




Barnardos
Online Safety
Programme

Cyberbullying: in children's own words

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Cyberbullying: in children's own words

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FOREWORD

Suzanne Connolly,
CEO Barnardos Ireland

During the Covid pandemic children were given ready access to laptops and digital devices to enable them to learn and stay connected to friends and school-mates. This report suggests that one of the unintended consequences of the increase in online time is an increase in cyberbullying, as reported by children.

Technology can be intuitive and easy to use, but often children are not equipped with the social skills to understand the nuanced communication online. Children may know how to use various apps or games online, but they might not always know how to behave online.

With support from Google.org, our preventative Online Safety Programmes delivered online safety training to over 23,000 children in 2021. We spoke with principals and teachers in these schools who expressed concern at the increased amount of mean messaging that happened in various games or social media apps in the evenings. Teachers explain that these online disputes can cause issues during school hours too as class mates fall out with each other over messages that are sent the night before, and are then upset in school.

At Barnardos, we value the rights of the child and especially their right to be heard in matters that affect them. This is why focus group reports like this are so important, to give children a voice and to learn from what they say. In our parent workshops about online safety, our main goal is to encourage parents to have an open dialogue with their children about their life online. We take a positive approach to online safety and we give parents 'conversation starters' to help them check in with their child about the issues they face online. However, our learning from this focus group is that children still fear the reaction their parents might give if they tell them about cyberbullying. This means we need to work harder to share this information with parents and equip parents with the skills to help their child navigate the online world in a positive and resilient way.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Barnardos Online Safety Programme has delivered workshops about online safety to primary aged children and their parents since 2014. In September 2019, Barnardos partnered with Google.org to expand our programme and to reach more schools. Our goal is to reach 1,000 schools or 82,000 children by October 2024.

At Barnardos, we believe in children's rights and the right of children to be heard. In the ever-changing landscape of online safety, it is important that we ensure our workshops are current, relevant and up to date for the children we deliver our workshops to. This is why we host focus groups with children and young people in an effort to hear their lived experiences online.

Executive summary

It was clear from our focus group that children aged 8-12 had experience with cyberbullying. From the 272 children surveyed, below are the most noteworthy stats:

- **62%** of the children surveyed have seen other people being cyberbullied
- **53%** of the children surveyed have been cyberbullied themselves (once or many times)
- **18%** have been cyberbullied in a way that really affected their ability to learn and to feel safe at school
- **25%** of the children surveyed responded that they had cyberbullied others

Children seemed to have a very strong concept on how to define cyberbullying and why other children might cyberbully. However, when they were asked to decipher between sample posts that could be 'cyberbullying' or 'just a joke', this exercise was a lot harder for them. They understood that cyberbullying can be quite nuanced and some people may be more sensitive than others.

What was noteworthy was that children don't seem to tell their parents if they are being cyberbullied. **60%** of those surveyed said they would never tell a parent if they were cyberbullied. One girl, in particular, explained that she didn't know how to approach this conversation with her parents if she were cyberbullied. This was important learning for the Online Safety Programme and a new approach in workshops was taken as a result.

When asked on how best to improve the internet, the children shared some interesting ideas on how to make blocking and reporting more effective.

Rationale for consultation

Since the pandemic and the return to face to face workshops, the Barnardos Online Safety Programme have heard from schools that they have noticed an increase in cyberbullying among their students. For this reason, in May 2022, we held our second 'Plugged in Switched off' event, which was dedicated to understanding more about cyberbullying. This webinar targeted principals, parents and professionals working with children and it can be viewed on our website – www.barnardos.ie/pluggedin. However, following the event, we received feedback that participants would like to understand more about cyberbullying from a child's perspective.

To investigate this, we hosted 7 focus groups over the month of June 2022. We wanted to hear directly from children what they understood cyberbullying to be, as well as how, where and when it tends to happen these days. We also wanted to understand if children had ideas on how to prevent cyberbullying, or what, in their eyes, might help them if they are cyberbullied. The information given to us in these focus groups will be incorporated in our workshops in schools for both students and parents.

Methodology

In line with our workshops, we spoke to children aged 8-12 (3rd-6th class). There were 8-10 students in our 90-minute focus groups. In total, we spoke to 68 students in our focus groups. Two of our schools were Dublin based and the remaining were Cork based.

