland Anti-Cyberbullying Taskforce. We also refer the Taskforce to other relevant APS material, such as our submission to the Commonwealth Department of Communications Enhancing Online Safety for Children: Public Consultation, as well as materials developed on online safety, and the sexualisation of girls. In drawing attention to these resources however, we acknowledge that the digital environment is changing so rapidly that new challenges to cybersafety are evolving exponentially, and likewise the need for agile and innovative responses at all levels.

The APS is the premier professional association for psychologists in Australia, representing more than 24,000 members. Psychology is a discipline that systematically addresses the many facets of human experience and functioning at individual, family and societal levels. Psychology covers many highly specialised areas, but all psychologists share foundational training in human development and the constructs of healthy functioning.

A key goal of the APS is to actively contribute psychological knowledge for the promotion and enhancement of community wellbeing. Psychology in the Public Interest is the section of the APS dedicated to the pursuit of this goal, and to the promotion of equitable and just treatment of all segments of society.

This submission focuses on the causes and impacts of cyberbullying, and recommends multi-level strategies to prevent and respond to cyberbullying.

What is cyberbullying?

We note that the Taskforce’s March 2018 communiqué adopted a definition of bullying that is adapted from that used on the Bullying. No Way! website:

Bullying is an ongoing misuse of power in relationships through usually repeated verbal, physical and/or social behaviour that is intended to cause physical and/or psychological harm. It can involve an individual or a group misusing their power over one or more people. Bullying can happen in person or using digital or other technologies, and it can be obvious (overt) or hidden (covert).

Cyberbullying has been defined as any behaviour performed through electronic or digital media by individuals or groups that repeatedly communicates hostile or aggressive messages intended to inflict harm or discomfort on others (Tokunaga, 2010).
Cyberbullying can take place via all methods of online communication, and can take a variety of forms including (but not limited to) harassment and threatening messages, critical remarks and teasing, denigration, trolling, sending nasty SMS (including homophobic, sexist or racist comments), masquerading, impersonation, outing and trickery (sharing private personal information, messages, pictures with others), social exclusion (intentionally excluding others from an online group), and sexting (sharing explicit material by mobile phone). There is some evidence that individuals who cyberbully tend to bully others in face-to-face settings as well, and may also be victims of cyberbullying (Kowalski et al 2014).

With the widespread use of mobile devices by young people, cyberbullying can occur 24 hours a day, and leaves a permanent online record which can be very difficult to remove, and is sometimes impossible to escape. It often involves no authority (adults are less aware of cyberbullying as it is nearly always carried out secretly).

According to cyberpsychologist Mary Aiken (2016), who specialises in the impacts of technology on human behaviour, online anonymity fuels online disinhibition, which can result in people behaving more cruelly online than they would in person. The online environment and rapid sharing through large networks thus means that the effects are amplified. Cyberbullying can be shared with hundreds, even thousands of people.

Rapid technological changes, the anonymity of the perpetrator, and the potentially large audience make cyberbullying more complicated to prevent than traditional bullying. Therefore, policy makers, educators, parents, and adolescents themselves should be aware of its potentially harmful effects. Further research is needed on whether anti-bullying policies, materials, interventions, and mobile telephone and internet user guidelines are effective for reducing cyberbullying.

**Psychosocial impacts of cyberbullying**

Cyberbullying is associated with a wide range of psychological and psychosomatic problems, including fear for one’s safety; impaired social and emotional adjustment; poor academic achievement, anxiety, depression and suicidality; poorer physical health; higher absenteeism; and increased loneliness and low self-esteem (Hamm, Newton & Chisholm, 2015). A 3-year Australian study on the consequences of cyberbullying found that mental health problems, including anxiety and depression, were more prevalent for children who reported that they had been cyberbullied compared to those who had been bullied offline (Joint Select Committee on Cyber-Safety, 2011). Cyberbullying has been strongly related to suicidal ideation, more so than traditional bullying (Van Geel, Vedder, & Tanilon, 2014).
The number of children going online, together with the increased mobile phone ownership in younger children, means that the incidence of children and young people at risk of cyberbullying is increasing all the time. For the ‘digital native’ generation, it is likely that their technical skills exceed their social and emotional maturity. The age of children who are subjected to cyberbullying is thus an important consideration in understanding the psychological and social impacts.

A US study on children’s online use found that one-quarter of the children in the study reported using Facebook even though it is a social network meant for teenagers and adults (Blackwell, Lauricella, Conway, & Wartella, 2014). In an EU study, one-quarter of the 9-10-year-olds and one-half of the 11-to-12-year-olds were using Facebook; four out of 10 gave a false age (Livingstone et al., 2014). (In 2018 such usage is likely to have expanded to newer platforms such as Snapchat and Instagram).

