

Written evidence: inquiry into the impact of cyberbullying on children and young people's mental health and emotional wellbeing

Inquiry chaired by Alex Chalk MP in partnership with The Children's Society and YoungMinds.

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1. Based on your knowledge, experience or practice, please give an overview of the impact that cyberbullying can have on children and young people's mental health and emotional wellbeing.

Barnardo's NI is the largest children's charity in Northern Ireland. To inform this response, we held 2 focus groups with 6 females aged 13 – 17 in Belfast to gain greater insight into how children and young people experience cyberbullying and how it may impact on their mental health and emotional wellbeing. Young people told us cyberbullying can take many forms including:

- Name calling or being mean online;
- Posting embarrassing photos or videos of others without their permission;
- Digitally manipulating pictures to create false impressions;
- Posting pointed statuses;
- 'Sexting' requests for pictures or videos;
- Cut and pasting pictures or status of others into group chats;
- Deleting someone from a group chat.

The [Northern Ireland Anti-Bullying Forum](#) describes cyberbullying as bullying that takes place through electronic technologies such as mobile or smart phones, smart phone apps, social network websites and gaming consoles. Results from research conducted in Northern Ireland found that while it may be easier to use these forms of technology as a way to bully others, it may cause greater distress for the target than more conventional forms of bullying. [Kernaghan and Elwood](#)

(2013) have developed a useful framework to understand how the characteristics of cyberbullying may impact on children and young people's mental health and emotional wellbeing as partially outlined below:

Boundless space: Cyberbullying interactions are not bound by time or physical space. Unlike more traditional types of methods, the target may experience bullying via text, phone call, comments on social networking sites and other ways any time of the day or any place. This may increase the target's anxiety and cause them to feel that they cannot escape cyberbullying.

Infinite Audience: In terms of cyberspace, the audience may be larger than that of conventional bullying and may be potentially infinite. In one focus group cyberbullying was described as more 'intense' than traditional forms of bullying due to the bigger audience: *"If something is going on in school then it is maybe one or two people doing it to that person or maybe five people which is awful but social media can turn it to twenty people or thirty people and it is much more intense"* (17 year old female). This characteristic of cyberspace may result in greater fear and humiliation of the target compared to bullying in a physical space.

Unknown Bully: With the ability for people to create fake accounts to 'troll' or bully others online, the bully has the potential to hide their identity. This may result in online exchanges being nastier than face to face due to the physical distance between the bully and target: *"They can hide behind that screen and they don't think it is going to hurt the other person on the other side"* (17 year old female).

Low Parental Presence: Bullying tends to thrive in areas with low adult supervision. Unlike other physical spaces children and young people inhabit, some platforms in cyberspace have little or no supervision by adults. This may

have the effect of children and young people feeling alone and unable to access support.

Bullying online is not detached from the real world. Young people reported that cyberbullying can affect school attendance and increase anxiety about going to school: *“It happened to me and I thought that everyone was against me and I didn’t go into school the next day because I didn’t know what to do. Like I didn’t know who I would sit with or what had happened because it happened online. I wouldn’t know what to do.”* (17 year old female).

2. Based on your knowledge, experience or practice, do you think that there are any groups of children and young people who are particularly vulnerable to cyberbullying and its effects on mental health and emotional wellbeing?

Access to the internet and social media in particular has significantly impacted on how children and young people interact, form and maintain relationships with others. Positive relationships with family and peers are important to a child’s development. Children’s wellbeing is put at risk when relationship problems develop including bullying ([Kernaghan and Stewart, 2016](#)). In this way, any child may be affected by bullying online or in real life. Research has shown that targets of bullying and by extension cyberbullying can feel isolated, lonely, powerless, shameful and experience more health problems, feel hurt or threatened and may have their self-esteem damaged in the long term. Research conducted by the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) examining the impact of childhood bullying with a cohort of over 9000 cases found that childhood bullying victimization is associated with a long-term impact on mental health service use through to midlife ([Evans-Lacko et al, 2017](#)). In the very worst occasions, bullying and cyberbullying can have a serious detrimental impact on a child’s mental health leading to the death of a young person.