- Saint Patrick's Boys' National School, Ringsend, Dublin (5th/6th class)
- Saint Patrick's Girls' National School, Ringsend, Dublin (3rd/4th class)
- Scoil Maria Assumpta, Ballyphehane, Cork City (3rd/4th class)
- Glasheen Boys' School, Cork city (2x 5th class)
- Saint Catherine's National School, Model Farm Road, Cork City (2x 6th class)
- Ballygiblin National School, Gurteenaboul, Co.Cork (5th/6th class)
- Gaelscoil an Tealaigh Naofa, Ballyphehane, Cork City (3rd/4th class)

We held an information session in each school ahead of the focus group. This allowed children time to ask any question they wanted and to make sure they knew what to expect on the day of the focus group. We handed out parental consent forms and we also gave a survey to each student in the class. There were 272 responses to the survey and its results are at the end of this report, on page 17. As our focus groups had only capacity for 10 people, names were drawn out of a hat to be able to take part in the focus group. However, each person we visited during the information session filled out the survey.

Using the Laura Lundy approach to participation, the focus group used various methodologies to engage children. We had ice breaker games, videos, worksheets and discussion groups to cater to all abilities. We also offered a variety of ways to answer questions (art work/spoken word) to suit different learning styles. At the end of each focus group, we thanked each child and offered a drink and a snack as a treat for being involved.

2. CYBERBULLYING: IN CHILDREN'S OWN WORDS

Positives and negatives of the internet

As an introductory exercise, children were asked what they liked about the internet and also, what they didn't like. They could easily list many positives about being online, especially as a lifeline during COVID times.

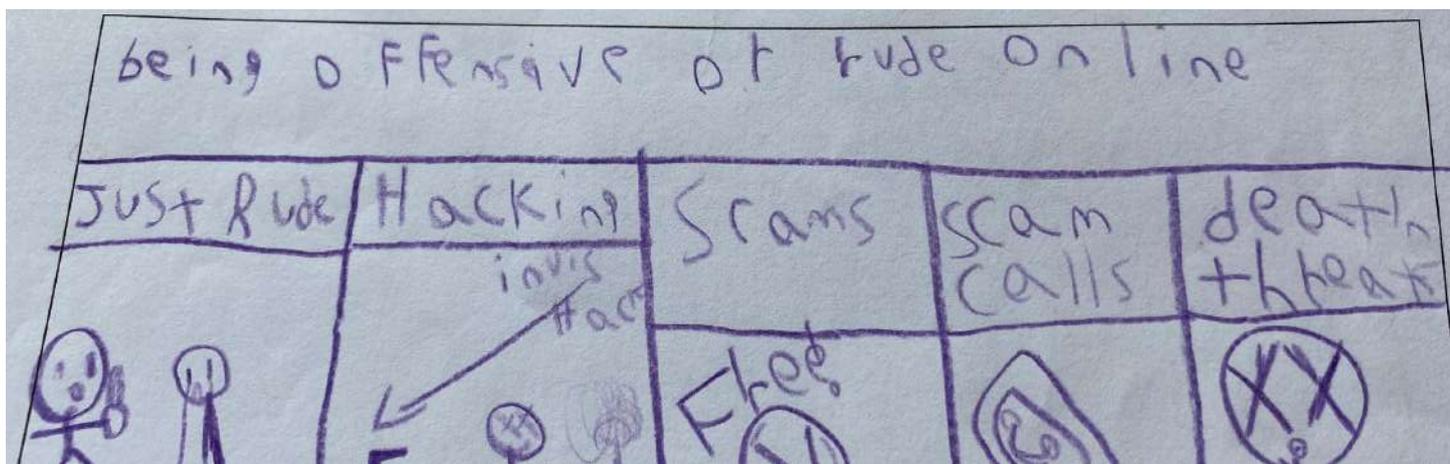
"Limitless possibilities online, can do whatever you want, it's your playground." - Boy, 11

"Can watch stuff, can learn tutorials, virtually a land with millions of opportunities." - Boy, 10

"Say if someone is worried about their fitness, they could watch a video about some fella losing weight and that could inspire them." - Boy, 9

"Great way to contact others if in hospital or far away." - Girl, 8

"During lockdown I was suffering a lot when it came to being lonely because you had your parents to talk to and all that but it was kind of nice just to have like somebody to actually play with online and like, it was nice to interact with people I should say. And that's why I just started to do like on the app like Discord to discover and meet new people." - Boy, 10



Similarly, they had a lot to say about the negatives of being online too, especially on the topic of scams and being hacked.