Blackwell et al. (2014) point out that underage social media users (8-10-year-olds) are at risk because they are engaging in online social interactions prior to necessary cognitive and emotional development that occurs throughout middle childhood. They warn that this could lead to negative encounters or poor decision-making. At this age, children can also be hypersensitive to criticism and cutting remarks. For example, Aiken (2016) points out that not many children have the social skills to deal with a thousand social network ‘friends’ turning on you, or just passively watching you being cyberbullied.

Teenagers between 12 and 18 are also particularly vulnerable because of the developmental stage of identity formation that they are undergoing (e.g. Shapiro, Spies & Margolin, 2014). During this period, teenagers are experimenting with different identities, trying on new styles, new clothes, new interests. They are building up a sense of themselves that is stable and knowable. This identity relies a great deal on the feedback of others.

Teenagers face a more complicated process of identity formation in the age of the internet, not just because of the sheer volume of feedback they can now receive from their social contacts, but also because they can have a number of different identities or ‘selves’ online depending on how they represent themselves. Also, because of this critical stage of identity formation, and the time and effort that teenagers put into their cyber-selves, being attacked online has the potential to be catastrophic for teenagers (Aiken, 2016).
Young people are not a homogenous group, and some researchers and practitioners have highlighted the particular vulnerability faced by young people who already face discrimination and/or marginalisation, such as young people with a disability, LGBTQI+ and CALD young people, and young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. While there are obvious benefits in a supportive online community, the social vulnerability of being a part of a minority group can be magnified online.

Girls and young women for example, can be particularly harmed when sexual or intimate images are made public or shared online without their consent. Research has shown that media technology and social networking sites are often used as vehicles in the perpetration of gendered sexual violence targeting women (Walker et al., 2013).

Young LGBTQI+ people may also be at high risk of being bullied by their peers both on and offline. Hinduja and Patchin (2011) have pointed to differences in homophobic bullying from other forms of bullying, such as being more difficult to challenge, due to teacher fear of a backlash from parents or community if they challenge homophobia, or perhaps fear of being labelled or targeted themselves; the difficulty for same-sex attracted young people to access support if they are experiencing bullying due to the need to disclose their sexual preference; and the likelihood that the alienation same-sex-attracted young people experience is more extreme (for example after disclosing their sexuality they may lose the support of their parents).

Similarly, those from migrant and refugee backgrounds as well as young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are at greater risk of experiencing cyber-racism, which can range from abusive language to discriminatory treatment to violence motivated by race.

The Youth Affairs Council of Victoria (2009) cites UK research highlighting that:
- approximately 80% of students with an intellectual disability are bullied, and
- cyberbullying of people with a disability often happens under the guise of humour, making it harder to detect.

It is important that efforts to enhance online safety encompass measures to support these young people and address discrimination online.

Those who bully others are also negatively impacted by their bullying behaviour. Research has indicated that both cyberbullying and
cybervictimisation are associated with psychiatric and psychosomatic problems, with those most harmed being those who are both cyberbullies and cybervictims (Sourander, et al, 2010). This indicates the need for new strategies for cyberbullying prevention and intervention.

Protecting children and young people from cyberbullying

Adults, including governments and institutions, have a responsibility to protect the rights of children, and this includes in cyberspace where children are spending increasing amounts of their time, at increasing risk from a range of developmental, psychological, emotional, sexual, criminal, and other harms. Aiken (2016) argues that the four main principles of the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (devotion to the best interests of the child; nondiscrimination; the right to life, survival and development; and respect for the views of the child) are being broken by the presence of an unregulated internet, and that all parties involved are collectively participating in the abuse of children’s rights.

Addressing cyberbullying requires all stakeholders to be involved, including young people, parents, schools and communities. Where parents may see firsthand the impact of cyberbullying, in many respects they may have the least control at minimising harm, or power to prevent it. For example, the ubiquitous use of technology makes monitoring young people’s behaviour online almost impossible now. As Aiken (2016) argues, ‘parents alone cannot police our youth in cyberspace’. Government regulation and policy has an important role. In the next section we therefore start with Government actions, before moving on to look at some of the better school and community-based programs that have been developed.

Government action

While the internet was never designed for children, governments and technology companies are now starting to develop better ways to protect children from online harm. Governance strategies that are already being trialed, which we recommend the Taskforce investigate, include:

- Increasing the use of age verification and age restriction.
- Legislation that makes hate speech a crime, and stipulates that networks allowing hate speech be regarded in the law as accomplices in those crimes.
- Making child-safety filters compulsory.
One of the more recent and innovative strategies is the use of algorithms to detect and warn about cyberbullying. Algorithms can be created to detect bullying online content using a simple formula which takes into account content, direction, internal and frequency of antisocial behaviour, bullying or harassment online (e.g., the Aiken algorithm - Aiken, 2016). According to Aiken, algorithms can be used to automatically detect escalation in a cyberbullying sequence, and then digital messages can be sent to warn the victim and offer support, as well as alerts sent to parents or carers alerting them to the problem. There are many other potential uses for cyberbullying algorithms, like sending digital deterrents to the cyberbully, or collecting evidence of crimes for prosecution.