Both focus groups were asked if they thought any particular groups were vulnerable to cyberbullying. Two key issues around vulnerability to cyberbullying emerged. First, those young people that were perceived as being different whether through disability, perceived sexual orientation or ethnicity were identified as potential targets of bullying both offline and online. While it was not always the case, young people felt that those bullied in school or other physical spaces were likely to be targeted online by the same peer group. Young people in the focus group also suggested that the social status of a child in school could result in them being more vulnerable to cyberbullying. Examples of groups who could be affected included those with no or little friends, young people joining a new school such as at sixth form or newcomer (EAL) pupils.

Barnardo's research into child sexual exploitation (CSE) has found that certain groups, such as young people with learning difficulties, those with mental health problems and lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, transgender and questioning (LGBTQ) young people, appear to be particularly vulnerable to online harm. This is in part due to seeking social interaction online that they are not able to achieve offline and in part due to not fully understanding the consequences of sharing personal information, sending images or arranging to meet strangers met online ([Palmer, 2015](#)). These groups may also be vulnerable to other online risks such as cyberbullying.

3. How effective do you think social media companies are at preventing and responding to cyberbullying? Please give specific examples of current interventions which you think are effective, or other examples of good practice you have identified.

Barnardo's NI recognises that bullying is a complex phenomenon. It may be carried out by either a single person or a group and appear in a range of locations online and in physical spaces. It is also the case that there are various

motivations why children are bullied such as appearance, perceived sexual orientation, ethnicity, social status or because the bully was bored. The sheer range of these contributing factors to how bullying may be experienced has made it problematic for all stakeholders to effectively prevent and reduce bullying and cyberbullying. While acknowledging that challenges exist, social media companies could be more effective in preventing and responding to cyberbullying on their platforms.

Young people in the focus groups were asked for any examples of good practice relating to social media companies and cyberbullying either experienced by them or a friend but they were unable to think of any. *“They need to start doing more definitely. I can’t even remember anything they have done about anything. I think they are just it in for money.”* (16 year old female). Three main areas to improve social media companies’ effectiveness in responding to cyberbullying were drawn from the focus groups:

Age Limits: Popular social media platforms with young people such as Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat have set 13 years of age as the minimum age requirement. Young people felt that this was useless as it was not enforced or checked on any platform.

Prevention: Awareness about any steps social media companies took to prevent cyberbullying amongst young people was low. There is scope to increase children’s and young people digital skills to be able to prevent and reduce bullying online on social media.

Reporting: Some young people were unaware of how to report cyberbullying to the platform where they experienced it. Of those that used the Report Button on Facebook they found it to be ineffective and that no action was taken: *“I’ve been texted by all these anonymous accounts multiple times – some guy has proposed to me on Facebook – and I reported him but nothing happened. He could still text*

me.” (16 year old female). This was frustrating for the young people as they felt they were not taken seriously and it reduced their feelings of safety online.

4. Do you think that social media companies could improve their ability to prevent and respond to cyberbullying on their platforms, and if so, how? Are there any measures that particular social media companies need to take?

In terms of cyberbullying specifically, young people told us that often they were advised by adults to reduce or stop using social media if they experienced cyberbullying. This was viewed by the young people as an unrealistic solution to cyberbullying: *“You can’t stay away from it no matter how much adults are like “Just don’t go on it then.”*” (16 year old female). Recognising that children and young people’s use of social media is here to stay, a number of suggestions of how social media companies could improve their ability to prevent and respond to cyberbullying are outlined below:

- While young people were aware of advertisements targeting them on Facebook they were unsure if any helplines or support information was available. They felt that making information about support around cyberbullying and mental health prominent in similar spaces would be an improvement and would make it accessible to a wide audience.
- A key area for improvement is the right for children to remove images, comments and videos online. Children and young people may regret something they have posted or shared about themselves or others and need help from social media companies to erase it. This is a crucial way to respond to cyberbullying as swift removal would reduce the distress caused to an individual and reduce the audience who view the items. It also allows children and young people who have made mistakes online to have this ‘forgotten’ rather than on permanent record.