“Some people are making accounts when it is not actually you.” - Girl, 8

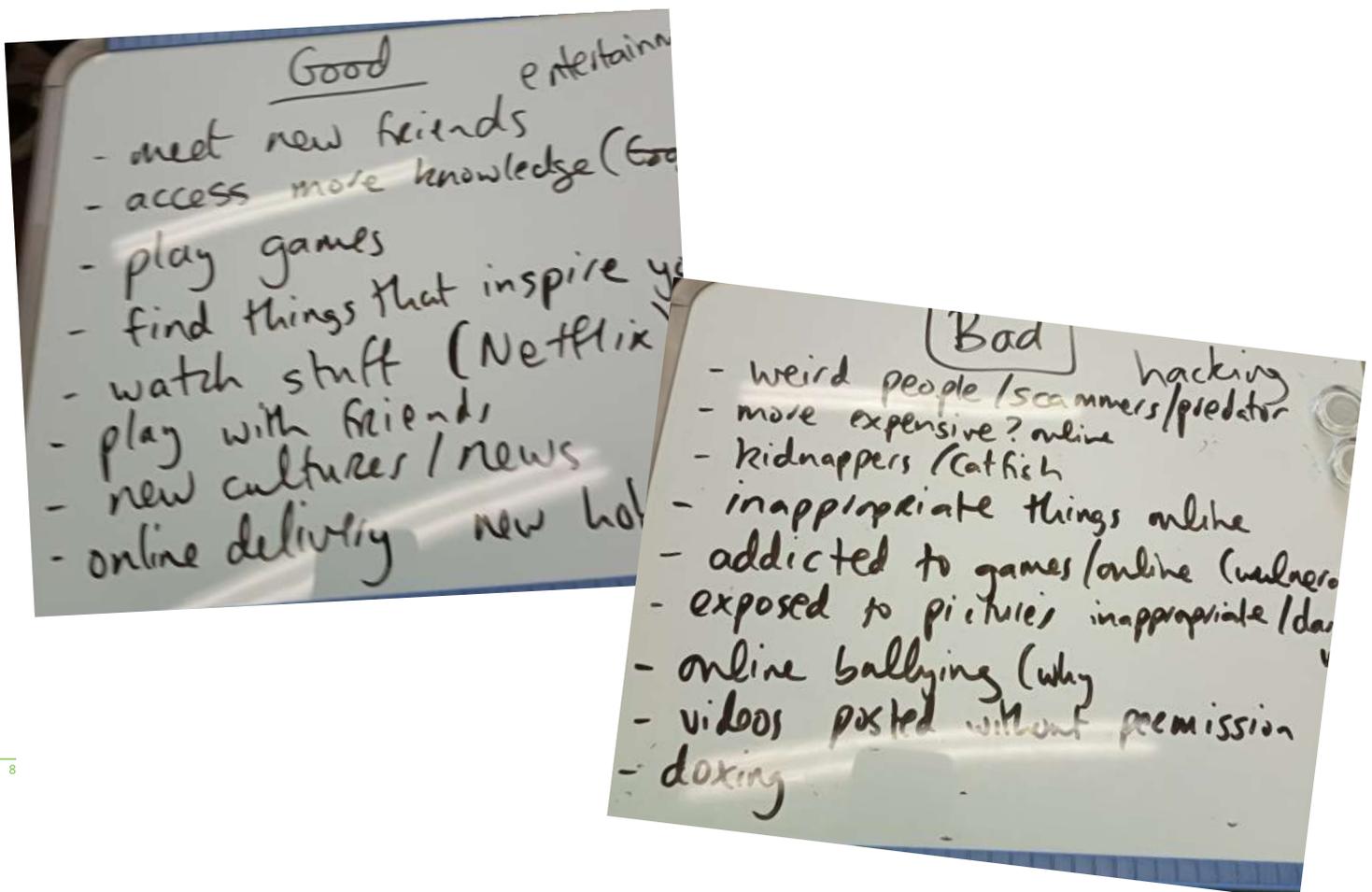
“So a bad thing that actually happened to me the other day – you can post like what you’re doing on an app called Snapchat and my friend put up an embarrassing video of me from like a couple of years ago.”

