

Module 9: Addressing cyberbullying in schools

Objective:

- Equip teachers with the tools to identify and respond to cyberbullying effectively.

Summary of content:

- Defining cyberbullying: understanding how it differs from traditional bullying.
- Recognizing the symptoms and behaviours of students involved in cyberbullying.
- Intervention strategies for addressing cyberbullying in and out of school.
- Educating students about responsible use of technology, privacy, and online behaviour.
- Collaborative efforts with parents and law enforcement for severe cases of online cyberbullying.

Lesson 1. Defining and understanding cyberbullying

Young people between 15 and 24 years old are the most present age demographic in the online environment (United Nations, 2022). This is associated with positive and negative phenomenon. One negative phenomenon is online violence. Online violence against children and teenagers can take several forms, according to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2022):

1. Online child sexual exploitation and abuse: refers to grooming and online sexual solicitation, nonconsensual sexting, sexual extortion, child abuse materials, and live streaming of sexual abuse.
2. Cyber-aggression and cyber-harassment: refer to cyberbullying, cyberstalking, hacking, identity theft, and fraud.

Cyberbullying can be defined as a form of bullying that takes place in the digital environment, such as social media and gaming platforms or through other apps (UNICEF, 2024), and implies threats, verbal aggression, hostility, and shaming (WHO, 2022). It is a relational phenomenon that can appear in the school network or out of it.

Cyberbullying can occur in school-peer relationships, in romantic relationships, or in those started online (WHO, 2022). Regarding the prevalence, the Health Behaviour in School-aged Children study, carried out in 44 countries, reported that cyberbullying has increased since 2018, with about 12% (1 in 8) teens reporting cyberbullying others and 15% reporting being cyberbullied, and phenomena occurred relatively equally between girls and boys. A World Health Organization guideline for preventing violence in children reported that cyberbullying peaks between 13 and 15 years, later than bullying (WHO, 2022).

It can take several forms, such as flaming (an online fight with aggressive language), harassment through repetitive messages, cyberstalking, which can take the form of intense and repeated harassment, denigration through the spread of lies and photos, the theft of identity, and ostracization (Cantone et al., 2015).

It is characterised by intentionality, repetition, and power imbalance, like classic bullying, but **it has several distinct aspects** such as anonymity and publicity (Campbell & Bauman, 2018).

- In cyberbullying, the audience could be huge, information is available 24/7, the abuse can continue at home, or on holidays, the attack could be anonymous, and the images, videos, or rumours could go viral (Campbell & Bauman, 2018).
- Digital literacy could create a power imbalance (OECD, 2019).
- It can include revenge porn (where nude photos are posted online without the consent of the individual) and sexting (a person forwarding nude or nearly nude photos to others) (OECD, 2019).

Examples of cyberbullying can be obtaining the passwords of the victim, creating false profiles of the victims, posting inappropriate content and defamatory information (WHO, 2022), spreading lies, and sending threatening messages or videos (UNICEF, 2024).

We need to understand and keep in mind that:

- Cyberbullying happens in a different environment. Beside the fact that the online environment allows information to be viewed by a huge audience that has continuous access and the content can be permanent and easy to access and share, another element is that the distance between the bully and the bullied allows the first to feel less empathy (Campbell & Bauman, 2018).
- Sexual harassment, sexual shaming, homophobic, sexist, racial, and ethnic attacks online could also be considered acts of cyberbullying (WHO, 2022).
- We need to pay attention to the fact that cyberbullying doesn't appear in isolation. It has some comorbidities, such as traditional bullying and harassment (WHO, 2022; Campbell & Bauman, 2018), and could occur in conjunction with dating violence, sexting, and cyberstalking. Bullying in school must be addressed because it's a predictor of other forms of violence, such as abusive behaviour online in teenagers (WHO, 2022).

There are several myths regarding cyberbullying:

1. Cyberbullying is a phenomenon known to everyone.
2. We have an epidemic of cyberbullying.
3. There is a causal link between cyberbullying and suicide.
4. Cyberbullying occurs more often than traditional bullying.
5. Cyberbullying is normal at a certain age.
6. Cyberbullies are mean kids.
7. If you turn off the computer, you can stop cyberbullying (OECD, 2019).

Reflection/discussion question:

For a moment, try to reflect on your own values and norms around violence. Think of a time when you found out about cyberbullying in your school. How did you respond, and what might you do differently now after learning about the cyberbullying characteristics?

Lesson 2. Recognizing the symptoms and behaviours of students involved in cyberbullying

In order to address cyberbullying, it is essential to understand the symptoms, behaviours, and consequences of it. The younger generation spends around 6 hours online per day (WHO, 2022), and every effort to combat cyberbullying becomes important.

