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The Right to Be Safe
Cyber – Bullying: A new reality in Child Safety
A Position Paper from the ISPCC
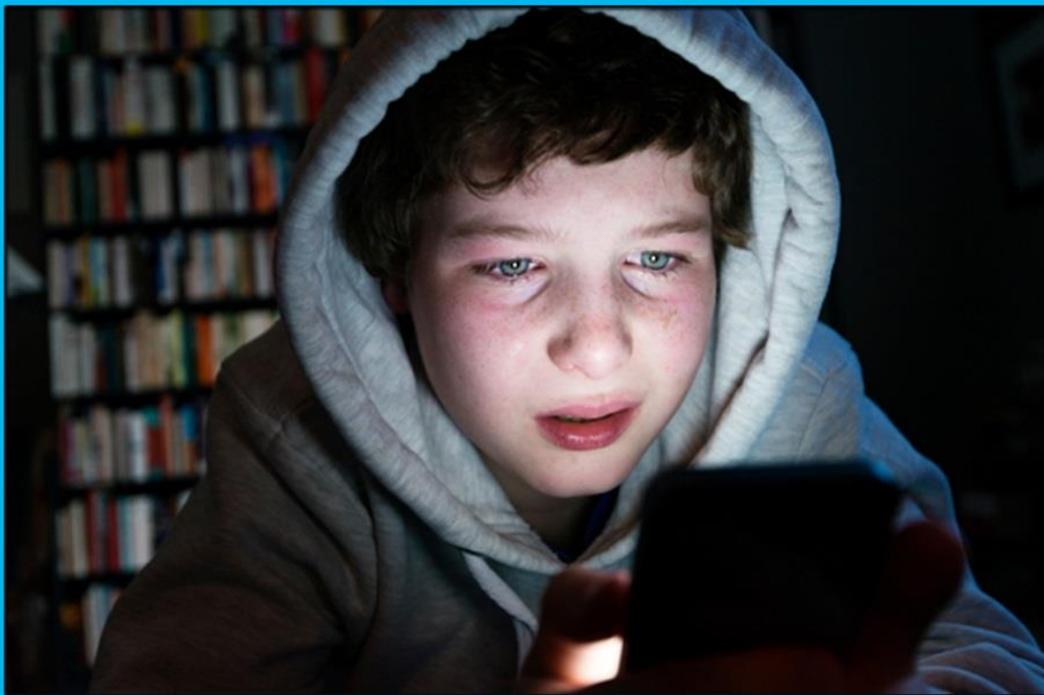
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Introduction

The Irish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children is the national charity responsible for child protection and welfare. Through 'Childline'- the only 24-hour listening support service for children- and our childhood support and mentoring services, we work to ensure that all children in Ireland have a positive experience of childhood through building their psychological resilience.

ISPCC staff and volunteers are highly skilled and experienced, and work with approximately 500 children and families per year through our childhood Support work services on a range of often complex social and psychological issues. From the perspective of ISPCC professionals, bullying -and in particular cyber bullying- can have profound effects on a child's development, on their ability to learn and on their emotional resilience and self-esteem.

As a result, the ISPCC launched its 'Shield' programme in 2012. Initially this programme was established to raise awareness among the general population of the devastating effects of Bullying on children and young people. Since 2012 this programme has developed significantly with a specific focus on working directly with schools to support them to tackle, and ultimately alleviate bullying. By reviewing over thirty years of research on the topic of bullying behaviours and positive response models, the ISPCC were able to develop its Anti-bullying toolkit to support schools and community groups in reviewing and perfecting their current anti-bullying policies and codes of conduct.

This supports the development of a robust policy that promotes a positive environment for all children. The evidence gathered from this programme- and from working with 200 schools- has informed this briefing paper.

The ISPCC has over a decade of experience of working with, and listening to children who have experienced cyber bullying. These reports, and our Anti-Bullying programmes, are informed by this knowledge and experience.

Cyber Bullying: Why is it Different?

ISPCC evidence highlights that bullying remains a growing and significant barrier to child safety. So-called 'traditional' bullying has many forms, including verbal and physical bullying. However, 'cyber bullying' has emerged as a form of bullying with distinct features:

- The method of bullying- using technology to bully- often means that the child being bullied feels they have no safe space to hide. Use of mobile phones and tablets is now commonplace in homes, and in particular in a child's bedroom, often resulting in a child being exposed to bullying behaviour late in the evenings and during the night. ISPCC Childline volunteers report receiving calls and texts from children who are being bullied online throughout the evening and night.

- Unlike 'traditional' bullying, cyber bullying has a clear repetitive element. Researchers on the topic- including the recent DES and HSE commissioned literature review- noted the distinct repetitive nature of cyber-bullying.   ISPCC experience of cyber bullying confirms that the nature of online bullying means a single message can be repeated online and often by a network of perpetrators, rather than one single individual.