- As discussed in Q3 some young people were unaware of how to report cyberbullying to a social media company. Social media companies should take measures to communicate with children and young people in a way they can easily access and understand. This should include their general Terms and Conditions, their policies and mechanisms to report abuse. Furthermore, it was suggested that reporting was not taken seriously and acted upon by all social media companies. Videos, pictures or comments that are flagged or reported can still remain visible while they are being moderated. The speed of the moderation could be improved and the potential to temporarily remove the items reported as cyberbullying during this time would reduce the audience and reassure children and young people that reporting was taken seriously.
- Young people felt there were little or no consequences for bullying others online using social media. They reported that people should take responsibility for what they say online. Ultimately, they felt that social media companies should be able to block or freeze all accounts of an individual for a time period as punishment for using social media to abuse others.

5. From your knowledge, experience or practice what do you think are the core principles that should guide the approach of social media companies in preventing, identifying and responding to cyberbullying on their platforms?

Early Intervention: Early support and intervention is a central aspect to Barnardo's approach to working with children, young people and families. We want to prevent the challenges in the first place. By tackling the causes rather than just the symptoms, we can create better outcomes for more children. This is an area that social media companies should explore further to develop ways in

which cyberbullying can be prevented on their platforms. This would be a major development as it could reduce the distress of an individual at the time and result in significant savings in mental health care over the life course.

Evidence Informed: Any approach taken by social media companies should be guided by evidence. Much more research is needed into developing effective ways to prevent, identify and respond to cyberbullying. Research is also needed to understand other risks children and young people may encounter on social media and how this could impact on their mental health and emotional wellbeing.

Participation: Barnardo's vision is of a society in which every child has the chance to fulfil their potential, and realise their ambitions. In order to achieve this, we must make sure young people's voices are heard by decision makers. Greater engagement with children and young people is needed throughout all anti bullying work to understand their experiences and to develop ways in which they can be helped and supported. Barnardo's NI would strongly recommend the participation of children and young people in the development of any new approaches by social media companies to prevent, identify and respond to cyberbullying. In addition, we recommend that information is disseminated to children and young people in an attractive age appropriate way such as in [Barnardo's Be Safe](#) guide.

Collaboration: In addition to ensuring children and young people can meaningfully contribute to new approaches to prevent and reduce cyberbullying, Barnardo's NI suggests that the principle of collaboration with key stakeholders including Government across the 4 UK nations guides new developments by social media companies. One suggestion of collaboration was put forward in a recent policy paper for Barnardo's [Making young minds matter: Reshaping support services for young people in the new Parliament](#) (Sim, 2017). It recommended that Government should work with social media companies to

create a fund, based on voluntary contributions from such companies match-funded by Government, to finance interventions and innovations of this kind.

Innovation: Social media has brought multiple benefits to children and young people including the ability to connect with others, access support and information at their convenience and a platform for young people to be heard in a range of diverse ways. However, children and young people are a vulnerable group and every effort to keep them safe online should be made by social media companies along with parents, schools and other agencies. Although this does provide a challenge, it is also an opportunity to create innovative solutions. Social media companies are well placed to continue the innovative approach used to create these platforms and apply this to children's online safety and cyberbullying specifically.

6. If you have any further comments about how social media companies can better respond to cyberbullying or promote positive interactions online, please detail these below.

Much work is needed to create an online world that is safe and geared towards children and young people. Barnardo's is a signatory of the '[5Rights](#)' framework which takes the existing rights of children and young people and articulates them for the digital world. These rights should guide social media companies in all their dealings with children and include:

- The right to remove;
- The right to know;
- The right to safety and support;
- The right to make informed and conscious choices;
- The right to digital literacy.
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7. Based on your knowledge, experience or practice, do you have any other views on the risks that social media can present to children and young people’s mental health and emotional wellbeing, including to specific groups of young people who are particularly vulnerable?

Young people reported that social media can bring a range of benefits. This included an easy way of staying in touch with family and friends and to communicate with others. Young people also reported that social media could be useful in exam revision and for information about world news. However, they were clear that social media does have a number of risks in terms of mental health and wellbeing:

Content: The nature of information available for children and young people online may pose risks to their mental health and emotional wellbeing. It is not always easy to find accurate information, sources that are trustworthy or age appropriate content. One young person said: *“Anything can be said. You can see anything you want by typing it in. That’s crazy. I have seen people’s heads get cut off.”* (16 year old female). Inadvertently or directly viewing violent images or sexual content may cause concern and damage a child’s emotional wellbeing.

