PARTICIPATE

Parents and Technology in Cyberbullying:
Intervention and Prevention for Future Experts

D3.3 – Parent toolkit for teachers/professionals piloted

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European School Heads Association
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Toolkit for Enhancing School-Parent Collaboration Against (Cyber)Bullying

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PARTICIPATE TOOLKIT

ENHANCING SCHOOL-PARENT COLLABORATION AGAINST (CYBER)BULLYING

Why this Toolkit?

Social media platforms and digital technologies have changed the way that children and teens interact, socialise, and develop their sense of identity (who they are). As these technologies have become more central to how children and young people experience and interact with the world, cyberbullying has become more widespread.

Cyberbullying (bullying with the use of digital technologies) is a complex problem that demands a multi-layered response from governments, technology companies, workplaces, schools, families and individuals.

The social media platforms who own and profit from children and young people's use of their platforms need to be regulated to prioritise the safety and wellbeing of children and young people. But everyone plays a part.

We created this toolkit to help <u>both</u> school staff and parents better understand and support children and adolescents as they grow up in a world where cyberbullying and related forms of online harm are increasingly common.

This toolkit is informed by research with young people, schools and parents from multiple European countries.

Working together, families and schools can…

✓ **Build trust**: Close, active collaboration and open and honest communication between school staff and parents helps to address all forms of bullying, including cyberbullying. A unified approach helps children and young people to feel more supported and understood.

✓ **Develop a fuller picture**: Working together, schools and families can develop a fuller picture of what children are doing and experiencing online. For example, teachers are more likely to see how peers interact at school whereas parents are more likely to notice changes in their child's mood or behaviour at home.

✓ **Ensure better outcomes**: Open communication between parents and teachers helps to identify and respond to problems before they become more serious. Collaboration allows adults to respond in ways that support, protect, and educate children and young people.

✓ **Promote positive behaviours**: Effective partnerships between parents and teachers can lead to improved protective behaviours amongst peers who witness bullying (bystanders) and preventative behaviours amongst those who might otherwise cause harm.

What is Cyber/bullying?

Bullying can be understood as any unwanted interpersonal behaviour that:

- Occurs between individuals or groups of people
- Is often repeated, and causes physical, social and/or emotional harm to those targeted
- Can include: mocking, teasing, offensive nicknames, spreading rumours, physically hurting someone, stealing, excluding or making someone feel that they do not belong.

Cyberbullying:

- Is bullying with the use of digital technologies that takes place in online spaces
- Takes place in public or private online spaces using digital technologies like mobile phones, computers, tablets/iPads, smartwatches etc. and on social media, gaming platforms, messaging apps etc.
- Can include: manipulating/altering photos of people, creating fake accounts with someone else's identity, creating an account anonymously that makes fun of people, sharing or threatening to share a photo of someone without their consent, including intimate images.
- A message, image or video that is shared once can be considered bullying behaviour as it carries the likelihood or possibility of being shared multiple times.
- As digital technology becomes more accessible, cyberbullying is evolving and becoming more widespread. For example, Deepfake technology (i.e., fake but convincing content intended to humiliate victims) is a new and insidious form of cyberbullying that poses major risks to children's safety and well-being.
- **While cyberbullying takes place online, it frequently extends to, spills over, or centres around and focuses on, people at school**, which means that schools have a responsibility to take it seriously.

Young People's Accounts of School-focused Cyberbullying

"On one of our school trips, there was a group of three teenage boys on that trip who were actually in my class who made a video talking about the girls in my class, and really objectifying, saying the most vulgar sexual things. Some of the stuff was so horrific, you couldn't repeat it. The way they'd like to do certain stuff to certain girls. It was so objectifying. The way they were speaking about girls. It was so disgusting" (15-year-old girl).

"But then this TikTok account went around [school] in second year, and they made like, there was racist TikToks and all on it. And then they posted the Principal on it and they posted like teachers on it. But I think the main one was racist towards… I don't wanna say it, like black people in the year" (16-year-old girl).

Children, Teens & Digital Technology

Online lives: Children and teens' digital technology use has become a major part of their lives. They are spending more time online than ever before, often in spaces (apps, platforms, gaming sites etc.) that adults (including parents and teachers) don't always fully understand or monitor very often.