The consequences of cyberbullying are serious because this phenomenon is associated with depression, stress, anxiety, conduct problems, substance abuse, and deterioration of social relationships (Campbell & Bauman, 2018). Cyberbullying is also strongly linked to suicidal behavior. Some studies indicate that the detrimental effects of cyberbullying are even worse than those of traditional bullying. One explanation could be the fact that in cyberbullying there is online disinhibition. The perpetrators say or disseminate things that in reality would never be done or said (Suler, 2004, cited in Campbell & Bauman, 2018).

Symptoms of cyberbullying can be grouped into several categories (UNICEF, 2024):

- Physically, students could be tired because their sleep is affected and could have somatic symptoms such as headaches, stomach aches, and nausea.
- Mentally, students could face thoughts about themselves that they are stupid, unacceptable, or not desirable. They could feel shame, fear, anger, and a decrease in self-esteem.
- Emotionally, students could lose interest and motivation to do things and feel nervous, anxious, insecure, guilty, or lonely.
- Behaviorally, the students facing this challenge can be prevented by shame from speaking up about the issue, isolating themselves and skipping school, beginning to consume substances such as alcohol, having unsafe sex, or using violent conduct, and having lower academic performance (UNESCO, 2024; OECD, 2019). Bullies showed school absenteeism (Cantone et al., 2015).

Behaviorally, cyberbullying is also associated with online solicitation and grooming. In grooming, adults seek relationships with children and teens. They can use the online environment to build rapport and facilitate their crimes. Teachers and parents should pay attention that victims are convinced by receiving attention, sexual instruction, and offers of adventure (WHO, 2022). Another phenomenon that appears in conjunction with cyberbullying, or it could be considered a form of it, is hacking and identity theft (WHO, 2022).

According to a project managed by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (Affairs (ASPA), 2019), there are several warning signs that a child/a teen/a student experiences cyberbullying. The majority of these occur when teenagers use their devices:

- Their use of devices decreases or increases rapidly.
 - When they use their devices, they appear to experience a strong emotional response.
 - They could hide the screen or not accept to discuss their online experiences. •
- They could avoid social interactions.
- They could delete their social media accounts.
 - They could lose interest in activities that they usually liked.

But we also need to consider the psychological profile of cyberbullies. They feel pain, and they suffer too. We need to move from the perspective in which they are “bad children.” There don't exist good or bad children; there are children who behave well and children who do not, and they need our help to manage their pain.

Studies indicate that cyberbullies have lower scores on affective and cognitive empathy (Zych et al., 2019). They also have difficulties in terms of psychological adjustment, such as poorer relationships and increased risk for difficulties at school (Campbell et al., 2013). Children that cyberbully others think in a weaker proportion, compared to victims, that their behaviour is harsh and it could have a great impact on the victim. There are also differences between those who cyberbully and those who don't: the first have more conduct problems (difficulties at behaving according to rules), they are hyperactive, have peer relationship problems and emotional regulation difficulties, and higher levels of stress, anxiety, and depression.

In order to recognize cyberbullying, you need to understand digital behaviour and the signs and symptoms that could appear. You should also consider the effects and consequences that could be dramatic in some cases, contributing to the low functioning of the bullied but also of the bully. If there are several signs and you think that a child in your class is cyberbullied, the first step is to talk to them in private. After that, you could also talk to a parent and build activities with your class. The strategies that you could use will be developed extensively in the next lesson.

Activity: Next time you observe that a child in your class is implicated in cyberbullying (regardless of the side), try to talk privately with him/her and identify their difficulties, problems, and symptoms, according to what you learn in this lesson. After that, you could apply in a targeted way the techniques delivered in the next chapter.

Lesson 3. Intervention strategies for addressing cyberbullying in and out of school

To combat cyberbullying, one of the most prevalent forms of online violence against children, evidence-based strategies should be used and implemented in schools and out of the classroom (WHO, 2024). Cyberbullying can be decreased using traditional bullying

prevention programs and specific programs.

Before implementing whatever technique against online violence and especially cyberbullying, some elements should be kept in mind, according to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2022):

- The majority of online violent acts against children are made by peers and acquaintances, not by strangers, as claimed by several online descriptions.
- Efficient interventions address healthy relationships and help teens navigate this period.

Teens

need to know what a healthy relationship is, who is an appropriate partner, and why and how to reduce risks.

- Existing programs could serve as the foundation for future cyberbullying initiatives.
- Cyberbullying doesn't appear in isolation but in conjunction with traditional bullying, and cyberstalking, and it can take sexual forms in sexting.
- Bullying should be addressed because it is a precursor to online violence.
- Single exposure, like a presentation, is not effective.
- Characteristics of online environments such as anonymity, the lack of an adult or system control, the great audience, and the difficulties of the victims to remove themselves without isolating should be taken into account (UNESCO, 2020).
- Programs should include enhancing student awareness, development of coping skills, empathy training, communication skills training, using safety surveys, and establishing strong relationships with students (Masoumi et al., 2024).

