Growing Up Online

Children's online activities, harm and safety in Northern Ireland - an Evidence Report

Spotlight Report on Cyberbullying

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Introduction and Aims

This Spotlight report on cyberbullying is based on the data from the broader research study entitled 'Growing up Online: Children's online activities, harm and safety in Northern Ireland – an Evidence Report' (Purdy et al., 2023), funded by the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland (SBNI) and conducted by a team from the Centre for Research in Educational Underachievement at Stranmillis University College, Belfast.

The project set out to undertake an evidence-based report relating to children's online activities, harms and safety. The project aimed to:

- address the emergence, nature and impact of online risks of harm and trends among all groups of children and young people in Northern Ireland, including risk and protective factors, access to support and intervention when issues arise and the implications for safety policy and practice; and
- review online safety provision including educational initiatives to safeguard and protect children online.

Literature Review

Cyberbullying is understood to refer to bullying others by means of electronic and/or online technologies, using devices such as mobile phones, tablets, laptops, PCs and gaming consoles. Most definitions of cyberbullying have been adapted from earlier definitions of face-to-face bullying, which the 'father' of bullying research, Dan Olweus, defined as intentional behaviour to harm another, repeatedly, where it is difficult for the victim to defend him or herself (Olweus, 1999). Following this model, one of the earliest definitions of cyberbullying described it as 'an aggressive, intentional act carried out by a group or individual, using electronic forms of contact, repeatedly and over time against a victim who cannot easily defend him or herself' (Smith et al., 2008, p.376).

More recently, a definitional debate has developed in relation to cyberbullying (Englander et al., 2017), with some researchers following Smith's example above and maintaining that cyberbullying should be seen as bullying that occurs through electronic or digital devices (e.g., Berne et al., 2019) while others have argued instead that cyberbullying should be considered quite separately with its own definition (e.g., Cross et al., 2015). Moreover, the notions of repetition and imbalance of power are often contested in relation to all forms of bullying but perhaps especially in terms of cyberbullying: for instance, attention focuses on whether a single online posting of a nasty comment constitutes bullying since it has the potential to be shared by another; and whether there can exist an imbalance of power in the online world (Hellström et al., 2021).While the definitional debates continue unabated, Wingate et al. (2013, p.88) note that "the cyberbullying literature has suffered from the absence of a 'gold standard' definition".

For the purposes of this Spotlight report, we have adopted the recent (though traditional) definition of cyberbullying as "intentional harmful behaviour carried out by a group or individuals, repeated over time, using digital technology to aggress against a victim who is unable to defend him/herself" (Campbell & Bauman, 2018, p.3).

Without greater clarity around definitions, measurement also becomes problematic and comparison between studies is highly problematic (Tokunaga, 2010; Scheithauer et al., 2021). Consequently, estimates of incidence range widely, depending on factors such as the definitions used, time periods, gender and age of participants. For instance, rates will vary widely if children are presented with a narrow definition and asked to refer to the past two months (as in Olweus' frequently replicated work), compared to many other studies where no definition is given and children are asked if they have ever experienced online bullying or (more broadly still) any form of negative online behaviours. One recent systematic review, for instance, reported a variance between 13.99% and 57.5% based on the analysis of 63 studies (Zhu et al., 2021).

Studies of cyberbullying in Northern Ireland have characteristically varied in terms of sample, definition, time scale and age range. Using the Olweus definition and a two-month timeframe, the most recent DE-funded research into the nature and extent of bullying in Northern Ireland (DE, 2011) revealed that 11% of year 6 pupils had been bullied by mobile phone at least once but only 3.5% said that it had happened at least two or three times per month (suggesting a repeated pattern of victimisation).

Bunting et al. (2020) asked over 3000 children and young people in Northern Ireland whether they had been cyberbullied over the past month: 14.9% of respondents confirmed that they had been cyberbullied with more girls (17.9%) than boys (11.9%) reporting victimisation. In line with other studies, this contrasts with higher reporting of all forms of bullying i.e. offline and online (16.8%) and higher incidence among boys (20.7%) than girls (13%).

Since September 2021 all schools in Northern Ireland have had to comply with the Addressing Bullying in Schools (NI) Act 2016. This new legislation includes a new statutory definition of bullying, defines the areas of responsibility for schools/Boards of Governors and introduces a requirement to record centrally all alleged incidents of bullying behaviour by means of the completion of the Bullying Concern Assessment Form. At the time of the Bill's passage through the NI Assembly, a sub-clause relating to cyberbullying was added (Purdy, 2016) following discussion among the members of the Education Committee. This sub-clause spells out the responsibility of schools as follows:

The Board of Governors of a grant-aided school may, to such extent as it thinks reasonable, consider measures to be taken at the school…with a view to preventing bullying involving a registered pupil… which

- involves the use of electronic communication
- takes place in circumstances other than those listed [above]
- is likely to have a detrimental effect on that pupil's education at the school

This helps to address the concerns and confusion expressed by school leaders in Purdy and McGuckin's (2015) study of cyberbullying and the law in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, and essentially gives schools in Northern Ireland the power to deal with cyberbullying incidents that happen outside hours and off-site, provided there is evidence of a 'detrimental impact' on the child's education in school.

Methods

The 'Growing Up Online in NI' study adopted a mixed methodological approach. Two online surveys were administered to children and young people from across Northern Ireland, aged between 8-18 years. One version of the survey was administered to 8-13-year olds (with slight amendments made to ensure age appropriateness) and another version was given to 14-18-year olds. In total 6481 children and young people responded to the surveys.

In addition, a wide variety of different target populations were recruited to take part in interviews and focus groups. In total 95 participants took part in the qualitative aspects of the qualitative aspects of this research, including children and young people in primary, post-primary, special schools and youth club settings, as well as parents, teachers /school leaders, and professionals working in the field of online safety. The qualitative engagement included Traveller/Roma children, LGBTQI+ young people, children with (severe) learning difficulties, young people in a youth club setting in a disadvantaged urban context, and pupils from an Irish-medium school.

Two children and young people's advisory groups were established, one involving primary school children and another involving post-primary school children. These groups helped inform the design of the qualitative engagement with children and young people, and made recommendations regarding the dissemination. The project was also supported by an expert advisory group convened by the SBNI.