- Boy, 11

“Can be exposed to videos that are inappropriate and once you like see those pictures can’t really get rid of it, it’s just there.” - Boy, 11

“Look at people on instagram or facebook and then you feel bad about yourself, pictures are photoshopped, not real life.” - Girl, 11

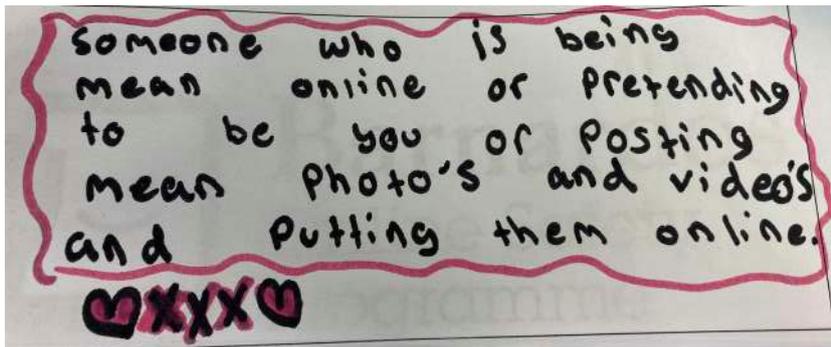
“You can get addicted to being online and you just want to finish other activities quicker to get back online.” - Boy, 9



Cyberbullying: a definition

Children were asked to explain what they understood by the word 'cyberbullying'. Many agreed and said 'mean messages, hacking, mean videos sent without your permission, being a griefer – where another player intentionally kills you repeatedly while playing video games'.

"Maybe it could be in a game someone could say something really mean to you and hurt your feelings, but like they don't know that but they just think it's funny for them." - **Girl, 8**



How and where cyberbullying happens

When asked to give examples of how and where cyberbullying can happen, many children explained it took place on games or on social media. Although age restrictions of 13 apply to most social media platforms (Tik Tok, Snapchat), it was outside of the scope of these focus groups to address this. However, it was clear that most children we spoke to were on various accounts underage. The children gave many examples on what aspects of cyberbullying they had seen or what had happened to them.

"It can be on Roblox (mostly) or Tik Tok or any social platform to be honest." - **Girl, 9**

"Mean texts, unfair gameplay, or saying mean stuff on a voice chat." - **Boy, 10**

*“Someone could post a video or picture of artwork and the comments could say ‘ewww so ugly’ or ‘that’s so bad, it looks like a 6 year old drew that’.” - **Girl, 8***

*“Could be playing a game and not doing the best, I remember I was playing a game, and someone messaged me and said oh you’re so bad, just quit the game, and I only just got the game.” - **Boy, 12***

Trash talking in online games

*“When I used to play Fortnite and that and I wasn’t the best at it maybe I felt like older people were like, Oh you’re so bad and all this’ they know we are younger cos can hear your voice and if talking to them, I know they are older from their profile.” - **Boy, 11***

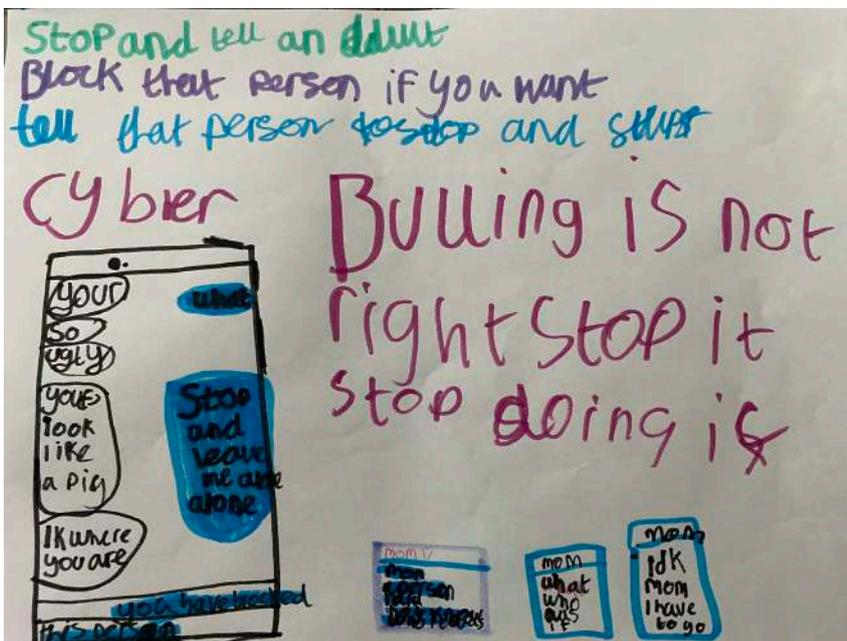
*“Cos in Roblox there’s this thing called Robux and you have to buy them but when you start playing you don’t have any and your avatar just has a girl with red hair & a denim jacket and some people think that that is ugly and they say ‘you’re poor, buy more Robux’ and they might say ‘you’re probably poor in real life, you can’t even afford Robox.’” - **Girl, 9***