- Recent research is now showing that children who spend more time online, or online without the supervision of parents are at greater risk of cyber bullying, and those that make personal information available online are also at greater risk. The involvement of parents in monitoring and supervising children and young people online, and the availability of advice in relation to use of personal data, is therefore key in preventing online bullying.

- While children and young people are very technologically savvy, their emotional and developmental stage means that they may not have the awareness of the dangers and risks associated with being online and also the skills and emotional maturity to deal effectively with this issue

How prevalent is cyber bullying?

It is difficult to know exactly the scale and nature of cyber bullying. However, the more we know about the issue, the more successful we can be in capturing data. In 2014, the Department of Education and Skills and the HSE National Office for Suicide Prevention commissioned a literature review which examined the prevalence and impact of bullying linked to social media on the mental health and suicide behaviour among young people. The review was comprehensive, and included an analysis of the data on cyber bullying.

It confirmed the ISPCC's perspective that the scale of bullying reported is often affected by the method of reporting, use or omissions of definitions of bullying and the age of the children involved. The DES/HSE commissioned research therefore concluded that cyber bullying was less prevalent than 'traditional' forms of bullying, and cited Livingstone and Hadden research in 2009 which found that 23% of children experienced traditional bullying with 4% experienced cyber bullying.

The ISPCC's knowledge and experience provides some detailed insights into how children view bullying, and in particular, cyber bullying. Within all the support work and outreach work offered to schools, students and parents by the ISPCC, the singular concern voiced by all is the nature of cyber bullying and the feeling of helplessness in how to respond to it. Children often feel a reluctance to let anyone know of a cyber-bullying concern for fear of having their smartphones or computers taken away. But these concerns are felt perhaps even more strongly by parents as they have not grown up with the cyber technology that children are now very familiar with. Parents have an innate desire to protect their children; however when the environment where any potential bullying is happening to their children is somewhat alien to these parents, as the cyber world can be, adequate parental support can be problematic. Parents are looking for answers and support themselves. But in looking for this, parents must also show proactivity in developing a safer cyber environment and expectation of appropriate behaviours with their children online. To support this process, adequate and informative cyber bullying work needs to be offered to the wider community.

More recently, other sample surveys have provided useful insights.

- To coincide with the ISPCC's 'Shield' campaign, the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals released research which showed that 16% of children consider themselves to have been cyber-bullied. What's more, the research also showed a drop in the level of vigilance by parents on the issue, with less than half of parents stating that they monitor their childrens' online activity on a weekly basis.

While there are several pieces of research that give an indication of the prevalence of cyber bullying, there remains no national official research data that gives details of the scale and nature of cyber bullying.

ISPCC Experience of Working with Schools and Children

- The "Shield my school" programme has run very successfully for two years, in which time almost 200 schools have benefited from utilising the ISPCC Anti-bullying toolkit in reviewing their anti-bullying policies. Schools are becoming ever more aware of the need for a proactive and supportive approach to bullying behaviours. The concept of an immediate punitive response to bullying behaviours has been replaced by the far more conducive element of restorative justice to help both parties within a bullying situation to bring a balance back to the relationship that has become very unfair.

- Schools are now developing and improving their awareness levels in relation to bullying concerns and the need for an open and honest environment where children feel comfortable and confident in letting others know if bullying is happening to them or one of their peers.

- With the advent of increased cyber activity, the ISPCC felt an online form of reporting bullying concerns would be of great benefit to schools. In early 2014 we developed such an online reporting mechanism which schools can download free of charge from the ISPCC website. This

reporting tool allows anyone within the school environment to report bullying concerns directly to the schools anti-bullying coordinator via a report button on the schools website or Facebook page.

- While the current support work offered to schools is highly effective and productive, the number of schools worked with to-date is small. 200 schools over a two year period out of more than 4000 schools in the country means we have helped only 2.5% of schools nationally. To have wider impact, extra resources will be needed to roll out the programme to an even greater number of schools and begin the process of an impactful community based response to bullying behaviours.

- The issue of bullying is far from insurmountable. Despite having new arenas where bullying can happen and the insidious nature that can occur with cyber bullying, it can be responded to successfully. What needs to occur is a level of proactivity from all concerned. Children and young people, parents and guardians, schools, community groups and community members must all show a level of responsiveness and a desire to ensure bullying is not tolerated or seen as acceptable or even a part of growing up.

- Once there is a common theme of support and positive expectations within our communities, then the issue of bullying behaviours can be responded to quickly and effectively.