Quantitative Results

As indicated above, the online survey was differentiated by age of the respondents to ensure age-appropriateness. While there was a broad focus on negative online experiences in terms of the options presented in both surveys, for the purposes of this Spotlight report on cyberbullying, we have specifically analysed the sample of those children and young people who reported that they had experienced cyberbullying behaviours. This was identified through their answers to the question: "Think about the worst experience you've had online in the past couple of months. What happened?"

8-13-year-old respondents

For the 8-13-year-old cohort, there were several options from which respondents could choose. A total of 12.89% (n=493) reported that "Someone was mean to me online", a clear description of cyberbullying behaviour.

When this subgroup was further analysed, it was found that the majority of those who reported being cyberbullied were girls (56.8%, n=280) compared to a lower incidence among boys (39.8%, n=196). Alternatively, as a proportion of the total cohort of 8-13-year-old respondents, 15.4% (280/1818) of the girls reported being cyberbullied compared to just 10.1% (196/1933) of the boys.

In terms of the frequency of the cyberbullying behaviour, 44% (n=215) reported that it had happened three times or more in the past couple of months. The two most commonly cited reasons for cyberbullying among this younger cohort were "because of a fallout with friends" (37.7%, n=186) and "because of the way I look" (26.8%, n=132), with much lower numbers citing identity-based motivations such as family background (6.3%, n=31), gender (5.5%, n=27), religion (5.5%, n=27), race (3%, n=15), SEN (2.4%, n=12) and care status (1.6%, n=8). See Figure 1 below.
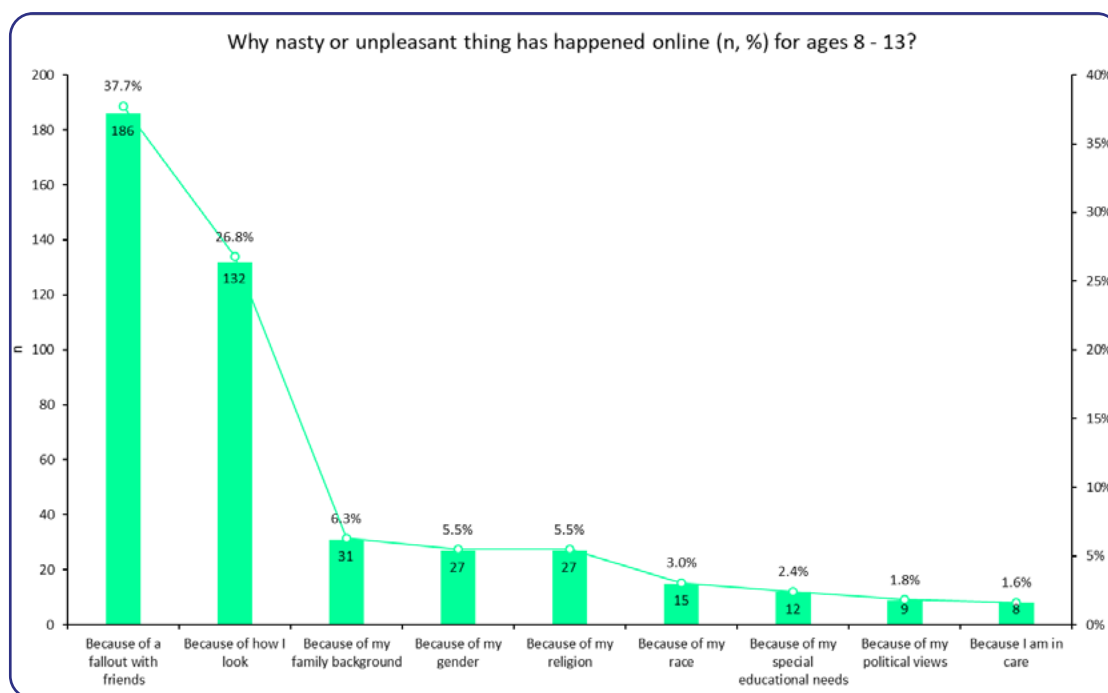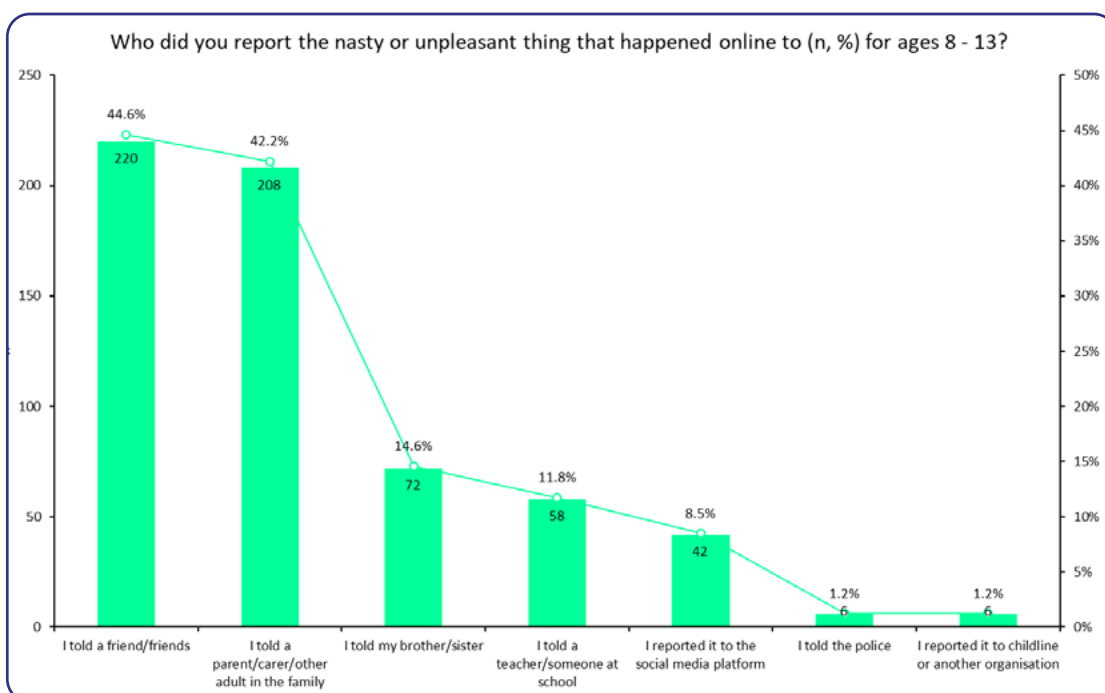

Figure 1. Why nasty or unpleasant thing has happened online (n, %) for ages 8 – 13?