There is also another important step in the implementation of effective techniques: recognize all types of violence. There are times when violence takes subtle forms, but the pain is present, despite the fact that it is not easily observable. Some examples of these subtle forms are: leaving a student out of an activity, intentionally ignoring a student, spreading rumours, threatening a student verbally, ridiculing a student in front of others, and sharing embarrassing information about a student on the internet (UNESCO, 2020).

Teachers have an essential role in addressing cyberbullying, and they are the link between school and community.

- They can create a safe environment in class.
- They can conduct activities in order to prevent or address incidents.
- They can connect students with the services they need.
- They can assess what strategies work.

There are 2 types of interventions (Campbell & Bauman, 2018):

1. Proactive interventions: these types of interventions aim to prevent cyberbullying through:
 - Working with students: having regular class discussions about bullying and cyberbullying and establishing which are the appropriate behaviours. At this point, it

is essential to let students generate the rules. Examples of rules are trying to include those who are left out, trying to help those who are bullied, and having student mentoring groups.

- Activating bystanders: encouraging them to object to the behaviour; using the KiVa antibullying model: taking the teachers as models; empathise with the victim; try to de-escalate the conflict. In order to imply the bystanders, try to ask students to think and reflect on what they would do as bystanders in the first place.
- Using SEL techniques that you learned in previous lessons about bullying
- Organisation of circle time meetings where your students can talk about personal concerns.

2. Reactive interventions when an incident took place:

- Apply sanctions, but not in an excessively authoritarian way. One example could be creating a bully court with your students, where they could advise the school regarding sanctions.
- Discuss with the victim in order to strengthen his/her social skills.
- Mediate the conflict and address the pain of the victim and the pain of the bully.
- Use restorative practice for bullies: ask students to reflect on what they did, if they feel remorse (but take care of not inflicting public humiliation and shame), if they think that they can manage this, and after that, try to help them to reintegrate in the group.
- Try to use the support group method. You should discuss privately with the victim, and after that, you present the bullies with the effects on the victim. Another student who wasn't in the conflict tried to think about what they would do.
- Use the motivational interview. In this type of intervention, the first step is to express empathy and to let the bully talk about the situation. The second step is to roll with resistance, which means having a conversation about the incident without being judgmental. The next step is to develop discrepancy through questions, active listening, and creating a list with reasonable reasons to change and what resources and support are needed.

Efficient programs encompass several elements and techniques that you can use with your class, according to the World Health Organization report (WHO, 2022):

At a structural level:

- Use multiple learning strategies and tools, such as videos, games, reading activities, and discussions.
- Keep in mind that here, quantity matters: you need repeated exposure in order to see an effect.
- Use role plays in order to develop peer engagement and interaction.
- Try to engage the whole-school and parents. One presentation for parents will not work, but they could be involved through homework and activities with their children at home.

At a skill level:

- Develop problem-solving skills. Try to engage students to reflect on conflict situations and to choose a suitable response. You can implement that through role-plays or stories.
- Train them to be assertive and resist peer pressure by exposing them to different situations that could amplify internal hesitations.
- Train them in developing empathy through recognizing and understanding what other people feel, and after them, help them to take another perspective and appreciate the differences.
- You could help your students manage their emotions through breathing exercises and self-distraction.
- You could teach them to identify conflicts and, after that, to withdraw or to address the needs and points of view of another in order to find a compromise solution.
- You need to teach them how to seek help. The first step is the identification of trusted helpers, and after that is the overcoming of the barriers, such as embarrassment.
- You could mobilise bystanders by teaching them to identify inappropriate behaviour and to intervene.

After we understand the phenomenon, our messages, and interventions need to be designed as harm-reduction ones, not in a prohibitive way (WHO, 2024). Harm reduction strategies encompass not only cyberbullying but also the phenomena that appear in conjunction with it.

Harm reduction strategies for grooming:

- Include in your discussion information like the age of consent, why it is not appropriate to have an intimate relationship with an adult, the strategies used by groomers (seduction, isolation, gifts, guilt induction, denigrating the family of the victim), and how to recognize the signs, such as asking a lot about sexual experiences and requesting photos.
- Teach them how to be assertive and refuse, how to help friends, and how to seek help.

Harm reduction strategies for sexting:

- Explain to your students that if they want to share images, they need to share only with the trusted ones and not be sent under pressure or when intoxicated.
- Explain what informed consent is.
- In photos, they should not show their private parts, including the face.
- Use end-to-end encryption apps.
- Do not share images with another person.

Teach your students the signs of a healthy relationship:

- Consent is an important part
- Promises are kept.
- Mistakes are recognized.
- Respect is present.

