Cyberbullying of Children: The role of Parental Response

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Abstract: Cyberbullying of children has been studied in many disciplines, e.g. psychology, education, criminology, information systems. However, much of the work consists of guidelines and only about half is empirical. Plus, the empirical research seldom has a sound, well-formulated theoretical underpinning. Although guidelines generally indicate what parents should do to prevent cyberbullying of their children, there is a paucity of research on how parents actually respond and what effect this has on their children. With all the best intentions in the world, very often parents may be responding inappropriately, thereby extending the bullying cycle and exacerbating the harm of the cyberbullying. The purpose of this qualitative research was exploratory and was to determine how parents respond to their children being cyberbullied. The research captured the interview responses of ten pairs of child/parent combinations, identified by means of purposive sampling. In particular, the responses of the parent to a cyberbullying incident involving their child were explored. The responses of each pair were compared to ascertain the role of the parental response, and then a more holistic thematic analysis was conducted of all the pairs of responses. Some of the findings indicate confusion about what exactly cyberbullying is; who believed that they/their children had experienced cyberbullying; what the experience had been; prior parental guidance of the children; who the children had told when they experienced cyberbullying; which parents had been told (if they were told) and why; how parents believed they had responded and how their children perceived them to have responded; the children's response to their parents' response; and the result of the cyberbullying incident discussed. This research contributes to the theoretical development of cyberbullying by building on a combination of self-discrepancy theory, social cognitive theory and parental mediation theory. In practical terms, the research will shine a light on an overlooked area of cyberbullying research. The findings will help guide parents, schools and counselors on how best to involve parents in the child's response to cyberbullying.

Keywords: Cyberbullying, Children And Cyberbullying, Parental Responses; Cyberbullying Guidelines, Parent/Child Pair Interviews

1. Introduction

Cyberbullying has become one of the scourges of the online world, often leading to suicide and lesser forms of self-harm, depression and considerable family upheaval. Children have been particularly susceptible to cyberbullying and the topic has been studied in many disciplines, e.g. psychology, education, criminology, and information systems. However, much of the work consists of guidelines and only about half is empirical. Plus, the empirical research seldom has a sound, well-formulated theoretical underpinning.

Although guidelines generally indicate what parents should do to prevent cyberbullying of their children, there is a paucity of research on how parents actually respond to such cyberbullying and what effect this has on their children. With all the best intentions in the world, very often parents may be responding inappropriately, thereby extending the bullying cycle and exacerbating the harm of the cyberbullying. This research aimed to ascertain how parents responded to their children being cyberbullied – and whether there were differences between parents' perception of their responses and their children's perception of those responses.

The research reported in the following sections, records an initial exploration into the impact of parental responses to their children being cyberbullied.

2. Literature Review

There are many definitions of cyberbullying but one that seems to capture the most important elements is: Cyberbullying refers to the deliberate and hostile behaviour intended to hurt or harm people using the Internet and more particularly, social media (Limber, 2012; Smith et al, 2008). Cyberbullying can take many forms, and although greatly facilitated by social media, it is not limited to those channels and can comprise any online communication. There are two main types of cyberbullying: cyber-harassment and cyberstalking (Lowry et al., 2016) but there are also other types such as identity theft, sexting, grooming, impersonation, flaming and exclusion (Notar et al., 2013). Often the bullying is prompted by some outstanding characteristic of the victim (Notar et al., 2013). The online environment has been seen as being more conducive to bullying than the offline environment because of the relative absence of family supervision (Goodyear et al., 2018). Plus, it provides greater volume, scale, scope and number of participants (Gillespie, 2006), and it involves perceived anonymity, lack of identification, diffused responsibility, lack of proximity, knowledge of others (Lowry et al., 2016), and an underlying disinhibition which leads to greater aggression (Suler, 2004).

Children are particularly vulnerable to cyberbullying and can suffer moral disengagement, lower cognitive and affective empathy (Lei et al., 2020), depressive symptoms (Turliuc, 2020), loss of confidence, sadness, powerlessness, fear (Hoff & Mitchell, 2009) and even self-harm and suicidal behaviour (Martin-Criado et al., 2021).

The family context has been seen as one of the most influential factors in dealing with cyberbullying. Parental styles, excessive control, and little involvement present risks for children whereas affection, trust and fluid communication are related to more competent, safer children (Martin-Criado et al., 2021). Martin-Criado et al. (2021) determined that parental knowledge of the cyberbullying environment as well as their {technical} competence in this regard, had a significant influence on positive parental involvement. Ho et al. (2020) identified four types of parental mediation of their children's social media activity: active mediation (open discussions about how to behave online and what the children might have encountered), restrictive mediation (limiting social media activity), authoritarian surveillance (monitoring children's social media accounts and activity) and non-intrusive inspection (occasional monitoring of children's open posts but not private conversations).