Despite the age restrictions for access to social media sites, the majority of 8-13-year-olds reported that the cyberbullying had taken place on social media sites (54.6%, n=269), followed by on a gaming site or console (30.4%, n=150) or on a group chat e.g. WhatsApp (27.8%, n=137) with fewer reporting that it had taken place via direct message (15%, n=75).

In the majority of cases, the cyberbullying had been perpetrated by "a friend or other young person you know" (61.7%, n=304), with only a third reporting that it had been carried out by a stranger (37.1%, n=183).

When asked how the experience made them feel, the most common responses were upset (50.3%, n=248), angry (37.5%, n=185), confused (30.8%, n=152) and anxious (26.6%, n=131).

Survey participants were asked whether they had reported what had happened. Of those who had indicated that they had experienced cyberbullying, just under half (46.6%, n=225) indicated that they had reported it, while 53.4% (n=258) had not reported it. Girls (53.3%, n=147) were much more likely than boys (38.4%, n=73) to report their cyberbullying experiences. When asked to whom they had reported the cyberbullying, the two most commonly cited responses were "I told a friend" (44.6%, n=220) and "I told a parent/carer/ other adult in the family" (42.2%, n=208). See Figure 2 below.

Figure 2. Who did you report the nasty or unpleasant thing that happened online to (n, %) for ages 8-13?

When they reported the cyberbullying behaviour, more than two-thirds of this younger cohort felt that the matter was dealt with either quite well (41.7%, n=203) or very well (28.7%, n=140). Less than a third (29.6%, n=144) felt that the matter was not dealt with well.

14-18-year-old respondents

In the survey questions for the older cohort of 14-18-year-olds, there were 16 different negative online experiences provided as options for the young people to choose from, not all of which could be described as cyberbullying behaviours.

The cyberbullying sample (n=384) is focused on eight of those 16, subcategories, as listed below in order of rate of incidence (See Figure 3). All participants in the sub-sample experienced one or more of these types of online bullying.

1. Mean or nasty comments were made about me or sent to me (69.5%, n=267)
2. Lies or rumours were told about me (51%, n=196)
3. Embarrassing photos or videos of me were edited, posted, tagged, or shared without my permission (32%, n=123)
4. I was threatened (26.3%, n=101)
5. I was excluded from an online group (24.5%, n=94)
6. Someone tried to blackmail me (19.5%, n=75)
7. Personal information was shared about me without my permission (19%, n=73)
8. My personal account was hacked (11.7%, n=45)
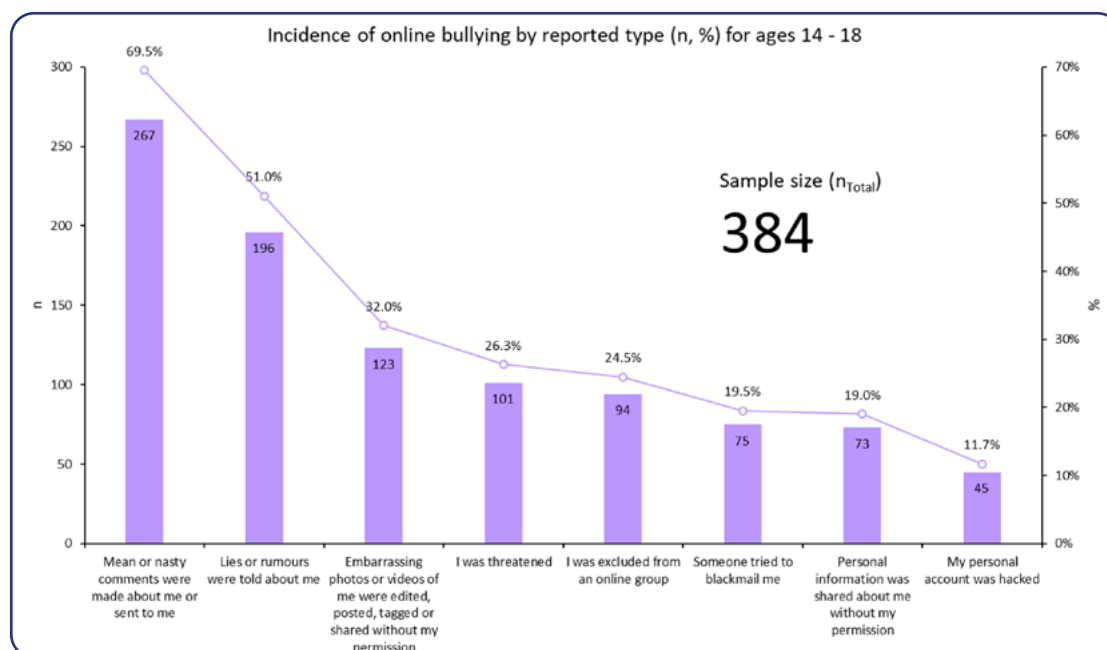
Figure 3. Incidence of online bullying by reported type for ages 14 – 18.

When analysed further by gender, there are some interesting findings. For instance, while girls were more likely than boys to report that 'mean or nasty comments were made about me or sent to me' (70.9% vs 63.6%), more likely to report that 'lies or rumours were told about me' (56.8% vs 45.7%) and more likely to report that 'I was excluded from an online group' (27.1% vs 19.9%), by contrast, boys were more likely than girls to report that 'someone tried to blackmail me' (21.2% vs 16.1%), boys were more than twice as likely as girls to report being threatened online (35.8% vs 17.6%) and were almost three times more likely than girls to report that their account had been hacked (17.2% vs 6.5%).

While the numbers were often small, there appears to be a higher incidence of cyberbullying among those 14-18 year olds who identified as gay/lesbian or bisexual rather than heterosexual. For instance, a higher percentage of gay/lesbian (77.3%, n=17) and bisexual (72.4%, n=42) rather than heterosexual (68.2%, n=180) young people reported that 'mean or nasty comments were made about me or sent to me' over the past couple of months. Similarly, when asked if they had been threatened, incidence was much higher among those who identified as bisexual (37.9%, n=22) and gay/lesbian (27.3%, n=6) compared to those who identified as heterosexual (21.6%, n=57).