'Rage quitting' in games

"Sometimes if playing Fifa and you're losing and have no chance of scoring, you just press forfeit button."

- Boy, 10

"I kill you, you start screaming at the computer, fling your controller, that's me playing Fifa." - **Boy, 8**



How cyberbullying makes you feel

The children were quick to provide descriptions of how cyberbullying had or might make them feel. They said it felt demoralising when playing video games that someone would keep trying to kill you on purpose.

"Why bother even trying? They keep doing it, find you and killing you" (in games) - **Boy, 8**

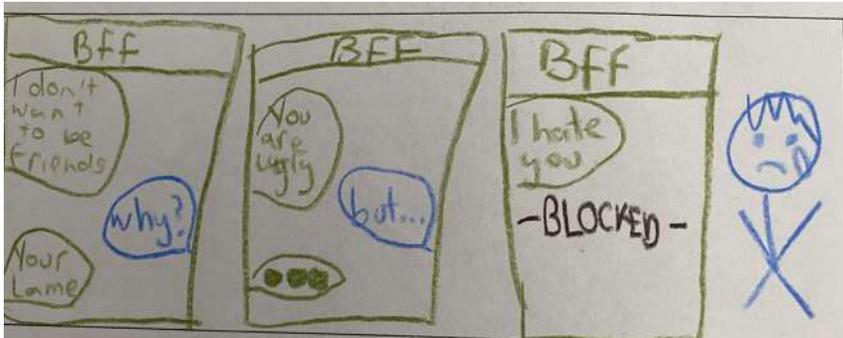
"Lonely, cos you try and expect that someone would come over and say don't do that." - **Boy, 9**

"Sad, less safe on the internet, going to school be sad, puts you in a bad mood, not want to talk to anyone." - **Girl, 10**

"Depends on the type of person you are and depends on the messages." - **Boy, 12**

Why do children cyberbully?

When asked why they thought people cyberbullied, the children indicated that they felt that there are not consequences online in the same way that there are in real life. This, they believe, makes cyberbullying easier to do.



“Because they know you don’t know who they are and you can’t really tell anybody and they won’t be told off because you don’t know who they are.” - Girl, 9

They also showed insight into underlying reasons why someone would bully.

“Peer pressure to fit in, others playing games.” - Boy, 10

“Might be bad things going on at home.” - Boy, 11

One of the children showed an understanding that this behaviour can be connected to the child’s experience.

“Like for example their Da could be a bullyer, their Da might be saying those words and they take it from their Da, they might not realise how bad they are.” - Boy, 12

They also showed recognition that cyberbullying can have serious consequences.

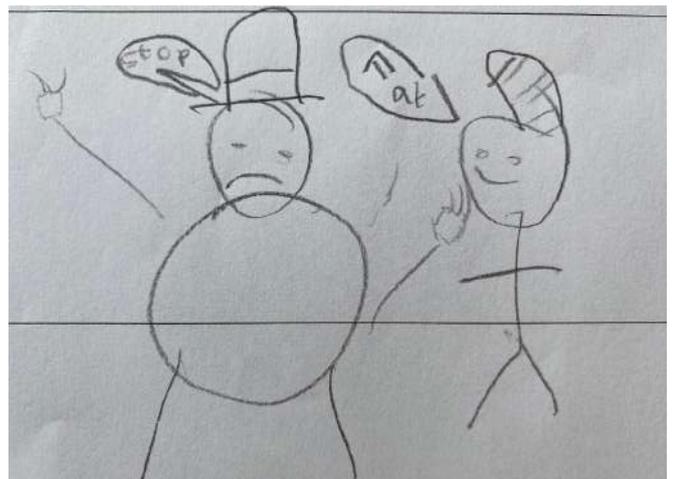
“Cases were people were cyberbullied a lot and took their own life which is really bad.” - Boy, 11

If you were cyberbullied, who would you tell?