A certain amount of responsibility has also been assumed by schools and together with the parents they attempt to deal with the cyberbullying problem. However, there are varying reports of how effective schools are – often their area of influence is curtailed by the realm of their authority (Hoff & Mitchell, 2009).

Although there has been a marked lack of reference to theoretical underpinnings in many of the studies on cyberbullying, those that did feature prominently were: social learning/cognitive theory – that learning occurs in a social context and involves the interaction between people, their environment and their behaviours (Bandura, 2002); parental mediation theory – that parents use different strategies to negate harmful media effects (Clark, 2011); and self-discrepancy theory – that there are different domains of the self (the actual self as one presents to others, the ideal self as one would like to present to others, and the ought self as one should present to others) and the true self (the uncensored self) (Ho et al., 2020).

3. Research method

The research was exploratory and consisted of qualitative interviews of ten pairs of parent/children (11-18) combinations, identified by means of purposive sampling. In total 20 individual interviews were conducted with each parent and child being interviewed consecutively with no opportunity for collusion in between. Each participant was assured of the confidentiality of their responses so children, especially, felt free to discuss matters they might not have discussed with their parents. The transcripts of the interviews were first analysed in parent/child pairs and then all transcripts together so as to gain a more holistic, thematic reflection of the response patterns.

4. Findings

The interviews started with an explanation of the concept of cyberbullying. However, rather than limiting the activity to online, our explanation of cyberbullying had to be adjusted to make allowances of the fact that while the bullying might be initiated online, very often it spun off to the offline world, and vice versa.

Another issue was that very often the "victims" didn't know or realise whether they were being bullied or not. Bullying is often in the mind of the perceiver or experiencer. What some people might interpret as bullying might be regarded as acceptable behaviour within a certain context. For instance, Philip plays games online and within the games they taunt one another. Upon overhearing such "trash talk" John, his father, became concerned and discussed the situation with Philip. However, the latter responded: "we know we're good friends we give each other as good as we get". Hamish, too, had initially been of the opinion that "they were just doing it [teasing/taunting] because they said it was a game".

In other instances, behavioural norms within a group indicated potentially insulting/harmful behaviour. Thus, in Mary's case, a practice developed within her group of friends of "insulting" one another. Initially uncomfortable with the practice Mary eventually followed suite and then obviously overstepped the mark and became the victim of a long and vicious bullying campaign that extended way beyond that group of friends. Tracey referred to a "trend of posting a picture of yourself online with the caption: "Say anything you want to me". In itself, such behaviour is potentially very harmful but becomes even more so when other people post pictures of those they wish to bully with a similar caption.

Another aspect of cyberbullying is that the actual bullying can take many forms simultaneously. It can be direct – as in the case of hurtful messages being posted to the victims online, or hurtful things being said about them online, for instance, during Zoom class sessions or in posts online about the victim but from which the victim is excluded. Then there is the exclusion from group activities – those planned and executed offline and those conducted solely online. Many children reported such bullying.

4.1 Social media guidance by parents

Most of the parents interviewed exercised some sort of monitoring of their child's social media and general online activity. Although initially embarked upon and pursued diligently, very soon many of them realised that it was just too time-consuming and gave in to the position of random sampling of their child's online activities. Alternatively, they rationalized their scaled down approach by arguing that they did not want to intrude upon their child's privacy and/or trusted their child not to do anything untoward or risky. Usually, if there were a number of children in a family, parents would be strictest with the eldest and by the time it got to the other children, any monitoring had become far less strict and intrusive.

"Some parents monitor everything their children receive and send [but] it's an issue of privacy. All my friends would always hate it" (Sally).

"They've never been really strict on social media" (Nicola).

4.2 Main incident

With regard to the main cyberbullying incident upon which each participant reported, often the cyberbullying started during Covid lockdowns – and continued long after the lockdowns. The online environment facilitated the wide reach of negative messages about the victim so that by the time Covid lockdowns were lifted and children could return to school physically, in Mary and Tracey's cases, hundreds of students had already decided to have nothing to do with them and they were ostracised during break times and during any socialization opportunities. Eventually both changed schools.

Hamish also experienced an extended period of bullying. "It was over a period of years that it was happening" (Jane).