> *"We would have ongoing conversations around communicating online, around how you connect with people online safely, about how you keep yourself safe. […] In terms of online safety, it's evolving. I learn an awful lot from [my children] as well. […] There's this whole social etiquette that I am unaware of but it's really interesting to hear about [from my children]"* (Mother)

The double-edged sword: Social media and gaming platforms can help children and teens relax, stay in touch with their peers, share interests, seek support and feel a sense of belonging and connection. But these spaces are also designed to keep them online for as long as possible. Online risks pose a real threat to safety and wellbeing.

The spillover effect: Children and teens' online and offline experiences are deeply entangled. This means that their online interactions can spill over into the school environment and elsewhere. In other words, children and teens often chat, post and comment on each other's online content outside of school which can then spill over in school and vice versa.

The power of algorithms: An algorithm is like an invisible system that watches everything a user does online. It then uses that information to create a profile (e.g., assigning them a gender/ethnicity) which decides what to show them next. This is why children/teens come across content they didn't specifically look for online.

The attention economy: Algorithms are designed to show children and teens personalised, targeted content that grabs and holds their attention. App features such as likes, streaks, views and comments act as "rewards" and are designed to keep them scrolling.

The amplification of harmful online content: Platforms tend to promote content that is shocking, humiliating or cruel, because it gets more clicks, reactions and shares. This means harmful content, including content that targets or mocks specific individuals, can spread rapidly and reach a wide audience very quickly.

The impact of harmful online content: Online content shapes young people's attitudes, beliefs, and relationships - especially in school. Studies have found a surge of misogyny (hatred or prejudice against women) in schools where young people use sexist language/jokes coming from online content. As such, it often influences cyber/bullying behaviour both in schools and online.

> *"There were boys shouting all kinds of profanities at girls, telling them to stay in the kitchen, pretending they had bottles of wee, when they were just apple juice, and squeezing them at the girls"* (Mother).

> *"I remember there was all this stuff about like that [women] they're inferior. And like, a lot of stuff was about transgender women in sports and making fun of one female athlete. And there are comments like 'oh she shouldn't be on the field'. Like that's the kind of stuff that when an algorithm on Instagram or something finds out that you're a white male, recommends to you. It's because it gets the most reactions"* (15 year old boy).

Children, Teens & Cyber/bullying

Cyberbullying is pervasive and can target teachers, school leaders and students: It has increased in line with children's greater use of social media and gaming platforms. Anonymous digital platforms make it easier for people to feel that they can post bullying content without fear of immediate consequences.

> *"We don't even know half of what's happening on TikTok. Teachers have had TikTok accounts set up about them. Students have had TikToks set up about them. The Principal has had TikToks set up about them"* (Secondary Teacher).

Bullying in general is highly complex: Bullying behaviour takes place in the context of peer dynamics and school - community cultures. Sometimes bullying happens without people having a true understanding of the negative impact of their behaviour or that the behaviour they are engaging in or experiencing is a form of bullying. Bullying can also happen within friendship groups.

> *"One of the [boys] sent the [graphic] video to another boy in the year and then that boy circulated it around the year (...). I think all of them ... I don't think they were fully aware of the damage it would do to the girls, even the guy that circulated it"* (16-year-old girl).

Behaviour versus labels: A national level study carried out in Ireland found that only 8% of 13-year-olds reported being "bullied" in the previous three months. However, when presented with a list of specific behaviours, 62% reported experiencing at least one form of bullying on one or more occasions, and 37% experienced at least one type repeatedly.

It is often better, therefore, to focus on behaviour rather than labels like "bully" or "victim". Few people will want to identify as either a bully or a bully-victim, making it harder to address the behaviour or its impact. Focusing on the behaviour rather than the word shifts the focus from "who you are" (a "bully" or a "victim") to what happened and the meaning and impact of that behaviour.

There is no typical bully or victim, but bullying affects different children differently: Girls, for example, are more likely to receive unwanted sexual images or to be the subject of sexist "banter" whereas boys are often targeted if they are not seen as masculine enough. These behaviours are often framed as "just a joke" which normalises, minimises and dismisses the seriousness and impact of the behaviour.

> *"Whenever some subject about girls and stuff comes up, they're always like 'oh she should just stay in the kitchen, girls are lazy' (...) And then girls in my class, I don't know how, but they'd be agreeing with the boys and laughing with them. I feel like a lot of them are scared of some people so they just try to [laugh] to impress them"* (15-year-old girl).

Parenting in an era of Digital Technology & Cyberbullying

The knowledge gap: Research suggests a critical gap in many parents' awareness and understanding of their children's online interactions and experiences. This means that parents are often not well equipped to identify, intervene or provide the support their children need.