In terms of the frequency of the cyberbullying behaviour, 42% (n=160) reported that it had happened three times or more in the past couple of months, again suggesting a regular pattern of bullying behaviour. As with the younger cohort, the two most commonly cited reasons for the cyberbullying among this older cohort were "because of the way I look" (33.1%, n=127) and "because of a fallout with friends" (32.6%, n=125), with much lower numbers citing identity-based motivations such as gender (13%, n=50), sexuality (11.2%, n=43), family background (9.6%, n=37), religion (6.5%, n=25), SEN (5.7%, n=22), race (4.4%, n=17) and care status (3.1%, n=12). See Figure 4 below.
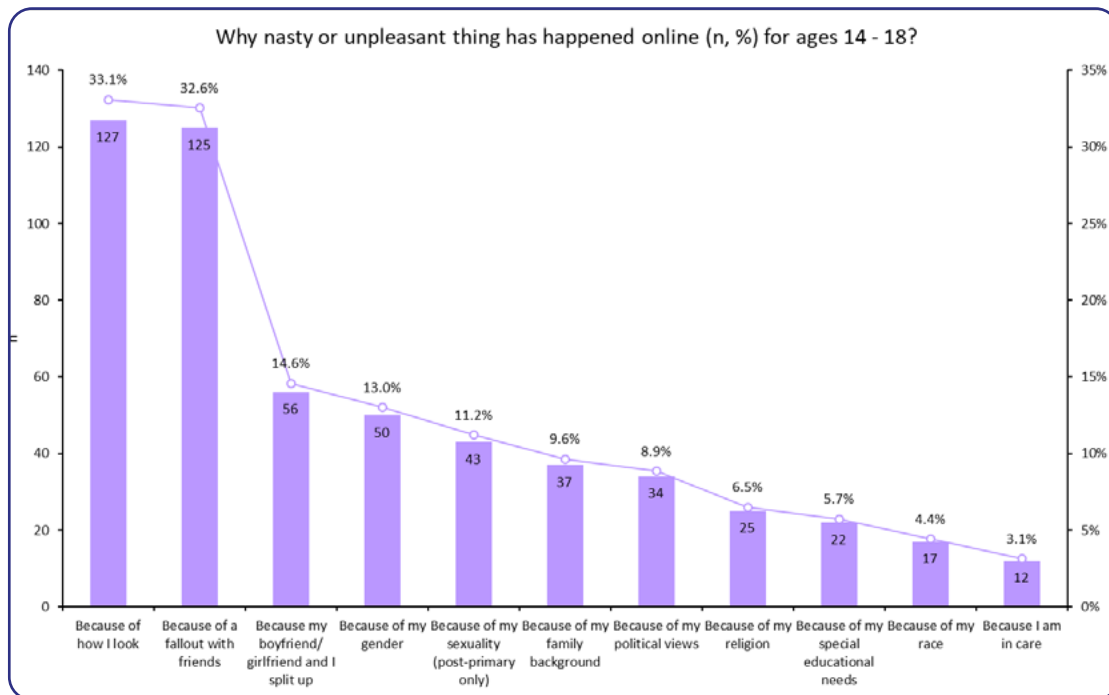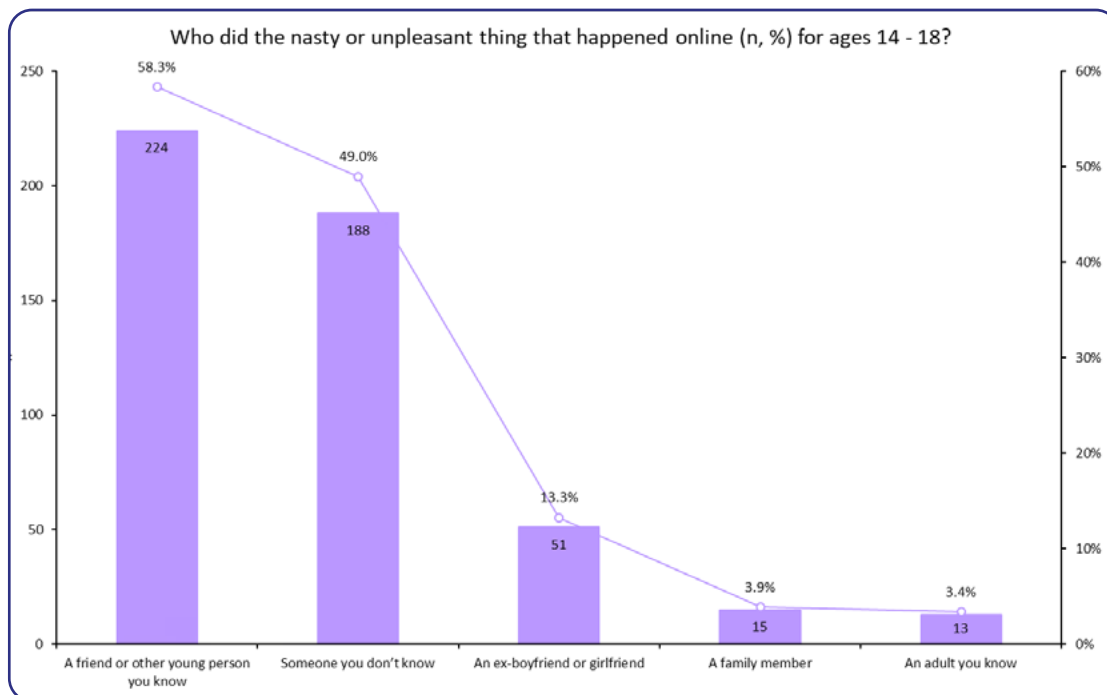

Figure 4. Why nasty or unpleasant thing has happened online? (n, %) for ages 14 – 18?

Compared to the younger cohort, an even greater majority of the 14-18-year-olds reported that the cyberbullying had taken place on social media sites (80.2%, n=308), followed by much lower but very similar incidence through a group chat e.g. WhatsApp (17.7%, n=68), via direct message (17.4%, n=67) or on a gaming site or console (17.2%, n=66).