Digital Skills: Those children and young people with less technical proficiency around privacy settings, location services and managing their online profiles can be exposed to greater risks. One example of this was given in a focus group related to the new update on Snap Chat (June 2017). Snap Maps, the new update, means users are constantly sharing their location with their Snapchat friends, as long as the app is open or actively being used. This is the default setting so children and young need to be able to access settings and use ‘Ghost mode’ to make their location private. This represents obvious safety risks for children and young people. It also means that they can track their friends’ location and see who is meeting up leading to both fear of missing out and perceptions of social exclusion.

Child Sexual Exploitation: All children and young people can be at risk of sexual exploitation when going online and interacting with strangers. Young people in the focus groups reported that false profiles were a risk they encountered which reduced their ability to know what was real online: *“It is pretty scary because some people could be really gullible enough to think that the 38 year old man or fifty what whatever age he is, is actually a 12 year old that they are going to meet up with.”* (17 year old female). A recent survey of five Barnardo’s sexual exploitation services across the UK found that of the 702 children accessing the services 42% of these children were groomed online. Of those groomed online, nearly two-thirds (61%) met the perpetrator and were sexually exploited. Almost half of those groomed online were also exploited by more than one offender. As outlined in Q2 young people with learning difficulties, those with mental health problems and lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, transgender and questioning (LGBTQ) young people, appear to be particularly vulnerable to online harm. Children were also exploited through the use of technology in other ways. This included sexting, peer exploitation, exchange of films/ photographs, encouragement to self-harm, encouragement to engage in harmful sexual behaviour, and sexual role play through animated profiles or online gaming ([Fox and Kalkan, 2016](#)).

Body Image: – Technology on smartphones has provided the ability to edit and drastically change photos and images. This has created the pressure to attempt to replicate this in real life and the pressure to edit photos displayed on social media in the same ways. *“I take about 20 million photos and I am like ‘Nope, none of them’”* (17 years old female). Evidence would suggest girls are more likely to belong to social media platforms than boys and are more likely to be high intensity users ([The Good Childhood Report, 2017](#)). Furthermore, this study found high intensity social media use may be having some detrimental effect on children’s subjective well-being with the effects stronger for girls than for boys.

8. Based on your knowledge, experience or practice, do you have any other views about how social media can be a tool for promoting positive mental health and wellbeing in young people. Are there any groups of children and young people who you think particularly benefit from access to social media?

Barnardo's NI recognises the impact that social media has had on childhood in the last decade. While risks for children and young people are real online, children and young people have told us that it also provides benefits of staying in touch easier with family, informing them about the world and providing them with a space to connect in. As the majority of young people use the internet for social networking, it is important that companies work towards developing tools to promote positive mental health and wellbeing. We have identified three main areas in which social media could provide benefits to support positive mental health:

Information: Social media can improve young people's access to accurate information about mental health and emotional wellbeing. Barnardo's NI would support Royal Society for Public Health's recommendation in their [#StatusofMind Report](#) that the Information Standard Principles to health information published via social media are applied so children and young people are clear that information on health and social care is trustworthy.

Service Delivery: Barnardo's believes there is scope for some means of service delivery for mental health with children and young people online. This is one area that social media companies could provide tools for early intervention and support. One 17 year old cited The Samaritans' use of technology as a positive tool to help young people with their mental health: *"The Samaritans are really good so they are because it is anonymous. You text them through text messages and they will reply to you to try and help you in the situation with whatever you want help with"*. Additional development of online tools for mental health services

requires further input from medical professionals, children and young people and the agencies that work with them.

Signposting and Support: Social media platforms are well placed to signpost those experiencing mental health issues to those organisations who can help children and young people. It can also provide access to others who have experienced issues themselves and can motivate others to seek help. Barnardo's developed an app, 'Wud U?' designed to educate young people about sexual exploitation. The app has been downloaded more than 13,000 times and features scenarios, guidance on staying safe and signposts users to support. This is one example of how technology already regularly used by children and young people can be a helpful tool in providing support. Further work should be undertaken to use other social media platforms as a tool for promoting positive mental health and wellbeing in young people.

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