Relationships Australia Monthly Website Survey

September Survey: Cyberbullying

Introduction

Cyberbullying is bullying through the use of technology; for example, using the internet or a mobile phone to hurt, harass or embarrass someone (Reach Out 2020). While cyberbullying can affect anyone using technology, this survey specifically addressed cyberbullying in school-aged children.

1 in 5 Australian youth report experiencing cyberbullying (Reach Out 2020). Cyberbullying can be particularly insidious as technology allows for anonymity, making it difficult to trace the perpetrator. Even when the victim knows who the perpetrator is, psychologists believe that it can be easier to bully someone through digital means as the perpetrator does not need to confront their target in person and therefore may feel more entitled to do or say things they would feel uncomfortable saying in another setting.

Cyberbullying is complicated further by the onus of responsibility and legal issues in digital spaces. When cyberbullying occurs between two school-aged children outside school grounds, it is difficult to ascertain whether the school, the parents or the digital platform should take responsibility. In fact, platforms such as Facebook have been criticised for their handling of harassment and bullying. For example, reporting abuse requires the abused to block the individual or 'ignore' the conversation through a silencing feature. As such, Facebook places the onus of reporting on the victim. This means the user has to experience the bullying and acknowledge it as inappropriate and report it, before it can be dealt with by the company. Alternatively, people have argued that Facebook has the capacity to incorporate technology to address these issues before the user experiences the abuse. Facebook says this would go against their ethos to encourage free and open dialogue among people (Kirkpatrick 2010).

Since the COVID-19 pandemic began, many students have moved to online learning and increased their use of digital media outside the classroom to stay in contact with friends and family. Queensland Kids Helpline has reported a dramatic increase in calls about mental health, cyberbullying and suicidal thoughts since the COVID-19 pandemic started, with calls increasing by approximately 14% (YourTown 2020). This month, Relationships Australia asked people what they know about cyberbullying and how they would combat it, especially in relation to COVID-19 and the increase in the use of technology among young Australians.

The findings in this report support the conclusions from the Royal Children's Hospital National Child Health Poll that found that the majority of Australian parents are not confident in identifying or responding to signs of a mental health problem in their child (Rhodes 2017). This highlights the continued need for awareness and increased capacity building, to ensure that adults can better recognise early warning signs of mental health problems, and to navigate their way to the right support. If you are looking for support with these, or other issues, Relationships Australia is providing counselling throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, including through telephone and/or video appointments.

Key Findings

- 74% of respondents think cyberbullying is a big problem among school-aged children (figure 2)

- People felt more confident in their ability to *notice* a child's social issues compared with their ability to *address* a specific social issue, such as cyberbullying (figure 3)

- While over half of the respondents felt confident in their ability to address cyberbullying, 20% of these respondents did not feel confident in their perceptiveness about child mental health more generally (figure 3)

- 97% of respondents think the parents of the perpetrator were responsible for addressing cyberbullying, 89% thought the parents of the victim were responsible (figure 4)

- 80%+ said they would seek help from institutions like schools and organisations that addresses children's issues (figure 5)

- Most people felt that COVID-19 had an effect on cyberbullying; 70% agreed that the move to online learning had increased children's vulnerability to cyberbullying (figure 6)

- Two-thirds of respondents felt that it was the school's responsibility to track additional communications across platforms, especially as online learning increases the time students spend online (figure 6)

Results

436 people responded to the Relationships Australia September survey. As in past months, the majority of respondents (76%) identified as women. In comparison with other months, this survey demonstrated at increase in the percentage of 20-29 year olds completing the survey.

Figure 1. Respondent Demographics
Monthly website survey, September 2020, Survey results