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**Recommendation 2:** The Queensland Government, through the Taskforce, should work with the Federal Government, particularly the office of the E-Safety Commissioner, to address cyberbullying on a national as well as state level.

**School-based interventions**

To date, few programs addressing cyberbullying have been empirically tested, and there is limited evidence to guide the effective prevention of cyberbullying among young people (Snakenborg, Van Acker, & Gable, 2011). Australian research (Cross et al., 2015) has found that approximately 50% of school staff do not feel sufficiently skilled to respond to cyberbullying.

The few studies of school-based interventions to prevent cyberbullying that have been completed do, however, show some promise. Cross et al. (2016) conducted a group randomized controlled trial on Australian teenagers to measure the longitudinal impact of the Cyber Friendly Schools Program (CFSP) over a couple of years. This intervention targeted the online context in which 13-14-year-old students interact. It took a whole-school approach, with training students, student cyber leaders, pastoral care staff, classroom teachers and parents/carers. The program was associated with significantly greater declines in the odds of involvement in cyber - victimization and perpetration from pre - to the first post - test, but no other differences were evident between the intervention and control group. Despite a high level of
interest from schools, teachers were reported to have implemented only one third of the program content. Although the CFSP results are promising, the authors concluded that more work is needed to build teacher capacity and self-efficacy to effectively implement cyberbullying programs.

Doane et al. (2016) studied the effectiveness of a video program to increase cyberbullying knowledge and empathy toward cyberbullying victims, and to reduce cyberbullying intentions and behaviour in American college students. These findings showed that a brief cyberbullying video was capable of improving, at one-month follow-up, cyberbullying knowledge, cyberbullying perpetration behaviour, and constructs known to predict cyberbullying perpetration. Considering the low cost and ease with which a video-based prevention/intervention program can be delivered, this type of approach should be considered to reduce cyberbullying.

A program called “Media Heroes” has shown some effectiveness in empowering schools to address cyberbullying in classroom settings without costly support from the outside. Schultze-Krumbholz et al. (2016) aimed to change attitudes and beliefs about cyberbullying by providing a cohort of students in Germany with definitions and the legal background of cyberbullying acts, as well as the impact of cyberbullying on the victim and of promoting empathy with the victim. Media Heroes further aimed to improve social and online skills by fostering cognitive and affective empathy and media literacy, and then providing specific action alternatives. For example, the program promotes empathy by presenting students different cyberbullying-related stimuli (e.g. text-based stories, news items, videos, plays) and encouraging them to reflect about involved people’s thoughts, motivations and feelings before enacting the situations themselves. The program was delivered by classroom teachers. Results showed that secondary students who took part in the long intervention showed a decrease in cyberbullying behaviours and an increase in empathy in the six-month follow up.

The Finnish bullying prevention program KiVa has also reported some success in reducing cyberbullying, in a study that examined the effectiveness of the program on 9 different types of bullying behaviour (Salmivalli, Kärnä, & Poskiparta, 2011). The KiVa program includes both universal actions like student lessons, an antibullying computer game and an internet forum, as well as targeted actions like discussions with victims and bullies and peer support for victimised classmates. KiVa demonstrated a 36% reduction in bullying which occurred 2–3 times a month or more via the internet and mobile phones, highlighting the value of whole-school programs that address cyberbullying behaviours. Hence, to improve the impact of a cyberbullying
prevention intervention, it may be important to simultaneously nest this intervention in a school program that is also adequately addressing offline bullying.

In addition to specific programs such as those described above, the Cyberbullying Research Center in the US makes a number of general recommendations for schools to prevent cyberbullying that are based on the research being gathered by the Center (Hinduja & Patchin, 2018). Their recommendations include educating the school community about digital citizenship responsibilities, appropriately disciplining students who engage in cyberbullying (including utilization of law enforcement if appropriate), and creating positive, safe and respectful school climates.

**Recommendation 3:** Cyber-safety strategies at all levels should be designed to build on existing strategies that are addressing other forms of bullying and discrimination (such as racism, homophobia or sexual violence), and in school contexts these strategies should form part of a broader student wellbeing, respectful relationships and anti-discrimination policy framework.

**Recommendation 4:** Schools need to be supported and resourced to develop whole-school online safety policies, in collaboration with their students, and to implement evidence-based strategies to address online safety and bullying (e.g., classroom lessons in developing responsible online citizens, teacher training to deal confidently with e-safety concerns, appropriate disciplining, respectful school culture).

