

Parent's Anticipated Responses to Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying is the intentional act of using technology to intimidate, harass, or mistreat another. Compared to offline bullying, the online nature of cyberbullying permits greater anonymity for the perpetrator and the means to distribute harmful content rapidly, widely and to a larger audience.

As the internet becomes increasingly prevalent in daily life, cyberbullying poses a growing threat to adolescents, who are the greatest consumers of digital media and at a higher risk of the psychological, behavioural and health problems that may emerge as a consequence of cyberbullying (for both the victims and perpetrators).

When faced with the decision to report instances of cyberbullying, adolescents often feel that they should handle it themselves because they are concerned that their parents may respond disproportionately, or that there may be negative consequences for disclosure (such as limiting access to technology). As a result, many adolescents do not disclose instances of cyberbullying and, therefore, may not receive the support they need. Help-seeking is highly important for adolescents to reduce the negative effects of cyberbullying but parents must have the necessary tools to deal with instances of cyberbullying appropriately. Unfortunately, parents are often unaware of, or underestimate their children's experiences of cyberbullying.

Despite the crucial role that parents play in the prevention of bullying, parents may feel conflicted about what strategies to take, or may respond ineffectively when their child discloses their involvement in bullying (either as a victim or perpetrator). For instance, parents may ignore the problem, retaliate, or remove a child's internet access in an effort to protect them. In this research, we wanted to know how parents believed they would respond if their child were to be involved in cyberbullying as either a victim or perpetrator.

What was done:

We asked 452 Australian parents and caregivers (of children between 12–16 years) two questions: How would they react if they found out their child had 1) been the victim of cyberbullying, and 2) if their child had been cyberbullying others? Using thematic analysis, responses were analysed to identify themes and patterns.

What was found:

Three main themes were identified regarding how parents anticipated they would respond to cyberbullying: Taking Action, Communication and Education, and Emotional Reactions. Most parents indicated a desire to respond proactively to instances of cyberbullying, by offering support, seeking justice, or mediating their child's internet use. However, disparities in parents' anticipated responses were identified depending on whether the child was imagined as the victim or perpetrator. For example, when the child was imagined as a victim, 79.6% of parents focused on taking action, compared to 50.9% of parents in response to their child being cyberbully. Parents of perpetrators were more likely to respond with communication and education.

Theme 1: Taking Action

Taking action represented parents' intentions to stop or minimise the negative outcomes of cyberbullying (for both victim and perpetrator) – such as reporting the incident, restricting technology access, or punishment (for the perpetrator). These responses highlight an apparent desire to regain order and control over the situation, and seek justice.

Restricting access to technology was the most common anticipated response for parents of both imagined perpetrators (33.4%) and victims (23.9%), representing an instinctual response to limit their child's access to the channels of cyber victimisation in a protective and reactive way (known as restrictive mediation). However, this strategy may counterintuitively increase the risk of cyberbullying and deter children from disclosing future experiences.

44.1% of parents suggested they would report incidences cyberbullying if their child were the victim (for example, by reporting to the child's school, police, or other authorities). Notably, just 7.7% of parents suggested they would report an incident of cyberbullying if their child was the perpetrator.

Theme 2: Communication and Education

Communication and Education comprised parents' anticipated strategies to engage with the victim or perpetrator, and offer support, understanding, and facilitate communication (both between parents and children and victims and perpetrators).

When their child was imagined to be a victim of cyberbullying, 26.4% of parents anticipated that they

would offer their child support, focusing on their child's feelings and experiences, through active listening and offering positive coping strategies (suggesting an active mediation process). Active mediation is a protective strategy which promotes better communication between parents and children about the internet and equips children with the skills to respond proactively to online risks.

When their child was imagined to be a perpetrator of cyberbullying, parents' responses focused on victim restoration and support for the bully. Some (17.5%) suggested they would make their child apologise to the victim, an often ineffective strategy that may have counterintuitive results, sometimes even increasing incidences of perpetration. A larger proportion (27.7%) indicated offering education and support in an effort to understand their child's motivations for bullying and comprehension of the situation's significance.

Theme 3: Emotional Reactions

Emotional Reactions was the smallest theme identified and represented the self-identified emotions associated with discovering one's child was involved in cyberbullying (for example, anger, sympathy, and disappointment).

Emotional reactions were described more often and more strongly when parents imagined their child as the victim of cyberbullying.

When parents imagined their child as a perpetrator of cyberbullying, their emotional responses typically involved anger (5.5%), but also included shock, disappointment, shame, and denial.

The implications:

Our results suggest that parent's responses may be, at times, ineffective for managing cyberbullying, and are often contrary to children's wishes. Restrictive reactions may disregard children's abilities to identify and minimise online risks and deter them from disclosing future instances of cyber victimisation. Adopting proactive and preventative parental strategies to prepare and educate children - before instances of cyberbullying occur - is likely to be more effective for both the victims and perpetrators. More guidance for parents is needed from all levels of the community (including schools and government) to prepare them to respond appropriately to, and proactively prevent, incidences of cyberbullying.