Figure 2. Cyberbulling is...
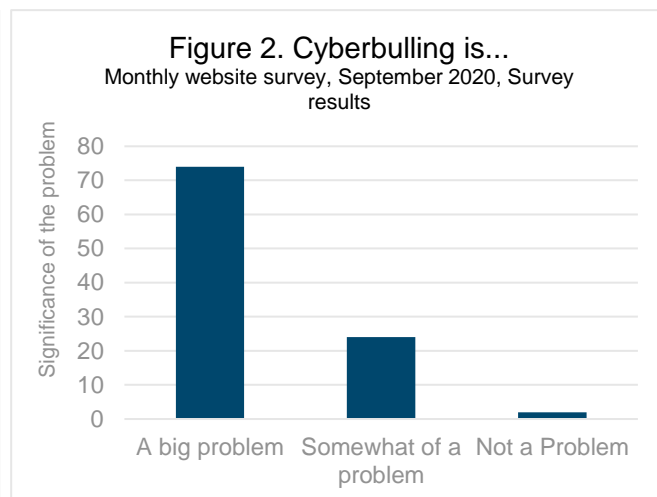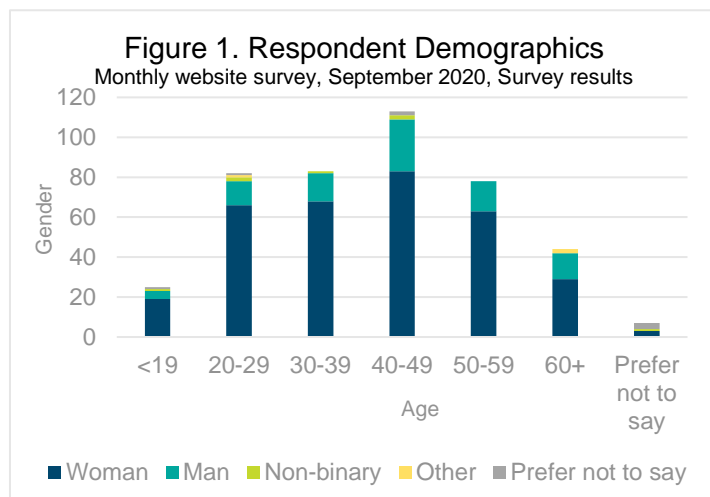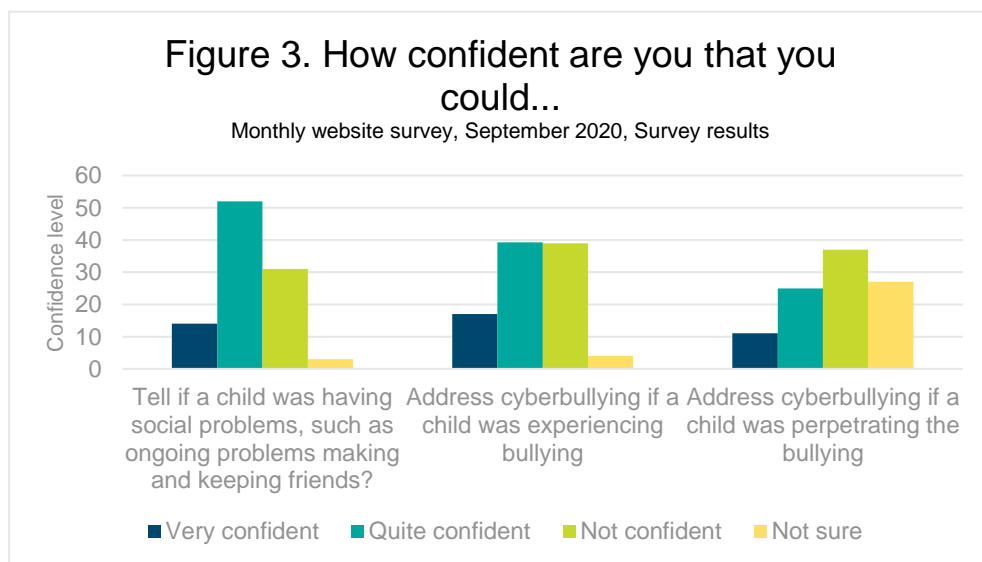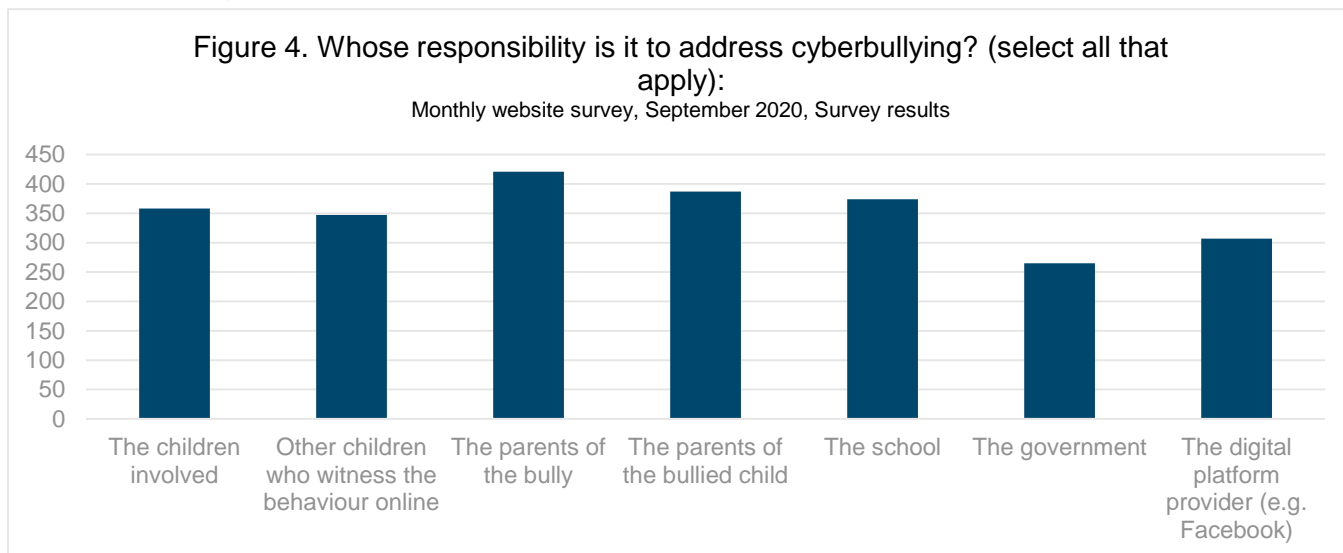Monthly website survey, September 2020, Survey results