"I don't think it would have persisted to the extent that it did, had they had face-to-face contact. So I think they were hiding behind that screen" (Sue).

4.2.1 Why were the children bullied?

The bullying occurred for a number of reasons, most frequently because the victim manifested some outstanding characteristic. In many cases it was because of physical shape – a particularly thin and unathletic type of boy, a fat girl – or, on the other hand, a particularly beautiful girl, or an especially bright child.

"It's like a physical thing. They just kind of assume things about him because he isn't a sporty child" (Jane).

Often risky behaviour, according to Sally, and particularly among girls, was to post nude or similarly risky photographs of themselves on social media in the hopes of attracting a certain boy's attention and interest. Using platforms such as Snapchat, which didn't apparently store such postings, ensured that their parents' checking wouldn't detect such provocative and risky behaviour.

4.2.2 Feelings about being bullied

The range of emotions experienced by the victims ran from anger to sadness and distrust.

"I kinda felt annoyed. More angry or annoyed, but not like sad" (Justin).

"I feel sad, and I feel angry at the person for bullying me and getting away with it. I also feel sad because I thought they were my friend" (Hamish). Hamish's mother, Jane's, perception was that "it got under his skin and really started to affect his mental health".

Mary recounted that "I was very confused. I wasn't quite sure what I had done so wrong. It made me feel betrayed…. It just showed me not to trust everyone as well. It kind of gave me trust issues". Mary's mother, Sue, reported that she personally felt "Terrible. Heartbreaking. It was heartbreaking for her".

Tracey's mother, Bronwyn, indicated: "It was awful. She just kind of shut down. It was hard for her to go to school every day. Tracey was devastated."

A number of victims, like Brit, responded that they were frustrated by the protective shield provided by the computer screen. They were certain that the bullying would not have been so severe had the bully been able to immediately observe the hurt they were causing the victim, as in the offline environment.

4.2.3 Confiding

Not all the children confided in their parents, or did so as soon as the bullying started. Some preferred to discuss it with their friends first but none confided in their siblings – often because they were the eldest and didn't want to upset them. John noted that his son, Philip, wouldn't tell his older sister because the latter often teased him and he would want to avoid that. Anna reported that she confided in her dog. This was because they had a large family and the child felt that there was enough going on for their parents to deal with.

Usually the personality of the parent, the closeness of the parent/child relationship, and also the gender similarity dictated in which parent the child confided – or confided in first. So, for instance, Nicola preferred to tell her mother "because she's told me more about her friendship dramas when she was a kid, so I think she's able to relate a lot more than my dad, plus she is also a female".

However, Hamish, Mary and Tracey all preferred to tell their fathers because of the calmer, less emotional responses of the latter. Another reason for preferring to tell the father is because the mother's lack of technical (IT) knowledge – "she almost doesn't know how to handle it" (Sally). On the other hand, Justin indicated: "Probably my mom because my dad is very against me doing anything at all. He thinks that everything I do is completely my fault".

Sometimes, though, it is simply a matter of which parent the child encounters first that dictates who is told. Hamish's mother, Jane, collects him from school every day and she immediately queries him on his day at school so he tells her everything and then she tells his father later.

On the other hand, often children don't tell their parents immediately. Initially Mary kept the matter to herself but her mother noticed that she was upset and irritable with her siblings. Frequently it's a case of the child trying to be grown-up and cope with their problems on their own, or, as Max noted, "they don't necessarily say everything" because children don't want possibly risky things that they might have done being exposed and then having their mobile phones taken away from them". By and large parents believed that their children told them about 70-80% of the full story of their cyberbullying victimisation.

4.2.4 Parental response

When Mary first told her mother, Sue, the latter "just started shouting. She was ready to email the school immediately and I had to calm her down" Mary went on to explain that at the time she hadn't thought it was such a big deal but "I didn't realise how serious it was". However, Sue's memory was slightly different and that initially she was wanting to see the full perspective. "I wanted to see what the other side of the story was because there are always two sides to the story".

Bronwyn was "so furious. I was like "What did you do? What the hell is this? … and then when I take a step back, I realize that it wasn't actually her and I should be furious with the other person and then I just want to cuddle her. And unfortunately, sometimes that trust has gone a bit because she's been crapped on".

Nicola reported that her mother's approach was to "just ignore it" and that she'd "probably get rid of some of my social media" whereas her father "probably would have said: 'talk to your mom'".

Steve reported that he "didn't want to be too controlling and that … kids need to be encouraged to take responsibility for their own lives". This resulted in Anna not confiding in anybody and trying to deal with the situation on her own, albeit a very painful experience for her.