In an unhealthy relationship, the signs could be:

- Excessive control
- Anger management serious problems
- The presence of guilty
- The presence of threats

Activity

In the next few weeks, if you already identified situations of bullying and cyberbullying in your class, try to choose, maybe with your students, some strategies presented in this lesson and to apply them.

Lesson 4. Educating students about responsible use of technology, privacy, and online behaviour

According to the premise that there is good in evil and evil in good, technology can be approached through this philosophical tool. Technological progress is unstoppable, and access to it cannot be denied. What makes the difference is educating students about the internet culture. Features of cyber ethics education include clear objectives, accurate content, proper methods, real-life case studies, and ethical frameworks.

There are some main concepts when we talk about responsible use of technology:

- ❖ **Digital resilience-** this can be translated as being minimally affected by online negative experiences and also have several protective factors that help a person navigate this stressor (Vandoninck and Haenens, 2015).
- ❖ **Digital skills-** it involves safeguarding sensitive information and personal data, making digital privacy education essential to equip students for the digital world and help them navigate it safely and responsibly (Vandoninck and Haenens, 2015).
- ❖ **Online behavior-** under the disguise of invisibility in cyberspace, children could change their personalities and carry out things that they dare not do in this physical world (Chen, 2003).

There are some steps for achieving **digital resilience**:

1. Teach your students about digital privacy skills - you can discuss information that cannot be shared online (age, full name, school location, any credit card information).
2. Support your students to think in a critical way about any information. Encourage them to ask questions, such as:
 - Who created this content? Is it a reliable source (e.g., a government website, reputable organization, or verified news outlet)?
 - What is the purpose of the content? (e.g., Inform, entertain, sell, persuade?)
 - Is the author or source transparent about their credentials or affiliations?
 - Am I oversharing without having established a trustworthy relationship with this content?
 - Is the content presenting facts, or is it an opinion?
 - Is the language emotional or exaggerated to evoke a specific reaction?
 - Are there multiple perspectives represented, or is it one-sided?
3. Help students to understand that anything uploaded on the internet may be exposed

at some point in the future and we have no control over this.

4. Help students understand why people can be mean online (you can introduce emotions in the discussion like rage and shame and create a psychological portrait of an online bully):

- People may lash out online due to anger triggered by disagreements, perceived slights, or frustration in their offline lives. The internet provides an outlet to vent these emotions, often with little immediate consequence.
- Anonymity on the internet allows individuals to act without fear of being identified, which lowers their inhibition and increases the likelihood of aggressive behavior.
- The absence of non-verbal cues online (e.g., facial expressions, tone of voice) can make it harder for bullies to empathize with the impact of their words.
- Some individuals engage in online meanness to gain approval or status within a peer group. They may bully others to entertain an audience, gain likes, or assert dominance in digital spaces.
- Text-based communication often lacks nuance, leading to misunderstandings that can escalate into conflict. What one person sees as a harmless joke, another may interpret as an attack.
- Some individuals adopt trolling behavior, intentionally provoking others for amusement. This culture normalizes meanness as entertainment and desensitizes participants to its impact.

5. Build students' confidence in their ability to take on digital challenges (include them in finding solutions together).

6. Teach students to seek help from others and also normalise help-seeking behaviors (you can use the principle of thermodynamics, things can get worse if we don't release tension in time).

Lesson 5. Collaborative efforts with parents and law enforcement for severe cases of online cyberbullying

If things get out of control, the authorities need to step in to address things legally. This is the right action in severe cases of cyberbullying. Please also consult the Module dedicated to national policies, to find out more about bullying-related legal aspects.

In some cases, the relationship between parents, teachers, and law enforcement is not clearly defined, so it is hard to coordinate in order to find the best solution in severe cyberbullying cases (Broll, 2014).

Firstly, prevention is key. Teachers need to collaborate with parents in order to protect the child. They need to create clear boundaries and guide them in the online world. Sometimes, unfortunately, things get out of control, and we reach a point where prevention

is not enough. That's why a safety net is necessary.

Parents should have a clear understanding of the online life of their child. They should be open to new information, but at the same time aim to have a critical view of the risks involved. They need to provide a safe place for their child, for when things get out of control because they will seek help from an understanding authority figure (Broll, 2014).

Teachers should aim to be professionally prepared for both prevention and intervention. They should be continuously updated to the new literature and technology methods. They also need to be the provider of the information, to both parents and children. In severe cases, when they feel overwhelmed, they should be aware of the responsible authorities that can be alerted, so the situation is handled as soon as possible, without wasting any time (Broll, 2014).

Law enforcement should be also updated on potential risks in students' lives, and they should continuously keep in touch with the teachers. They should analyse the situations reported by teachers or parents and choose the best option in order to stop the cyberbullying from spreading (Broll, 2014).

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