Among this older cohort compared to the younger cohort, there was a higher reported incidence of perpetration by someone they didn't know. Among 14-18-year-olds, almost half (49%, n=188) reported that they had been cyberbullied by someone they didn't know, but they were still more likely to report that the cyberbullying had been carried out by a friend or another young person they knew (58.3%, n=224). See Figure 5 below:
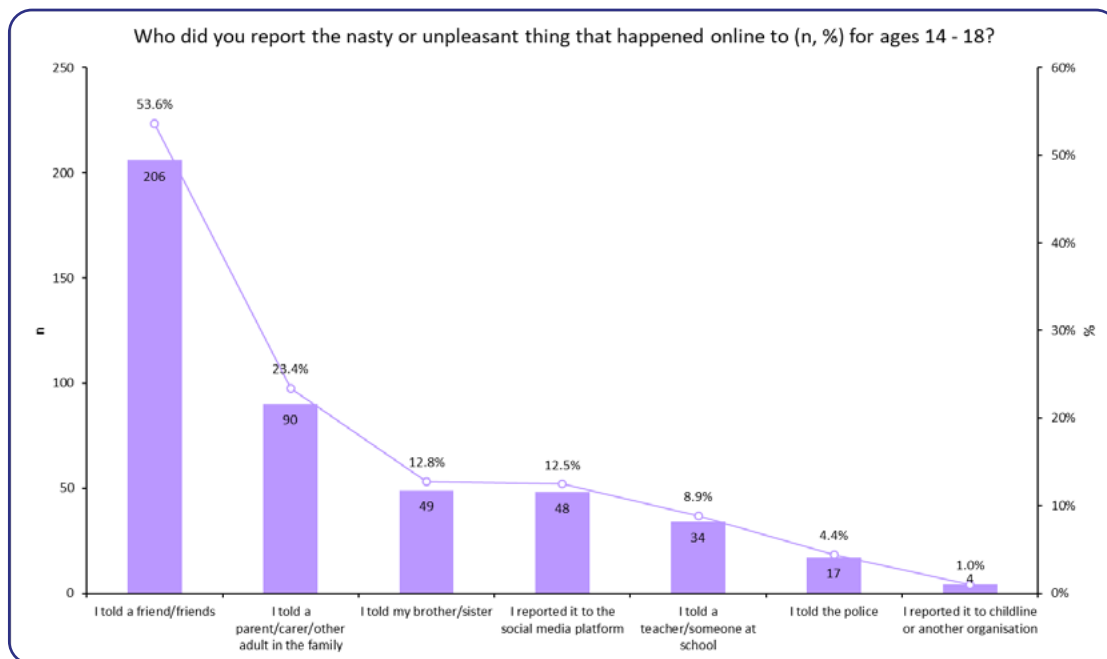
Figure 5. Who did the nasty or unpleasant thing that happened online (n, %) for ages 14 - 18?

When asked how the experience made them feel, the most common responses were once again "upset" (45.1%, n=173), angry (39.8%, n=153), confused (33.9%, n=130) and anxious (32.8%, n=126).

The 14-18-year-old participants were also asked whether they had reported what had happened. Of those who had indicated that they had experienced cyberbullying, less than a third (31%, n=112) indicated that they had reported it, while more than two thirds (69%, n=249) had not reported it. This level of reporting was thus much lower than among the younger cohort (see above). Similarly, however, girls (34.7%, n=69) were much more likely than boys (24.7%, n=37) to report their cyberbullying experiences.

When asked to whom they had reported the cyberbullying, the two most commonly cited responses were once again "I told a friend" and "I told a parent/carer/other adult in the family" but this time the older cohort were more than twice as likely to tell a friend/friends (53.6%, n=206) than a parent/carer/other adult in the family (23.4%, n=90). See Figure 6 below.

Figure 6. Who did you report the nasty or unpleasant thing that happened online to (n, %) for ages 14-18?

When they reported the cyberbullying behaviour, satisfaction rates were much lower than among the younger cohort. Almost half (46.6%, n=179) reported that the matter was not dealt with well, while almost a third (31.5%, n=121) felt that the matter was dealt with quite well and just over a fifth (21.9%, n=84) felt that it was dealt with very well.

Qualitative Results

The topic of cyberbullying was discussed in the focus group interviews with children and young people, teachers, and parents/carers. It was also highlighted in the open-ended survey responses from the other professionals.

Mainstream Primary (MP) Focus Groups

Two focus groups were held in mainstream primary schools, one with pupils in Key Stage 1 (MP1), the other with pupils in Key Stage 2 (MP2). Each focus group comprised a mixture of boys and girls from different age groups, with six participants in each group.

Both groups were presented with a scenario about a boy being bullied via social media. The older group of children had heard about similar instances happening with peers in their class and offered insights and practical solutions:

> ❝ *"That's called cyberbullying when people bully you online… I would just block them." (Girl, MP2)*

> ❝ *"He should tell an adult." (Girl, MP2)*

> ❝ *"Block and report." (Boy, MP2)*

> *"It happened to my cousin... I said to just leave the app and he deleted it...
> It was really hurting him and he was sad." (Girl, MP2)*

The younger group of children had no experience with online bullying, and their contributions to the bullying scenario were limited:

> *"Bullying is people making fun of people." (Boy, MP1)*

> *"Just delete them if they're mean." (Girl, MP1)*

> *"I heard about online bullying from Dork Diaries which is a book I read...
> I don't really remember what it is." (Boy, MP1)*

Mainstream Post-Primary (MPP) Focus Groups

A total of three focus groups were held in mainstream post-primary schools: one co-educational, non-selective Catholic Maintained school (School MPP1), one co-educational Voluntary Grammar school (MPP2) and one co-educational non-selective Irish Medium school (MPP3). Each focus group comprised a mixture of boys and girls from a single year group as follows: School MPP1 (year 11: 4 boys, 3 girls), School MPP2 (year 10: 4 boys, 4 girls), School MPP3 (year 11: 4 boys, 4 girls).

When asked about the dangers of the internet, responses included the danger posed by predators, scammers, hackers, viruses, catfishing, bullying, groomers, trolls, stalkers, explicit content and 'dangerous trends'. When discussing catfishing, the young people discussed how this could result in comments or messages being posted about their videos and posts:

Interviewer: Okay, so the catfishing? Is that something that you're aware of happening among your friends?