It was concerning to hear that many of the children spoken to wouldn’t tell their parents if they were being cyberbullied. There was a consensus that if the cyberbullying was deemed ‘serious enough’, only then would they get parents involved.

“If it was just for a day or two I probably wouldn’t but if it was going on a while I probably would.”

- Boy, 10



Of particular significance was the fact that one girl said she didn't know how to talk to her parents.

"See that's the thing – sometimes you just don't know – it's easier to say I'm going to talk to them than actually doing it." - **Girl, 9**

This highlights a need for children to be aware of ways to start a conversation about being cyberbullied or other difficult conversations like this with their parents. They did recognise that if they don't tell anyone, it can get worse.

"And it gets worser and worser if you don't tell someone." - **Girl, 8**

When asked why they wouldn't tell parents or an adult they were being cyberbullied, a lot of children admitted they worried their devices would be taken away from them.

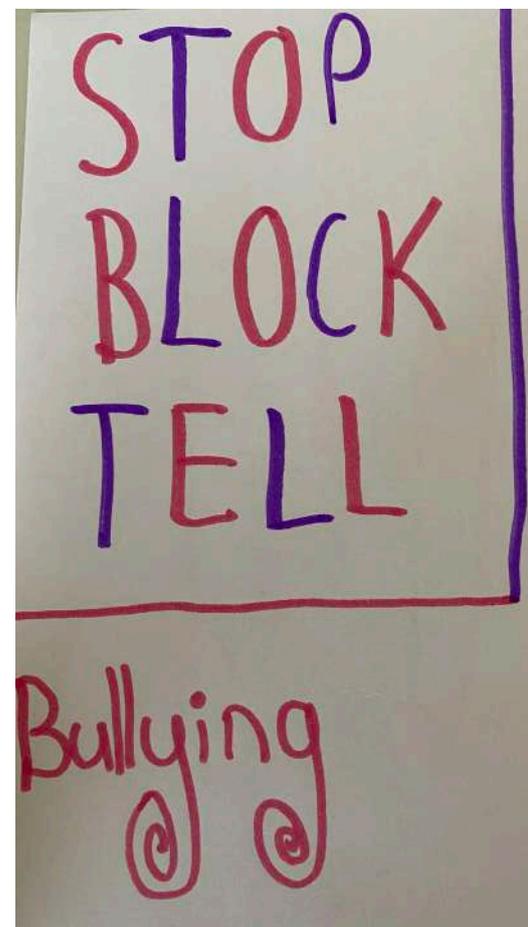
"I wouldn't talk to my Dad cos my Dad doesn't approve of me being online like on Tik Tok, Snapchat, I ask my Mam to download those apps because my Dad would then ban me." - **Girl, 10**

They also feared the person finding out that they had told.

"I feel like I'd be worried like say someone was cyberbullying me if my Mam knew their Mam they'd know I had told." - **Boy, 10**

How to help/prevent cyberbullying?

In one of the exercises in the focus group, children were asked to read different scenarios and assess for themselves if they thought it was 'cyberbullying' or 'just a joke'. This caused a lot of discussion and it was clear from the group that while some people thought the situation was 'just a joke', others in the group deemed it more serious and believed it to be cyberbullying. They recognised that something might not be intended to be mean but it can be perceived that way.



“People can get confused really easily – you might think it’s funny, they think its cyberbullying.”

- Girl, 10

“Sometimes if you text something and you don’t mean it to be mean, but your friend kind of took it to be mean cos like in text it’s harder to write exactly what you’re saying but in a phone call it’s easier to say.” - Girl, 9

What was concerning to see is that there seemed to be a general acceptance of ‘trash talk’ online, especially in gaming. Some of the children felt that ‘you shouldn’t let it bother you too much’.

“If someone is insulting you in a game I still wouldn’t call it cyberbullying, because bullying in real life will definitely have real consequences but bullying online is completely different. Like, if someone insults you or anything you really shouldn’t be offended if somebody says you suck at this game – just take it in your stride and move on.”- Boy, 12

“It all depends on what kind of trash talking they are using’ they could just be calling you bad or stupid and you could do something by accident then that ticks them off, they could start saying some really really bad stuff to you.” - Boy, 11

In general, when asked how to prevent cyberbullying, it was clear that many of the groups had done lots of previous work in SPHE on this topic. One group even had a cyberbullying song that they had learned with a previous teacher and were able to sing. The simple messages of ‘stop, block and tell’ seemed to be embedded and this was clear from their artwork.