> *"I feel worried. I recognise I'm behind him, always trying to catch up with what he has achieved and not told me. There is this knowledge gap between me and him. So I try to encourage conversation, because that's the only way"* (Mother).

Parents need better support: Parental controls are a minefield and have increased stress and workloads for parents. Many parents report that these controls often don't work as intended. For example, it can be impossible in reality to disable features such as invites from unknown people.

It's not about bad parenting: Children's online behavior is not the result of "bad" parenting or children but is being influenced by powerful digital platforms that are built to increase engagement, provoke strong emotional reactions, make people compare themselves to others and feel insecure about themselves.

Key Messages for Parents about Communicating with Children & Teens

- **Make conversations about children and teens' digital world a habit.** You don't have to be an expert in cyberbullying or online safety in order to have meaningful, real-world conversations about cyberbullying and online harm. What children need most is to feel protected and supported.

- **Building connection eases shame:** Have conversations about difficult topics early and often as this will build connection and ease shame later on. Children are best supported when they hear about pornography, online grooming, cyberbullying from trusted adults first i.e., before they ever encounter these things online and before they become a problem.

- **Use side-by-side conversations:** Many children and young people prefer "side-by side" conversations or "sideways listening" over more formal sit-down conversations. This allows the conversation to unfold rather than steering it. Asking children about their digital lives while you are doing enjoyable activities together makes it easier to talk about "difficult" topics when they arise.

- **Preparation is key:** Use everyday examples from TV shows, films, and real life as "teachable moments'" to start an ongoing conversation and to prepare children and young people for the kinds of content they are likely to be exposed to online.

- **Listening is empowering:** While most parents understandably want to "fix" a problem a child may be having, the most important thing is to listen. Listening is a powerful tool that empowers children and adults. Try to explore options together with your child to see what they would like and are comfortable with.

Key Messages for Schools about Cyberbullying and Parents' Experiences

Cyberbullying is a persistent and complex challenge because it stretches across school and non-school environments via social media and gaming platforms. **Close collaboration** between school staff and parents is essential for combating both face-to-face and online bullying and helping children navigate online spaces more generally.

Parents want to help: Parents express a strong desire to work collaboratively with schools and other parents to respond to incidents of bullying.

Children want their parents to be more involved: Many children and teens feel parents don't have enough knowledge of the harms or challenges that children face online but want their parents and schools to be more actively involved in promoting children's online safety.

Working together develops a fuller picture: The way young people understand and experience the world is not only influenced by their family, teachers and communities, but also by what they see on media and social media, some of which is harmful and inaccurate. Open lines of communication between schools and families about what kinds of messages children are receiving and absorbing online are key to prevention.

Combating powerlessness: Both parents and students report that they often feel powerless in their interactions with schools when trying to address bullying and cyberbullying in particular. The anonymity that the online world affords makes some parents reluctant to approach schools in the first place.

> *"[The Principal said] we can't investigate [the bullying] unless [the child] is actually in the school. And I was like: but she's too unwell to go to school. She's completely stressed out. If I try to get her near a uniform, she crawls under the bed. This is not a possibility. I need this investigated without my child having to go in and be bullied again"* (Mother).

> *"There's so much relationship content that's geared towards adults that 12-year-olds are seeing and then they're like 'oh this is what I am supposed to be doing in a relationship."* (15-year-old boy).

> *"It's like my child cannot escape this at all. She is so young and being black and all where you are already so sexualized and your body is put into focus, now this is happening online too. We don't even know who it is so why would we go talk to the principal with no idea?"* (Mother).

> *"They did a thing called a restorative practice or restorative conversation between [my daughter] and the girl she reckons was bullying her last year. And I think it was kind of harmful. [My child] literally didn't go to school for two weeks after it, right?"* (Mother).