**Recommendation 5:** Online safety should be considered within a child and adolescent development framework, whereby the development of respectful and positive relationship skills among young people is encouraged and supported.

**Recommendation 6:** Enhancing online safety for children and young people therefore involves supporting the development of young people as competent online citizens, promoting online literacy, and fostering young people’s ability to critique information and use socially responsible behaviour in communicating online.

**Parental interventions**

While parental monitoring has often been put forward as a solution to help protect children online, the majority of families are unable to provide adequate monitoring or mediation for their children when they are online. It is too much to expect parents to provide almost full-time monitoring when they are also earning a living, feeding the family, running the household, and
caring for the family. The proliferation of handheld devices, and access of internet outside the home, also makes it impossible for parents to monitor their children’s activities. However there are other strategies that can help parents in trying to keep their children safe:

- Asking children and young people about their real world day, and also about their cyber life.
- Talking with children about cyberbullying, the different ways in which it can happen, and what it can feel like if a person is bullied online.
- Talking with young people about identity formation and what it means, and the difference between the real-world self and the cyber self.
- Talking with young people about body image and self-esteem and about the ways in which their use of technology might be helpful or unhelpful to how they (and others) feel about themselves.
- Reminding children that they have a right to feel safe at all times both online and offline.
- Talking with children about how they can protect themselves from bullying, how to block and delete a sender, how not to respond to anyone who is being aggressive or hurtful online, and how to save any evidence and show it to a trusted person who can help.
- Encouraging children to talk to you if they feel uncomfortable, bullied or intimidated, or if they witness it happening to someone else, and to not try to handle things that go wrong in their cyber life on their own.

What young people can do

As direct victims and perpetrators of cyberbullying young people have an important role to play in preventing cyberbullying and supporting each other.

Recent research which surveyed 5700 young people about their own experiences of what helped stop cyberbullying behaviours identified a range of strategies young people themselves used (and could use) (Hinduja & Patchin, 2017). Strategies included blocking the cyberbully, ignoring the cyberbullying, getting parents involved, taking a temporary break from technology or shutting down their account altogether to fend off the online bullying; reporting abusive behaviour on the website, app, or game.

Cyberbullying almost never happens in isolation, and while cyberbullying may occur more privately, often other students know about it and thus have the option of intervening and to develop skills and techniques to respond to bullying as bystanders. Peer education and intervention programs therefore should be developed and adequately resourced as a key part of any cyber-safety initiative.
There are many resources available that promote pro-social behaviour and online safety. The APS recommends that the Taskforce refer to the following organisations and resources:

- **Kidsmatter** and **Mindmatters** have developed and collated resources on bullying and cyberbullying
- **The e-safety Commissioner**
- **The World Economic Forum Agenda**: 8-digital-skills-we-must-teach-our-children
- **The APS** has content on bullying, online safety, sexting, and sexualisation of young people.

*Recommendation 7: An engagement strategy to involve young people in understanding cyber-threats and in designing, implementing and evaluating cyber-safety initiatives should be developed to ensure children and young people have meaningful input into decisions and policies that affect them.*

**The role of psychologists**

Psychology is a discipline that systematically addresses the many facets of human experience and functioning at individual, family and societal levels. Psychology covers many highly specialised areas, but all psychologists share foundational training in human development and the constructs of healthy functioning.

Psychologists are experts in child development, and social and emotional wellbeing. As such they have been concerned and actively involved in researching and addressing the harmful impacts of bullying and more recently cyberbullying.

Along with others, psychologists are well-placed to inform policy development via practice and research in the field, as well as develop programs that enhance wellbeing and minimise harm.

In particular, many psychologists are employed within the educational system and well placed to work with schools to support victims and families and design behaviour change programs for bullies, as well as implementing whole-school policies and strategies.
Conclusion

In summary, the APS acknowledges that online harm is a significant individual, community and public health issue, and commends the Taskforce for its focus on reducing harm to children and young people. Respectful relationships are integral to wellbeing, and bullying has many harmful effects. The prevalence and scope of cyberbullying is especially concerning, and the 24/7 nature of the digital world means that cyberbullying can be particularly impactful, and difficult to prevent. The APS also acknowledges that cyberbullying is often an extension of other forms of discrimination and that any form of discrimination needs to be addressed and not tolerated. The APS therefore encourages the Taskforce to address cyberbullying as part of a broader strategy to promote pro-social behaviour, while acknowledging the unique features of a potentially limitless environment that reaches beyond the control of individuals and local institutions. The APS recommends that the Taskforce engage with all stakeholders to develop and implement strategies to reduce and respond to cyberbullying, that is, with young people, parents/guardians and educators, and most importantly, with government legislators empowered to tackle large-scale and global digital threats.

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