"People pretending who they are, pretending to be someone else?" (Girl, MPP1)

Interviewer: Okay, and then putting nasty messages out or inappropriate content? What happens? What do they do?

"They comment onto your videos, and comment on your posts." (Girl, MPP1)

The young people demonstrated an awareness of the dangers of hacking and potential risk of having their personal information including passwords leaked:

"Like IP Doxing, which is like leaking people's address, that happens a lot on Twitter" (boy, MPP2)

"Passwords, getting passwords leaked and stuff." (Girl, MPP2).

Interviewer: And what does that look like then: somebody's having an account hacked or what sorts of things?

"It would be maybe like an account adding you on something and then you're just like, pretending to be somebody else." (Boy, MPP2)

"Yeah, and you'll have no idea." (Girl, MPP2)

The participants also discussed the risks of being sent inappropriate video content which could include pornography:

"Inappropriate websites may be introduced to especially the younger audience, so that can get them in bad habits or in going, you know, choosing the bad way of life. And that can introduce a different idea of what school might be, or what other things might be. So, definitely, websites made by people with bad intentions." (Boy, MPP1).

Interviewer: Okay. So, what are those inappropriate websites? Is that violence? Is that pornography? Drugs? Is it, you know, what sorts of things do you mean? Or do you mean, all of those?

"Yeah all of those." (Boy, MPP1)

"Then, you know, certain videos get sent around people in our year, right and it says these really gory things that can't be, you know, you see certain videos from different countries, you know bad, bad people. And that's just, it's not nice to see." (Boy, MPP1)

"I'm sure you guys have probably been sent a video like that, or even seen a video like that. It's really not nice to see that kind of stuff." (Boy, MPP1)

When discussing what they already knew about keeping safe online the young people referred to respect in relation to writing nasty comments and an awareness that such comments can be easily traced and the permanence of posts on social media and sharing images with others:

> **"Showing respect for other people?" (Girl, MPP1)**

> **"You want respect back, you have to give, you have to do to other people. Give it out." (Girl, MPP1)**

> **"So don't write nasty comments to other people." (Girl, MPP1)**

> **"Don't say anything you wouldn't say to someone in person because it can easily be tracked down." (Girl, MPP2)**

> *"Anything you post on social media never goes away…photos you post or comments you say, it never goes away."* **(Girl, MPP3)**

> *"Images…are difficult to leave the internet. Once, so, when you send someone something, he might save it and after send to some other person. So, it's not just you that has the picture. Other people have it now."* **(Boy, MPP1)**

Interview with Youth Group

One focus group was held with a youth group operating within a disadvantaged community in West Belfast. The focus group consisted of females only (n=12) aged between 12-17 years. The young people highlighted online bullying as a concern because there are things people are willing to say online that they wouldn't be prepared to say face-to-face:

> *"See face-to-face? Like see face-to-face they won't say nothing face-to-face but they will all say behind the screen."* **(YG)**

When asked what they have done or would do when faced with a potential danger online, the participants rehearsed a range of potential options, such as: "*tell a trusted adult or guardian*"; "*see it, report it, block it*" and "*see it, hear it, stop it*". In the event of experiencing something dangerous online, the participants reported that they would speak to a friend, sibling or youth worker.

Interview with LGBTQI+ Young People

One focus group was held in a mainstream post-primary school with pupils in their LGBTQI+ club. The group consisted of seven students: boys, girls, and students who identified as non-binary. Participants represented a range of school year groups, from Year 9 to Year 14.

The young people referred specifically to trolling and claimed trolling was a form of online bullying, with "random people who feel like making jokes to make your life hell." 'Trolling' ranged from harmless humour to aggressive bullying:

Boy: "There's a lot of hate. There's a lot of people who hate on us."

Interviewer: Because you're in the LGBT community?

Boy: "Yeah."

Boy: "There are subsections of trolling. There's funny trolling and then there's like racist and homophobic trolling."

Boy: "There are probably thousands out there."

Girl: "And transphobic stuff. And then there's also trolls about mental health as well."

Boy: "I've been the target for the mental health one. I've gotten told to slit my wrists before."

Girl: "I've been told to kill myself."

Girl: "I've been called the N word."

Boy: "A lot of times that happens online yeah."

Often trolls acted anonymously, using 'smurf' or 'fake' accounts to ensure they could not be traced. The young people felt this was where the trolls' power came from: *"it makes them feel powerful because they can be anonymous when they're online."*

One of the participants spoke about how they found it difficult to socialise in school because of bullying. Both they and some of the other participants believed socialising online was easier as they could meet people with whom they had things in common. Participants all claimed they had made 'real' friends over the internet, using sites like Yubo, Omegle, Twitter, and Instagram; and were aware that people who were nasty online could be blocked:

> **Girl: "Most of my best friends I've met online."**

Interviewer: And what's the benefit of meeting people online rather than, say, in your school?

> **Boy: "I don't like people in this school."**

> **Boy: "I mean most of the kids in this school are absolute dickheads."**

> **Girl: "If we meet people online who are being dickheads, you can block, remove, bye!"**

> **Boy: "It's easier to bypass online than with a real person."**

Roma Traveller Primary School (RTPS) Focus Group

One focus group was held with primary school aged children from the Roma Traveller community (RTPS). The focus group consisted of two children (one boy and one girl) from a Key Stage 2 class.

Both participants were aware of potential online dangers, and negative online, bullying-type behaviours were identified. One participant highlighted that:

> **"Yeah, that happened to me a lot…some random people just text me, then I just block them…I feel not that worried about it but…. they are probably just like playing around…" (boy, RTPS)**

Special School (SS) Focus Group

Two focus groups were held in one post-primary special school, one with KS3 pupils (SSY, n=5), the other with KS4 pupils (SSO, n=4). The groups, as is reflective of the composition of pupil enrolment, were mainly male with one female in the older group.

This focus group took place during the weeks around *Safer Internet Day 2023* and so in this section of questions the researcher linked this to asking the groups about what they would do if 'something really nasty happens' when the participants are online. In both groups, it was obvious that the preventative curricular work done by staff was remembered by most of the pupils. Participants were able to acknowledge what would constitute something nasty from a given list including a stranger asking to meet them, someone sending a message or photograph, or asking for one in return. Animated responses included:

> *"For me I will do drastic action, block him, report him and just ignore it."*
> *(boy, SSY)*

One participant's comments (boy, SSO) were the closest to suggesting an understanding of the *Report Remove* tool which may have been referred to in information session.