On the other hand, Brit's mother simply enveloped Brit in hugs and sympathy – no hint of blame, just unconditional positive regard. "Brit knows that I'm always there for her to come and talk to, and that I'm on her side, and she's number one" (Diana).

Hamish also felt very supported - "Then my mom writes an email to the school. I think she really cares about me" (Hamish).

4.2.5 Response of third parties

On occasions, the parent(s) of the victim, would seek recourse with the bully and his/her parent(s). However, such meetings were usually unsatisfactory.

"My mom usually talks to the parents of the other child and they just say 'Oh, what am I gonna do about it?'" (Hamish).

While Nicola thought her father didn't understand much about girls' relationships, Mark actually arranged a meeting between the bully and her parents, and Nicola (the victim), his wife and himself. According to Mark, Nicola's response was "worried because she had said things she wasn't proud of as well as that she was going to get into trouble … She was probably hoping that it would blow over because she didn't want to jeopardise losing a friend". The bully and her parents were apologetic "but it was obvious the friendship was over".

More often than not, parents of victims would seek recourse with the school. Some were very good and responsive. Usually these schools had a very progressive and detailed strategy of dealing with bullying - and enforced it effectively.

Some schools tried but weren't really effective. "The system isn't set up really to support these children so [the school] tries to be mature about it – so, we're all going to reconcile and come together in a room and talk about it and then leave feeling better about ourselves but the reality is the children are not actually mature enough" (Sue). It simply seen as paying lip service to the process. Apologies could be made but the bullying would continue in a more covert way, e.g. exclusion from group activities.

Unfortunately, there were schools at the other end of the spectrum where, apart from perfunctory statement about intolerance of bullying, very little enforcement of a strategy for dealing with such situations existed. Often these schools held the view that there was just so much that they could do because they couldn't control what students did outside school or online.

"I don't think the schools do anything about bullying, full stop. I think sometimes they try…I think they're scared of what the consequences might be" (Max).

4.3 Advice to parents

When asked what advice they would give to parents, Steve felt "you can't protect them completely…this may be kind of inevitable, it might be a kind of learning experience for them, they might develop resilience out of it … You've got to build that resilience … It's about getting up…there are some big life lessons" (Max).

More specifically, respondents felt that it was very important to understand the online environment in which their children operated. Max noted one thus had to "try to understand what they're doing … how they do things and how they communicate". Mark, too, emphasized "trying to stay connected with their lives ".

"I do realise that Brit's not always in the right but it's not for me to sort out her battles. She needs to fight her own battles and I don't think I should be involving the other mother… They're fickle with their friendships at this age…Today we might be friends, tomorrow we won't, and for me to get involved, I wouldn't have any friends left" (Diana).

With regard to social media activity, Michelle advised parents to "check your child's social media with them. Anything they don't feel comfortable with, to show the parents from an early age". And in responding to messages that are hurtful, Hamish suggested "Let the 'advice' just bounce off because it's bad advice. What they say says more about them than about you".

Sue emphasized the relationship: "I went through a phase of monitoring everything and giving them certain times when they can be on social media but it was too Time-consuming with many children … Have your child be open and try to be in the same room with them as much as possible so that you can kind of witness what's going on on their social media because banning it is not the answer".

Bronwyn also highlighted the importance of trust: "I follow her on Tiktok. I'm not on Snapchat and other media. I don't fully follow her. I trust she doesn't have parallel accounts … I don't feel like there's something going on that she's not telling me that I need to go and sneak on her phone. I've got the password but I don't really think it's appropriate to use." Ultimately "it's about fostering as much trust in the relationship and just highlighting that it's not their fault" (Sue). And having learnt from her past overreaction, Bronwyn advised: "Listen before

you react to their story. If you are like me, the first thing you do is flip, shit on your child because you're so worried about this. Just listen to where they're coming from first before you respond".

Lastly, more strategically, Sue advised: "Encourage [the child] to join more clubs, different clubs that meant that they are part of different circles" so that if one implodes, there are still other groups of friends for the child.

5. Discussion

This research aimed to ascertain how parents responded to their children being cyberbullied – and whether there were differences between parents' perception of their responses and their children's perception of those responses.

In the sample of interviewees, all the children were of school-going age and, in the majority of instances, the bullying started online and then moved back and forth between that environment and the offline environment in school or various other offline venues like sports fields or social events (Notar et al., 2013). So, the bullying wasn't exclusive to the online environment although it provided the opportunity for more extreme communication in terms of nastiness of messages, greater disinhibition (Suler, 2004) and number of people to whom such messages were posted (Lowry et al., 2016).