In 2014, Childline received over 8,000 contacts in relation to bullying. Often, children are bullied in more than one way, so these statistics reflect that. We have only specifically recognised cyber bullying in its own category where it was the sole means of bullying.

Calls to ISPCC Phone service

Bullying	7712
Mobile phone bullying	60
Internet bullying	24

Calls to ISPCC Web/Text service

Bullying	344
Internet bullying	7

However, our internal data also shows that while children continue to experience bullying online, they remain comfortable using online tools to contact Childline for support. Our data shows that children are more likely to discuss issues regarding Abuse, Mental health issues and Relationships, using the ISPCC online services, than our phone services.

How can Public Policy Help?

There are several areas where legislators, policy makers and practitioners can better work together to tackle cyber bullying.

1. **Strategic Review of Anti-Bullying Procedures in Schools**

In 2013, the Department of Education and Skills launched new Anti-Bullying Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools. The procedures set out a range of requirements for schools to proactively tackle bullying and ensure redress and support systems are in place for children and young people. Importantly, a range of reporting and good governance measures were put in place to ensure that Board of Governors take responsibility for monitoring implementation of the procedures. However, no data has yet been made available to enable practitioners to understand the impact of implementation of the procedures. Implementation data is critical if we are to learn lessons regarding what works in order to tackle bullying. The ISPCC recommends a review of implementation of the anti-bullying procedures takes place in the 2015/16 year. This review should require schools to submit data to the Department of Education and Skills to enable us to get a national picture of anti-bullying interventions in schools.

2. **Research into the impacts of bullying**

The DES HSE commissioned literature review noted the lack of research on the impacts of cyber-bullying. High level analysis from within the ISPCC has identified that cyber-bullying impacts on a child's emotional well-being in a range of ways, including increased isolation, self-worth and damages peer relations and coping skills- at a time in their personal development when peer support is crucial.   The ISPCC is willing to work with government and agencies to support research in this area, through confidential and appropriate use of data.

3. **Support for parents**

There is sufficient anecdotal and quantitative data to show that many parents are struggling to ensure their child's safety in a fast moving online environment. It is therefore critical that organisations work together to ensure that resources are available to parents. As part of its Shield programme, the

ISPCC has made resources available to parents to provide guidance on what to do to resolve online bullying. Resources are now available across a range of sources- greater coherence between organisations would better help to signpost parents to the right resources.

4. Support for Schools

The ISPCC's "Shield My School" programme is a community based initiative, designed to assist schools in developing positive response models to bullying behaviours. Schools are in essence the cornerstone of any community, bringing together children and families into one setting with constant interaction between all concerned. With this in mind, schools are therefore very well placed to begin the process of addressing bullying concerns both within the school walls and outside as well.

The ISPCC's self-facilitating Anti-bullying toolkit is a unique document which allows schools to reflect on their current response to bullying issues and to review and develop the most robust anti-bullying policy document to meet the needs of their individual school. The toolkit can be facilitated by a fully trained ISPCC worker in order to assist the school in their policy review. This is a unique service and has been very successfully undertaken by 200 schools nationally to date.

To support this process the ISPCC offers outreach work on awareness-raising regarding bullying behaviours and developing positive response models. While schools are required to have specific policies in place to guide their actions and reactions in relation to bullying concerns, parents and students do not have such resources. To assist parents and students therefore, the ISPCC offers informative outreaches to these groups on general awareness raising on bullying behaviours to more specific topics including cyber bullying and cyber safety.

5. Mental Health Services

In its most extreme form, cyber-bullying is a form of abuse, and can severely impact on a child's mental health. In some instances, cases are referred to the ISPCC and our support services programmes, where children work directly with a Childhood Support Worker. However, the scale of demand for our services, continues to grow. The ISPCC support services currently operates a waiting list system- in 2014, our waiting list reached 235 families Mental health services are currently under-resourced to cope with the level of demand being placed on the services as well as the complex issues faced by thousands of children, many of whom are seeking to access ISPCC services. Our service staff have reported that mental health services in some areas are not designed in a child friendly way, which then impedes the full engagement of the children and young people who require the service. The medical model of service delivery utilised does not facilitate or encourage the active participation of children and families.

Conclusions

The ISPCC's Shield Campaign is now in its fourth year, and our 'Shield my School' Anti-Bullying Toolkit has provided an opportunity for over 200 schools to work directly with the ISPCC to target and tackle bullying. Traditional forms of bullying are now increasing understood and being dealt with proactively by schools. However, cyber-bullying requires the involvement of parents, community groups and other community networks given the reach of technology into our homes and community settings. More research is required to understand 'what works' to tackle cyber bullying; much more guidance and awareness raising is required by parents, and resources will be necessary to support children who have been victims of a form of bullying which is likely to grow.

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