> *"Well, you would go out and to the thing and say and just say just report, just report."*

Another boy (SSY) also showed a high level of understanding of how to block a potential aggressor:

> *"Yeah I know what to do…you just go into profile, and it will agree an option if there's one to block it."*

However, most participants responded that they would report to their parents or if on the bus, to the driver or escort:

> *"Mostly escorts could do the stuff rather than bus drivers."*

Interviews with Teachers

One comprehensive focus group took place comprising a selection of teachers from different schools as follows: three post-primary schools (one non-selective controlled; one non-selective controlled girls; one catholic maintained); three primary schools (one Irish Medium; one controlled in a rural setting; one controlled in an urban setting) and one special school. Additionally, one separate interview took place with a vice-principal in an Irish Medium post-primary school. Altogether, two participants were school principals, two were vice-principals and four were class teachers.

The teachers reported that children and young people were saying nasty things to each other online in a way that they would not face-to-face, and were also bullying by exclusion.

One of the primary school teachers explained:

> *"WhatsApp and the girls in my class… It's really bullying by exclusion, you know, like, one day there's a new WhatsApp group created, which one person has been left out of, the following week that person has been added in and then someone's been excluded, you know?" (teacher, primary)*

The vulnerability of children and young people to online bullying partly because of their cognitive ability was highlighted by one of the participants, along with the issue of children and young people posting nasty comments online but not being able to fully understand the true meaning of their comments:

> *"There's massive risks for our young people, like all the other young people, but increased with the vulnerability of our, our pupils, I suppose even in relation to bullying, they're more susceptible to being bullied online, even just in regard to their cognitive ability to be able to understand what's being said. As a result, they can then be more prone to say things that are inappropriate. We had a case recently, where one of our pupils actually posted something inappropriate, as a comment, not really realising what it meant. And the police ended up getting involved and you know, those were conversations then I have to have to say, look, you know, yes, this young person may be 16, but they don't have the understanding of a 16-year-old, and, you know, they have learning difficulties, etc. And so, they definitely are more susceptible to that." (principal, special school)*

The sharing of inappropriate videos without consent was an issue raised by one of the participants who explained that the incident involved a vulnerable young person with a statement of special educational needs who thought she had sent an explicit image and video to a boy who liked her, but in actual fact the material was later shared publicly on a social media platform. As the teacher explained:

> *"But you know, that just shows how somebody can be manipulated and really, you know, it was a vulnerable child who maybe didn't understand what her you know, the consequences of her actions were going to be." (vice principal, post-primary)*

Another post-primary teacher referred to an incident where lies and rumours had been spread about a girl, suggesting that she had been sharing explicit images online. It was later discovered that there was no evidence to support the rumour but, as the teacher reported, *"the damage and the hurt that that has caused to everyone has been phenomenal"*.

One of the teachers expressed their frustration at the apparent lack of parental interest for online and face-to-face online safety education events run by an expert:

> *"One of the things with the parents evening is we really struggled with engagement we tried both in person nights where the professional coming in from outside and online and the turnout was really, really poor and the in person one despite a lot of you know promotion by us and text messaging home and everything else two parents turned up, which is a disgrace in a school of nearly 800 pupils it's really frustrating." (vice principal, post-primary)*

Survey Responses from Other Professionals

A total of 15 professionals employed by various organisations were invited to complete an online survey. The organisations represented are concerned with looking after children and young people in the areas of health and social care, education, regulation of the communications sector, working with survivors of sexual abuse, and providing support to parents, children and young people, and information on various issues. Some of the organisations have conducted or commissioned research focusing on the online safety of children and young people.

Online bullying was highlighted by five of the professionals as a key issue:

> *"Many of our young people have no filter as to what they say or share. It is apparent in bullying behaviours, language they wouldn't use in open discussion, they hide behind anonymity." (Professional 1)*

Two professionals outlined what their organisations are doing to address the issue of online bullying. This included workshops for young people, and using anti-bullying week to highlight the issue:

> *"We run a huge number of workshops, with internal speakers, such as the College Safeguarding Team. We cover e-safety, cyberbullying, consent. We bring in speakers to cover other topics around keeping them safe online and looking after their mental health. physical wellbeing. Speakers include PSNI, Aware. We run anti-bullying campaigns and are members of the Anti-Bullying Alliance. We celebrate Anti-Bullying week." (Professional 1)*

> *"Digital safeguarding and bullying are included within the level 2 and level 3 safeguarding children as separate themes. We also work in partnership with the PHA to deliver digital safeguarding training which also includes the importance of positive views of online activity." (Professional 10)*

The professionals were asked what changes are required to better equip children and young people to engage safely when online. In relation to online bullying, responses included informal training for adults with a focus on the benefits of online technology along with realistic information about online risks:

> *"Providing online awareness raising to adults and caregivers, not as a formal training but in a conversational approach may increase their awareness of things to watch out for, in particular, regarding online bullying or abuse."* *(Professional 7)*

> *"Children and parents need to be informed on the positive use of online activities but also provided with realistic information about the risks that present. This should be focused at growing trends such as the persistence of bullying and the impact and how to manage that."* *(Professional 10)*

Interviews with Parents/Carers

Two focus groups were held with parents/carers, one in-person with a group of primary school parents (P) and one online with a group of secondary/post-primary school parents (PP). The post-primary focus group comprised five mothers and one father and was held after school hours. The primary group comprised five mothers and was held during school hours in the school which their children attended. The children of the secondary parents attended a range of Integrated (n=1), Grammar (n=5) and non-selective/high schools (n=1). Of these, two were single sex and six were co-educational. Parents were invited to attend, but this mainly female profile is in line with other research of this kind, which finds fathers difficult to recruit.