As per the messages of the Online Safety Programme, the children highlighted the importance of being an upstander. There were many stories and anecdotes about how helpful it was when they stood up for a friend who had been cyberbullied, or when a friend stuck up for them.



One of the children described an incident in a whatsapp group where others arranged to meet her but when she got there discovered they had arranged it to 'bully her and throw things at her' Girl 9. She explained that although this wasn't nice to experience, she hadn't attended this meeting alone and the friends who accompanied her made her feel 'strong' and that 'someone has your back'.

In our focus groups, we learned that mean messages can be shared in games, especially if a person is a beginner and doesn't know how to play as well as others yet. One girl explained that she saw someone being mean to others and she intervened and said 'stop'.

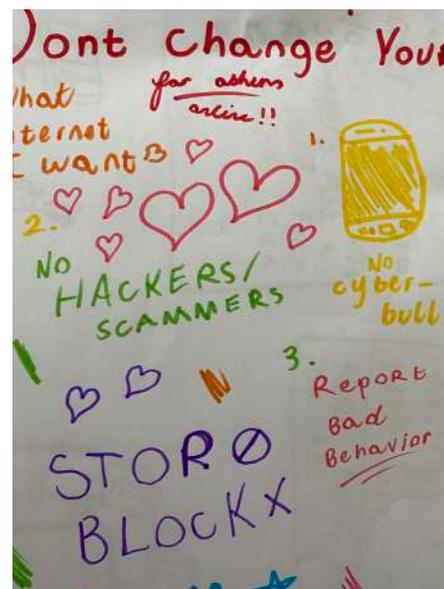
"I was playing this game Bloxberg on Roblox.... I saw someone in the game.... she was in the beginner of it.... this guy was like 'ew what are you wearing – how did you even get in, you must have hacked it cos you don't have a good avatar'- I went over to them in the game and said stop."

- **Girl, 8**

3. CHILDREN'S IDEAS ON HOW TO IMPROVE THE INTERNET

Our final section of the focus group asked children their ideas on how to improve the internet for children. Many children discussed the need for **improved 'blocking and reporting'** functions in games and platforms. They explained the varying level of effectiveness of these functions:

"So I was in a game and someone said do you wanna trade so I traded them and they gave me a legendary pet and I gave them two vehicles that you can't get anywhere. But what they gave me wasn't a pet it, it was a teddy bear so I reported them but it wouldn't work, I reported them again and it did work then." - **Girl, 10**



One boy described that the process of **'false reporting'**. He explained that he was getting 'mean messages' from someone in a game and so, he reported this boy. However, then he found out that this boy had then reported him, which he found very frustrating.

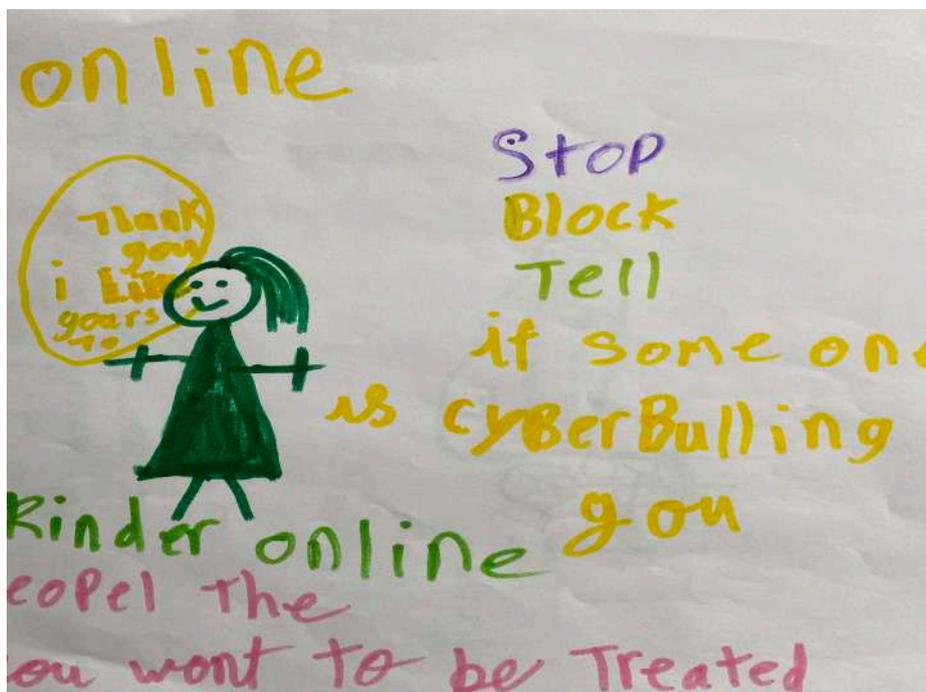
"Blocking helps a little bit, Instagram gives option to 'block someone and any more accounts they make.'" - Boy, 11