Figure 2 illustrates that 74% of respondents think cyberbullying is a big problem among school-aged children, a further 24% considered it somewhat of a problem and only 2% thought it not a problem. Despite the concern about cyberbullying, figure 3 demonstrates that people's confidence in addressing the issue is dependent on the nature of the child's involvement in the issue. People felt significantly more confident in their ability to address the issue of a child having social problems (14% very confident, 52% quite confident) or being cyberbullied (17% very confident, 39% quite confident) than their ability to address cyberbullying if the child was perpetrating the behaviour.

Figure 3. How confident are you that you could...
Monthly website survey, September 2020, Survey results

If a child is having social problems, such as ongoing issues making and keeping friends, this is often an indicator a child is being bullied (Rhodes 2017). Figure 3 suggests that people felt more confident they could *identify* social issues than actually *address* them (66% confidence versus 56%). Interestingly, of those respondents who felt confident that they could *address* cyberbullying (56%), 20% said they were not confident in their ability to notice if a child was having social problems in general. This suggests that while the majority of respondents have some level of

confidence in their ability to address cyberbullying, this does not always translate to perceptiveness about child mental health more generally. In short, this may mean the child experiencing the bullying would need to take some form of action to alert parents, teachers or other support figures in order to receive any support.

Figure 4. Whose responsibility is it to address cyberbullying? (select all that apply):
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As discussed, respondents' views as to who bears the responsibility for responding to cyberbullying is unclear. Figure 4 illustrates that respondents felt that a number of different individuals and entities have responsibility, with at least 60% of respondents attributing responsibility across each category. The fewest respondents felt that it was the government's responsibility (61%), while almost all respondents (97%) felt that it was the responsibility of the parents of the bully to address cyberbullying. Given the lack of confidence many had in their own ability to address bullying (as outlined in figure 3), this