All the parents acknowledged that being online has many advantages for children and young people, including educational benefits such as research and developing news skills, and keeping in touch with friends which was particularly relevant during Covid-19 lockdowns. The parents discussed attempting to balance the benefits against trying to encourage their children to spend time offline whilst not wanting them to feel left out. Participants also indicated how giving their children access to online provision is counter to their intuitive desire to keep their children safe:

> *"And that really safe space, that we're now exposing our children, if they have an ability to stay in contact with friends outside of school, that world is entering into our homes, and it can be quite hidden in the device."* *(P)*

> *"I think we resisted for a long time, you know, and even in the latter stages of primary school in terms of wanting phones and all sorts of devices, you know, we were kind of like, no, explore the outdoors and, you know, outdoor play and promoting all of that, which is something we still do, but it's one of those things where you feel you're fighting a losing battle. And you know…I think, that dichotomy between, you know, healthy, healthy lifestyles, physical development, versus sort of social emotional development, being connected with our friends, Wii Fit, you know, that idea where they feel like they're losing out or they're not part of a group, because they're not on platforms like TikTok and Instagram and so on."* *(PP)*

For some parents, there was an unspoken feeling that in denying their child access to online technology through smart phones, they would become out of step with other parents. One mum talked about putting the Snapchat app on her daughter's phone:

> *"It's the most horrible experience…and you know I wish I'd never put it on her phone…But I bowed to peer pressure… when you see what the kids can look at, it's just horrendous, you think I'm freely giving this to my child." (P)*

One parent quoted information that they had received during a "Keeping your child safe online" information course and advised *"do not ban your child from everything, talk to your child because as soon as your child goes outside the gate, and wee Jimmy has a phone, your child will stand beside wee Jimmy and do everything that you said not to do." (P)*

Parents displayed a sense of fear focused around two main areas. First, parents expressed concern regarding the nature of the information available to children who are not ready for it:

> *"She's ten, she doesn't understand what she puts out there." (P)*

> *"The amount of information out there is vast, and it's so much, and they don't have that filter, they don't know what they are reading…and it's just so big that this to me is scary." (PP)*

> *"It's, it's, it's terrifying." (P)*

Secondly, the permanency of what has been seen or experienced was expressed as a major concern for many of the parents in the focus groups:

> *"They can't delete what they might have put out there because it so quickly can be captured by someone else's screen. And it's that irreversible nature of it is my biggest concern." (P)*

> *"They cannot unsee it, or unknow what they've been told." (P)*

Online bullying was discussed as an issue of concern by several of the parents and they identified that online bullying could arise for various reasons, including based on appearance, and after a picture or video has been shared:

> *".. the bullying is the one that really scares me. Obviously, my children are all mixed race and I have a daughter that is blonde and blue eyes. And because she has curly hair, you know, it seems to, she seems to get it on both sides. So that bullying aspect of it scares me." (PP)*

> *"…. somebody's just recorded this poor fella doing this or somebody, you know, and I don't, that's, that's scary for me, sort of having things recorded, having things photographed having it all shared around, which obviously can lead to all the cyberbullying and, and so many other instances, I mean, that just for me, it's completely frightening." (PP)*

Conclusions

This Spotlight report on cyberbullying, as extrapolated from the larger 'Growing Up Online' report, has helped to shine a light on the particular nature and incidence of online bullying-type behaviours among 8-18-year-olds in Northern Ireland in 2023.

While it is acknowledged that the definition of cyberbullying is contested in the research literature (Wingate et al., 2013; Hellström et al., 2021), the findings presented in this Spotlight report nonetheless highlight the wide variety of online bullying behaviours which are experienced by children and young people in Northern Ireland, ranging from mean or nasty comments being made or sent to them and being excluded from WhatsApp groups, through to online blackmail, threats and being told to slit their wrists or kill themselves.

This Spotlight report has provided fresh evidence of the nature and incidence of cyberbullying behaviours across the two age cohorts (8-13 and 14-18) detailing what happened, why it happened, where it happened and who was responsible. Among the older cohort in particular, there were many accounts in the focus groups of young people experiencing disturbing behaviours such as trolling and catfishing, and accounts by teachers of having to deal with very serious incidents, sometimes requiring the involvement of the police. Such incidents were reported to have very significant emotional impact on the children and young people concerned, although it was striking in some of the focus group interviews how the young people appeared to accept a certain level of risk and danger online, and appeared confident in dealing with such incidents.

This report has also highlighted patterns of incidence by gender and sexual orientation, especially among the older cohort, where girls (rather than boys), and gay/lesbian and bisexual (rather than heterosexual) young people were more vulnerable to many though not all forms of cyberbullying. For instance, girls were more likely than boys to report that mean or nasty comments had been made about them or sent to them, more likely to have had lies or rumours told about them, and more likely to have been excluded from an online group. Gay/lesbian and bisexual young people were more likely than heterosexual young people to report that they had received mean or nasty comments or that they had been threatened. Conversely, boys were more likely than girls to report that someone had tried to blackmail them, that they had been threatened or that their account had been hacked.

The report also describes reporting behaviours by age and gender, with younger children and girls more likely to report cyberbullying than older children and boys. Across both cohorts, reporting is most likely to be to friends and family, with the older cohort even more likely than their younger peers to report to their friends ahead of their family. The implications of this are self-evident in terms of upskilling the peer group and parents/carers to be able to respond swiftly and effectively if/when a child or young person reports that they have been bullied online.

Teachers, parents and professionals working in this field all expressed grave concerns about the dangers that children and young people were facing online. Indeed, parents often felt conflicted and guilty, torn between the desire to provide online access to their children (to promote social interaction and aid learning) and the concomitant fear that in so doing, they were exposing their children to a world of risk and unknown danger. This contrasts with the lack of parental concern reported by many of the children and young people in the survey responses. Professionals spoke of the importance of providing appropriate training and resources to equip children and young people (and their parents/carers) with the skills to safely navigate the online world.

With the granting of Royal Assent to the UK's Online Safety Act on 26 October 2023, there is nonetheless a distinct glimmer of hope that internet companies operating in the UK will have to do more to protect children from online harm. The Online Safety Act has also conferred new powers on the Office of Communications (OFCOM) to enable them to operate as an online safety regulator. Internet companies are now legally obliged to protect their users and will be held responsible for the content posted on their sites, with hefty fines imposed if they fail in their new duty of care.

Given the fact that social media sites are the main locus of cyberbullying as reported by both age cohorts in this study, the commencement of the Online Safety Act offers real hope of a fresh start and the prospect of a safer online experience for our children and young people free from cyberbullying.

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