A Unified Approach: Home-School Collaboration

- Closer collaboration between school staff and parents is vital if cyberbullying is to be meaningfully addressed.
- Opportunities for **meaningful parental engagement can be constrained** by non-school factors (e.g. working hours, language barriers etc.), but also by what some parents perceive as **tokenistic or non-inclusive school-based practices**.
- If a child is being bullied, **parents can be reluctant to reach out to schools, fearing that their child might be labelled as a problem**, or become the focus of more bullying because they or their parents have spoken out.
- Some teachers and school leaders are reluctant to involve parents in bullying situations that do not necessarily occur at school or during school time.
- Some **school staff report that they lack the knowledge or skills to effectively engage parents in difficult conversations about bullying**. Some believe that parents hold diverse beliefs about what bullying is and that there is a disconnect between schools' and parents' views on what actions can be defined as bullying behaviours.
- Children, teens and parents report that schools sometimes fail to take meaningful action in response to very serious forms of cyberbullying. This has lasting consequences for those who experience bullying and increases the chances of it happening again.
- As cyberbullying is constantly evolving, there is a **need for ongoing dialogue** between school staff and families about what cyberbullying is (and is not), and what the consequences are for all concerned.
- Bullying often happens where/when teachers can't see it, or in spaces that parents can't monitor what is happening, but where other students or peers witness it.
- School staff and parents should help children and teens recognise and reflect on what they're seeing and to speak up about it. Discussing the importance of taking a stand and saying, "that's not ok", "chill", "why would you make things awkward?!" can make a real difference in stopping bullying from going further.
- **Young people are more likely to talk about peer dynamics and friendship "drama" to their friends**. Supporting them in identifying bullying dynamics in these behaviours helps to create a culture where bullying is less likely to go unnoticed or unchallenged.

Taking Action Against Cyberbullying?

"It might be controversial, but I actually think the worst perpetrators of this whole thing was the fact that the school didn't actually take any action. Yeah it's really bad. I think our school is really bad for like punishing people because it actually brings attention to the situation that is happening and they don't really like that. Restorative justice felt just like a procedure, I couldn't trust the school anymore because nothing actually changed. It continued on" (16-year-old girl)

"[The Principal's] reasoning was that [it wasn't bullying] because this little girl was harming a number of people, that it wasn't specifically targeted at [my child], right?" (Mother).

Self-Assessment Tool for Schools

Schools can use this self-assessment tool as a whole-school reflection during staff meetings. It can be completed individually and/or as a team to foster collaboration and identify shared goals.

At School Level……..	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
There is a positive culture between management and staff which helps to promote the wellbeing of the whole school community.					
Staff are provided with regular training opportunities to learn more about bullying and cyberbullying.					
There are frequent opportunities for informal interactions between teachers and parents.					
There are frequent opportunities for face-to-face communication between teachers and parents (e.g., open classroom policies).					
Management and staff have a clear understanding of the social issues affecting the wider school community (e.g., poverty; race; gender).					
Staff have a clear understanding of how to meaningfully address bullying in the school.					
Management facilitates school-wide discussions regarding the effectiveness of the school's anti-bullying approaches.					
Management and staff are responsive to bullying that happens online (not just in school).					

As a Staff Member…..	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I encourage parents to share their opinions and ideas with me about their child's needs etc.					
I create opportunities for open, two-way communication that helps build trusting and respectful relationships with parents.					
I actively try to help parents overcome barriers that might affect their ability to engage with me (e.g., confidence; language etc.).					
I promote regular communication between myself and parents, not just when their child is having problems or difficulties.					
I welcome feedback about things being covered in the curriculum.					
I am aware that some parents might find it harder to reach out to me, such as migrant or low-income families.					
I am responsive to parents' concerns about their child and their experiences.					
I regularly reflect on what communication practices are working well and what might need to be improved.					

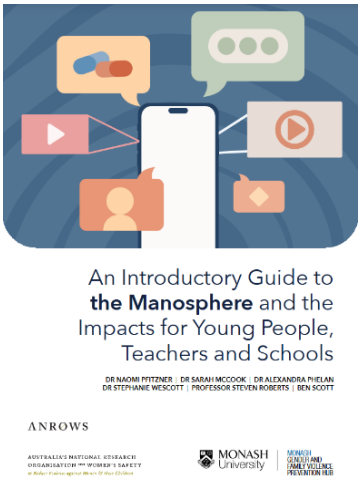
Responding to Bullying and Cyberbullying	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I understand my responsibilities where acting on and reporting instances of bullying are concerned.					
I have a good understanding of the range of behaviours that constitute cyberbullying.					
I feel confident addressing issues related to bullying and cyberbullying with my students in class.					
I feel confident addressing issues of bullying with parents whose child has been a victim of bullying.					
I feel confident addressing issues of bullying with parents whose child has engaged in bullying behaviour.					
I have a clear understanding of anti-bullying policies developed in my country or in schools across my country.					
I have a good understanding of how digital technologies and platforms work to grab users' attention and keep them online via algorithms, incentives etc.					
I make an effort to understand my students' digital lives and experiences.					