Furthermore, often the online environment in which the child was active, e. g. certain gaming sites, dictated a certain sort of insulting (Notar et al., 2013), almost vicious behaviour which was seen as acceptable in that situation (Lowry et al., 2016), and not interpreted as bullying by the child. However, parents were far more sceptical about the apparent lack of inhibition (Suler, 2004).

Often the children didn't realise the full potential of the bullying, yet the parents' responses indicated that they knew full well how things might possibly develop and how dire the consequences might be (Martin-Criado et al., 2020). This is probably why many parents initially responded angrily to their children confiding in them that they were being bullied.

Perception of being bullied and response to the situation also depends very much on the individual. Some are very sensitive and yet others tend to ignore the attempted bullying. Boys tended to be more impervious to bullying attacks whereas girls tended to be very affected by such behaviour. In a number of instances, the children, particularly the girls, had changed schools to get away from the toxic environment (Turliuc et al., 2020).

In most instances, it was the mother in whom the child confided first about being bullied, or who noticed something amiss first - quite probably because she was the parent more involved in the child rearing and nurturing aspects of their lives (Hoff & Mitchell, 2009; Ho et al., 2020). However, in many cases, the mother was seen as being emotional and given to angry (and possibly embarrassing) responses so the father was told instead. By and large, fathers were seen as calmer and more rational.

Technical knowledge of the parents and their understanding of the online environment and more particularly, of the various social media (and even gaming) platforms was a major component in facilitating the extent to which the child felt understood and supported. The behavioural norms (Bandura, 1977) of the different environments needed to be understood as well as the extent to which posts could be hidden or manipulated.

The disclosure of being bullied depends very much on the relationship between the parent and the child (Ho et al., 2020; Wright, 2018). In many instances, the child felt that they had done something to provoke the bullying and they were embarrassed or ashamed to tell their parent. Often they felt guilty about their actions, and in many cases, they couldn't provide evidence of the bullying such as photo's posted on Snapchat. Furthermore, a number of children (and parents) felt they had to toughen up and deal with their own problems instead of running to their parents. However, being bullied can be very traumatic and the child needed to trust that their parent would love them, no matter what, when they confided in them. Unfortunately, in some instances, the parent had initially reacted very angrily towards the child, sometimes blaming them, and this had resulted in the child clamming up and feeling more isolated and sad. Unquestioning reassurance, sympathy and physical manifestations of love did a lot to make the child feel better about the situation and that they were not having to deal with it alone.

In terms of their parent's recourse to learning that their child was being bullied, the children generally felt reassured but a number were wary of the emotionally driven reactions of their parents (usually mothers) (Clark, 2011). Whether it was reporting the matter to the school, contacting the parents of the bullies or confronting the bully directly, children generally felt reluctant to proceed along those lines because the end result was lip service being paid to the process but the bullying continued more covertly (Hoff & Mitchell, 2009).

Ultimately, the main advice to parents was to build up a strong, trusting relationship with the child so that if/when they were cyberbullied, they had someone in whom they could confide and trust that they would be unconditionally supported. While the inevitability of having to cope with life's hard knocks was not dismissed, it was recognized how the harm could be diminished by understanding the online environment in which children nowadays operate and also by judicious engagement in their social media activities – not overly authoritarian but rather caringly consultative (Ho et al., 2020).

From a theoretical perspective, the background context was very much framed by social cognitive theory according to which the children learnt their online "bullying" behaviour from others and then continued it offline. Similarly, the victims might have learnt provocative behaviour from the online context. Parental mediation theory manifested itself strongly in terms of the extent to which parents involved themselves in their children's social media activity, often rationalising a relaxation of good intentions with the actual practical demands of daily living. However, self-discrepancy theory and, in particular, the notion of the negative true self manifested itself most strongly when parents had initial very angry outbursts at learning that their children were being bullied online but then stepped back, composed themselves and acted more rationally. Sometimes they didn't even recall their initial reaction – a desire to submerge the negative true self in favour of the ought self.

6. Conclusion

This research has broached a critical aspect of dealing with cyberbullying: the impact of the parent/child relationship. Considerable insights were gleaned as to how the relationship, when handled appropriately, can be used to minimize the harm of cyberbullying of children. Future research should explore the relative impacts of aspects of the relationship upon children of different personalities or age groups. From a more practical perspective, these findings can further inform school policies or parents of children.

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