One of the children suggested that it would be good to have this option on all games/platforms as otherwise if someone is blocked they “can just keep making a new account, and it keeps happening”. - **Boy, 10**

Another child asked for more transparency and clarification around what you can and can't report. He explained that it can be difficult to understand why a report doesn't violate the community standards of the game. He said it was frustrating on Tik Tok that he would make a report and get a message back saying ‘no violation was found’ back. Nothing would change, but he didn't understand why.

One boy advised not to use the voice chat available.

“Just don't like talk to strangers online, like in Fortnite, you can go like on a team with just strangers. And there is like a voice chat available, but I never do that. Then they could be like scamming me or they could just be like, just being mean and stuff. So I just like turn off my voice chat when I am. And I don't talk to anyone.” - **Boy, 11**



Cyberbullying Survey

Children's Focus Groups

Respondents 272 children (3rd to 6th class)
June 2022

Summary of answers

62% of the children surveyed have seen other people being cyberbullied

53% of the children surveyed have been cyberbullied themselves (once or many times)

18% have been cyberbullied in a way that really affected their ability to learn and to feel safe at school

25% of the children surveyed responded that they had cyberbullied others

How did the cyberbullying happen?

- 36% said that someone had posted hurtful comments online about them
- 16% said that someone had posted mean or hurtful pictures or videos online of them
- 47% said someone made false reports about them in a game
- 39% said someone was talking behind their back in a separate group chat and I found out about it
- 54% said someone had excluded them from group chats/games online
- 17% said someone pretended to be them online and acted in a way that was mean or hurtful to them

I have cyberbullied others

- 25% responded that they had cyberbullied others
- 19% responded that they had posted mean or hurtful comments about someone online or in a game
- 6% said that they had posted a mean or hurtful picture or video online of someone

Knowledge of blocking/reporting

- 90% responded that they know how to use the block/report function
- 81% have used the block/report function in a game or app online

Who would you tell if you were cyberbullied?

	Never	Sometimes	Often	Always
Parents	60%	20%	15%	5%
Older relative (older sister, brother, cousin etc)	33%	39%	14%	14%
Friends	24%	42%	20%	14%
Teacher	56%	26%	9%	9%
No-one	48%	30%	15%	7%



Only **5%** said they would **ALWAYS** tell their parents

What are you worried about online?

	Not at all worried	Slightly worried	Fairly worried	Very worried
An embarrassing picture or video of you being shared around	27%	33%	22%	18%
Mean messages or being excluded from groups by friends you know	25%	31%	22%	22%
Mean messages from strangers online in games or on social media	42%	21%	18%	19%
Seeing something scary or upsetting online	42%	27%	14%	17%
Not knowing if things online are true or not (fake news)	42%	31%	17%	10%
Being scammed, or getting a virus	20%	23%	25%	32%
Privacy concerns - being hacked	17%	22%	22%	39%
Not knowing what to do when you see cyberbullying happening	41%	29%	20%	10%
Becoming addicted to video gaming/ devices	52%	24%	12%	12%

Barnardos Online Safety Programme

The Barnardos Online Safety Programme, with support from Google.org, delivers workshops about online safety to primary schools in Ireland. If you would like to avail of workshops for your school, please email us at onlinesafety@barnardos.ie or fill out our booking form on our website – www.barnardos.ie/osp



Barnardos
Online Safety
Programme

Barnardos' mission is to deliver services and work with families, communities, and partners to transform the lives of vulnerable children who are affected by adverse childhood experiences such as abuse, parental mental health, neglect, separation, bereavement and addiction. Barnardos' vision is where every child can reach their full potential - because childhood lasts a lifetime.

Barnardos has supported children and their families for 60 years.

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