suggests that while many consider that it is a responsibility to be borne by the parents of the person doing the bullying, people may require assistance to effectively address these issues. Similarly, although 70% of respondents agreed that the platform provider should take responsibility for the bullying, legal and feasibility issues complicate this from occurring in practice.
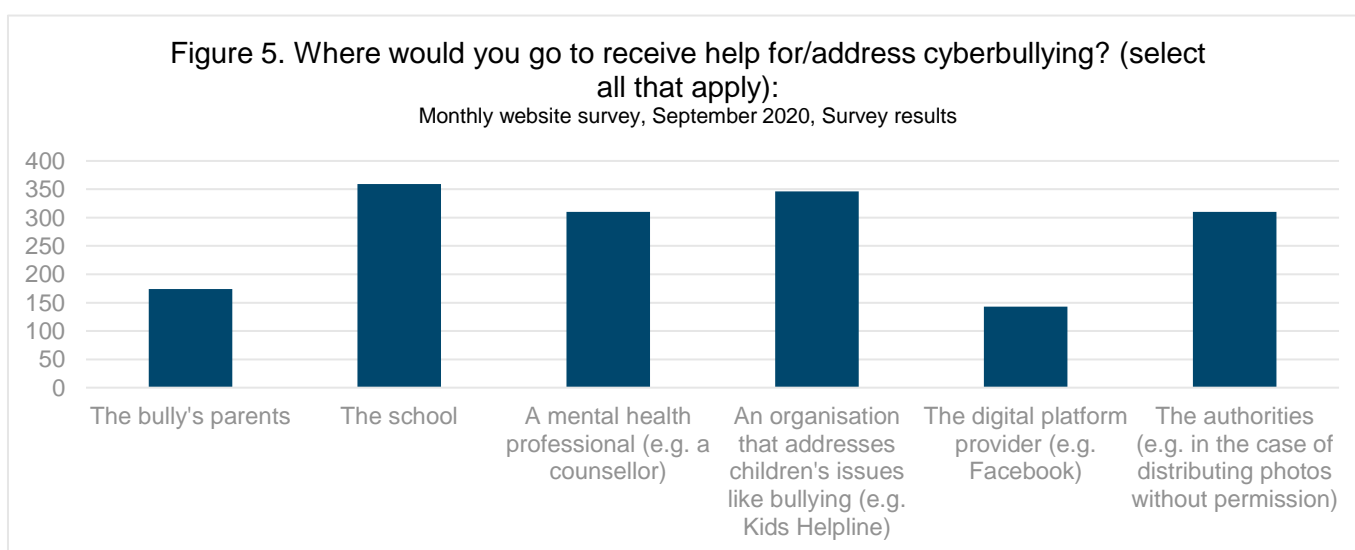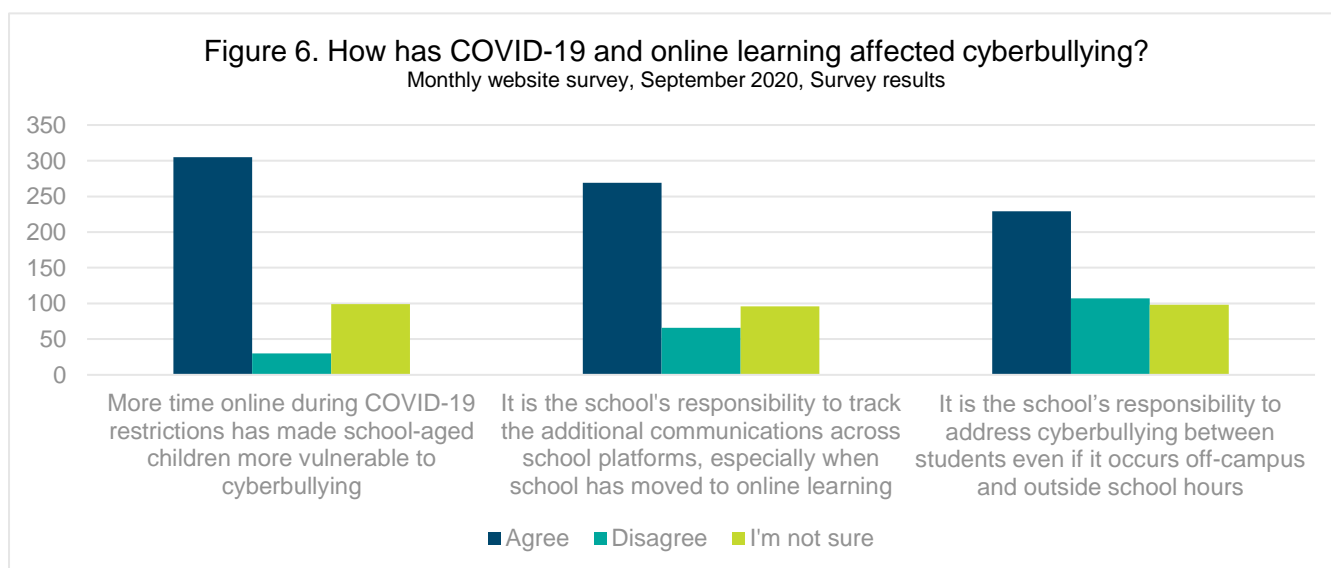

Figure 5. Where would you go to receive help for/address cyberbullying? (select all that apply):
Monthly website survey, September 2020, Survey results

Figure 5 explores where people would go to receive support for a child experiencing cyberbullying. Notably, while the bully's parents and digital platforms were deemed responsible for addressing cyberbullying by over two thirds of respondents, people were least likely to go to these sources for help, with only 33% and 40% of respondents choosing these options respectively.

People were most likely to seek help from institutions like schools and organisations. For example, 82% of respondents said they would contact the school for support and 79% of respondents said they would speak with an organisation that addresses children's issues (figure 5). This suggests that, in general, people feel more comfortable approaching third parties with expertise to address cyberbullying as opposed to people or groups more directly involved.

People's reliance on school support for this issue was further reflected in figure 6. More time spent online during COVID-19 led 70% of respondents to agree that school-aged children were more vulnerable to cyberbullying. In response, 62% of respondents felt that it was the school's responsibility to track their students' communications across additional platforms, especially during these times. Despite this, only 53% of people felt that it was the school's responsibility to address cyberbullying between students if it occurs off-campus and outside school hours. This suggests that despite a reliance on school support to address cyberbullying, many observe the difficulties in attributing this responsibility to schools when considering the intricacies of cyberbullying which often occurs outside school hours while students are at home.

Figure 6. How has COVID-19 and online learning affected cyberbullying?
Monthly website survey, September 2020, Survey results

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