



## What is Cyber bullying?

By **Chris Webster,**

Final-year Bachelor of Information Technology student at UTS and creator of [www.cyberbullying.info](http://www.cyberbullying.info)

Cyber bullying refers to bullying through information and communication technologies, mediums such as mobile phone text messages, emails, phone calls, internet chat rooms, instant messaging – and the latest trend – social networking websites such as MySpace, Facebook and video sharing sites like YouTube. Cyber bullying is a fast growing trend that experts believe is more harmful than typical schoolyard bullying. Nearly all of us can be contacted 24/7 via the internet or our mobile phones. Victims can be reached anytime and anywhere. For many children, home is no longer a refuge from the bullies. “Children can escape threats and abuse in the classroom, only to find text messages and emails from the same tormentors when they arrive home.”



**“There’s no safe place anymore. You can be bullied 24/7...even in the privacy of your own bedroom.”<sup>i</sup>**

Recent surveys have shown that one-third of teenagers have had mean, threatening or embarrassing things said about them online. 15% have had their supposedly ‘private’ conversations posted online for anyone to see, 13% have had rumours spread about them online, and another 13% have received threatening or aggressive emails, instant messages and text messages. Interestingly, those who frequently use social networking sites are more often bullied than those who don’t.<sup>ii</sup>

**Online social networking sites have become increasingly popular with children, especially young teens, as a place where they can meet other people, communicate, and exchange information.<sup>iii</sup>**



No type of bullying is harmless. In extreme incidents, cyber bullying has led teenagers to suicide. Most victims, however, suffer shame, embarrassment, anger, depression and withdrawal. Cyber bullying is often seen as anonymous, and the nature of the internet allows it to spread quickly to hundreds and thousands of people.

In some cases, it can constitute criminal behaviour. The inappropriate use of the internet, telephones or text messages is a criminal offence, carrying up to 10 years on jail.

**“Cyber bullying has the same insidious effects as any kind of bullying, turning children away from school, friendships, and in tragic instances, life itself.”<sup>iv</sup>**

Parents often tell their children to turn off the mobile phones or stay off the computer. Many parents don’t understand that the internet and mobile phone act as a social lifeline for teenagers to their peer group. Victims often don’t tell their parents because they think their parents will only make the problem worse, or – that they might even confiscate their mobile phone or take away their internet access – removing that social lifeline. While bullying is something that is often ‘under the radar’ of adults, cyber bullying is even more so. Teenagers are increasingly communicating in ways that are often unknown by adults and away from their supervision. They organise their social lives through these mediums. Their friendships are made and broken over these mediums.

**“The challenge is in raising awareness to such a level that people – victims and witnesses – will feel comfortable enough to speak up.”<sup>v</sup>**

‘So what can we do about it?’ many people wonder. Education and awareness is the key. Parents and teachers need to understand the problem, and understand the technology. In an age of influences such as reality TV programmes, where participants are harassed and ridiculed, children need to understand that this is not the way they should relate to each other. If awareness of these issues is raised to such a level among their parents, teachers and friends, children will begin to feel that they can talk about cyber bullying, and the problem will come out of the mobile phone inboxes, out of the computers and into the open.

**“A third of those who experience cyber bullying do not report it. If we are to succeed in preventing bullying, we need to break the climate of silence in which it thrives by empowering children and young people to speak out and seek help.”<sup>vi</sup>**

<sup>i</sup> “Electronic Bullying”, 2005, *Dolly*, April, Issue 414, page 90

<sup>ii</sup> “Cyberbullying and Online Teens”, Pew Internet and American Life Project, produced June 27 2007 <<http://www.pewinternet.org>>

<sup>iii</sup> Massachusetts Attorney General, 2006, “AG Reilly warns parents about the potential dangers of children using social networking sites such as MySpace and Xanga”, <<http://www.ago.state.ma.us>>, viewed 15th November 2006

<sup>iv</sup> “What can schools do about cyberbullying?”, 2005, *Principals’ Digests*, Volume 11 Number 19. Published Hamilton, New Zealand

<sup>v</sup> McDougall, B, “Victim of a cyberbully”, *The Daily Telegraph*, Sydney, 23rd February 2005, pg. 29

<sup>vi</sup> BBC News. (2006, July 25). Government acts on cyber-bullies. Retrieved May 15, 2007, from BBC News | Education: <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/5210886.stm>>