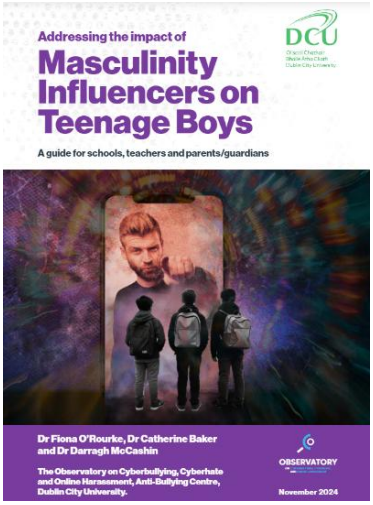
- Each European country has different organisations and hotlines that can support you. Please visit **Better Internet for Kids** (better-internet-for-kids.europa.eu/en/sic). Better Internet for Kids (BIK) is EU's online safety platform for children, parents and educators, and provides advice and information on rising online trends and behaviours in multiple languages.

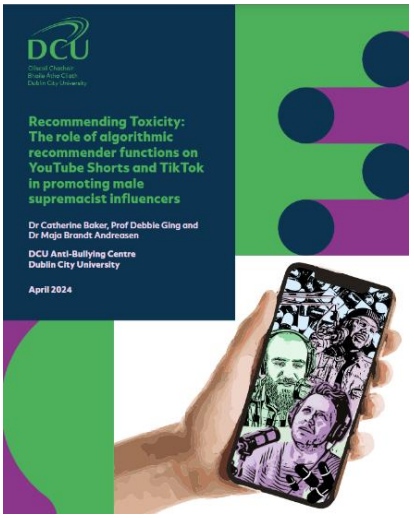
The following organisations offer practical guidance to help parents and teachers and provide information on privacy settings, parental controls, age restrictions, reporting tools etc. and/or offer free workshops for parents on how to protect and safeguard children online.

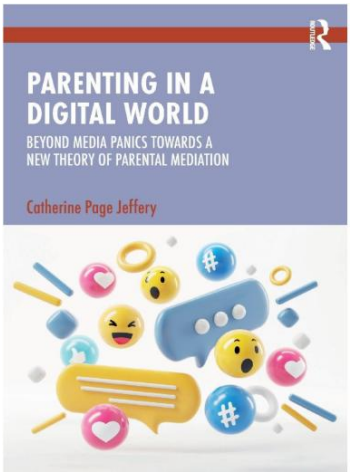
- **Bernados Ireland** (barnardos.ie): offers free online workshops for parents on protecting and safeguarding children online. They also have free online resources on bullying.
- **CyberSafeKids** (cybersafekids.ie): offer practical guidance to help parents and teachers to approach these topics with young people and think through these decisions, which can be adapted.
- **Coimisiún na Meán** (cnam.ie): Ireland's media regulator, with parent-facing guidance on the Online Safety Code.
- **Foroige** (foroige.ie): offers free online workshops on bullying/cyberbullying and online safety.
- **ISPCC** (ispcc.ie): offers practical guidance to help parents and teachers to approach these topics with young people and think through these decisions, which can be adapted. Also hosts a Childline.
- **Parents International Association** (parentsinternational.org) : Provides training for parents, teachers and school leaders on a wide range of topics.
- **Webwise** (webwise.ie): offers free guides for both parents and teachers on how specific social media platforms work and allow young people to do. It also provides information on privacy settings, parental controls, age restrictions, or reporting tools.
- **Tackle Bullying** (tacklebullying.ie) : General information hub on bullying and cyberbullying.
- **YouthWorks** (youthworksconsulting.co.uk): Provides free online guides on cyberbullying and supporting young people's online life, as well as trainings for schools.

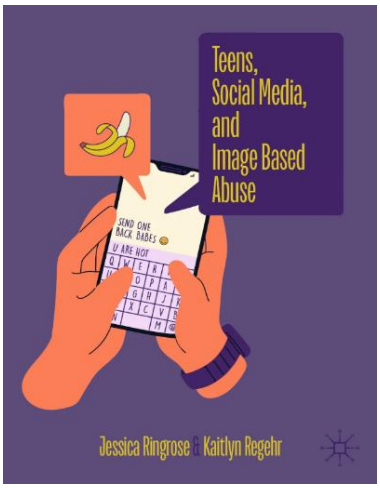
Further Reading PARTICIPATE TOOLKIT











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Coordinator

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