

# SENDING CYBERBULLIES INTO SPACE



**B**ullies have existed since humans first dragged their knuckles off the ground and found they could form a fist. The schoolyard environment is far from immune.

Now technology has provided a new medium with which to intimidate and cyberbullying has become a highly unwelcomed side-effect. And it can have far-reaching and highly targeted effects. A child's humiliation and hurt can now be streamed to limitless computers and camera phones.

Dr Marilyn Campbell is a psychologist and teacher specialising in anxiety disorders in young people. Working at the Queensland University of Technology, she is considered one of the country's leading experts on cyberbullying and is currently spearheading a national study into its ramifications.

Dr Campbell says that bullying is all about humiliation and rejection of a person, an "intent to hurt" in a relationship where there is an imbalance of power. This should not be confused with fighting between equals.

"We can only hypothesise at this point whether the effect of cyberbullying is worse than face-to-face bullying – but there is certainly a thought that consequences of cyberbullying could be more severe because of the 24/7 nature of the medium," Dr Campbell says.

"There's no real escape – even at home you can be threatened or invaded. Cyberbullies have a much wider audience, and of course there's the power of the written word or pictures – seeing or reading something about another person, the victim, means it sears into the brain much more than just hearing it."

Ironically, despite the instant effect of cyberbullying, Dr Campbell says there's evidence to suggest that it does not have the instant gratification of face-to-face bullying.

"Bullies have to wait to see the reaction of their work," she says. "This has shown there may be a stepping-up of the frequency of bullying – more taunts are sent, it's more pronounced, to make up for the wait. The critical issue is

the extent of the damage done to the target."

Experts have categorised bullying into teasing, exclusion, physical bullying and harassment. Elements of all of the above translate into cyberbullying, often more powerfully.

Often cyberbullying comes out of the blue and from totally unexpected sources. For example, a child might have had a schoolyard tiff with his/her group of friends. In normal circumstances in a couple of days all is forgotten and everyone is friends again.

But in cyberspace snide remarks are displayed for all to see. It's easy to "take back" comments in person, but not so easy if you've gone to MySpace and called someone terrible names and accused them wrongfully of bad behaviour.

A recent US study has shown girls are among the worst offenders in cyberbullying, stating: "very often it's the girls who use the Internet to bully other girls. It's called relational aggression. It's the way girls bully as opposed to the way boys bully. With girls, it's more

insidious. They use relationships as weapons.

"For example, a group of girls could be sitting around the computer, instant messaging their target. (The target thinks she is only communicating with one person.) At first, they befriend her. They gossip a while about mutual friends and eventually the bullies ask leading questions, hoping to get their target to say something negative about one of the girls present. Once the target falls for it, the bullies use the gossip against her. This leads to social isolation."

Dr Campbell says she was surprised at the result of a recent study she undertook for a paper on cyberbullying. She was expecting most online bullies would be face-to-face bullies as well, but her findings proved otherwise.

"We took a sample of 581 girls from two schools in NSW and Queensland and, of the five per cent who said they were cyberbullies, only 30 per cent also bullied face-to-face."

This was also reflected in figures on girls who were bullied pointing to the fact that cyberbullying

There's no easy way to get rid of bullies, but ignoring their online taunts and taking a few sensible precautions can give kids back the power

By Julie McGlone



is creating a whole new social problem rather than simply extending existing behaviour.

Students who bully and those who are bullied are, says Dr Campbell, most likely to be girls found in middle school.

"It peaks at 13 years and goes through to 15 years. By senior school most kids have figured out that it's not the way to act and, apart from those who will go on to be bullies in the workforce and in life, the problem is largely gone."

Dr Campbell says long term solutions must come from early intervention in the home and schools.

"Parents need to change bully behaviour as soon as they see it – they need to instil that you can get your own way without hurting other people. Often bullies have been the victim of bullying themselves."

While it is complex, with no quick fix, cyberbullying can cause serious emotional problems and needs to be addressed quickly and efficiently.

As a parent or carer it is important that your child feels comfortable

reporting any incidents which they find upsetting or which they are unsure of handling.

**There are some key behaviours to watch for:**

- Your child rushes home to the computer and appears agitated or unnaturally reserved afterwards
- SMS messages come more frequently than usual and your child answers quickly or seems stressed
- Your child is unhappy for no apparent reason or says he/she doesn't want to go to school or social functions
- You notice your child changing the computer screen or closing emails when you enter the room
- Your child is spending too much time on the Internet or being online late into the night
- You notice changes in behaviour, such as secretiveness, sleeping problems, neglecting school assignments, avoiding normal social activities or withdrawing from the family.

[www.netalert.gov.au/advice/risks/cyberbullying](http://www.netalert.gov.au/advice/risks/cyberbullying)

[www.bullyingnoway.com.au](http://www.bullyingnoway.com.au)

## Here are some practical tips for kids dealing with an online bully:

- Tell the bully in simple terms to leave you alone. Tell them not to contact you again. Log off immediately and stay offline for at least 24 hours
- Do not reply to any future mail from the bully. Do not reply to taunts, emails or gossip written about you. By ignoring taunts, you take the power away from the harasser and refuse to play their game. You are now in charge
- Never give your password or logon details to anyone, even your best friends. It's really easy for someone to log on to your Facebook, Bebo or MySpace site and post any kind of rubbish if they know your password
- Stay out of chat rooms where you don't feel comfortable
- Keep all harassing emails (and any replies you've made) as evidence
- If you feel you are in physical danger or if the bully has made physical threats against you, tell your parents immediately and they can decide if it's appropriate to contact authorities. ■