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The emergence of cyberbullying in childhood: Parent and teacher perspectives

Claire P. Monks[a,*], Jess Mahdavi[b], Katie Rix[a]

[a] University of Greenwich, UK
[b] Lansdowne Primary Academy, Gateway Learning Community Trust, UK

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the awareness and perceptions of parents/guardians and school staff regarding cyberbullying among primary school-aged pupils. Eight focus groups (total sample size $N = 41$) explored the emergence of cyberbullying, characteristics of cyberbullies and cybervictims, the impact of cyberbullying, and the role of adult supervision. Participants were generally aware of cyberbullying and its various forms and felt that it could occur among primary school-aged pupils. Thematic analysis was used to identify themes emerging from the focus groups. Relating to the emergence of cyberbullying, themes included children's ability (literacy and computer skills), access to ICT (Information and Communication Technology) and external factors such as peer pressure. When asked about the characteristics of children involved in cyberbullying, themes included the relationship between involvement in cyberbullying and traditional bullying, the role of gender, and different motivations for cyberbullying. None of the groups felt that cyberbullying was less upsetting for victims than traditional bullying and themes surrounding the impact of cyberbullying referred to the nature of cyberbullying and discussions relating to the characteristics of the victim were raised. When talking about the role of adult intervention, participants mentioned the use of rules/restrictions and the perceived generation gap in ICT skills. Participants agreed that supervision of Internet and mobile phone use at home would be beneficial, but was less in accord regarding the usefulness of supervision at school. The findings are discussed in terms of their implications for research and interventions.

La aparición del cyberbullying en la infancia: la perspectiva de padres y profesores

Palabras clave:
Cyberbullying
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Niños
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RESUMEN

El estudio analiza la conciencia y la percepción de padres/tutores y personal del colegio en relación al *cyberbullying* en alumnos de la escuela primaria. Ocho grupos focales (con una muestra total de $N = 41$) exploraron la aparición del *cyberbullying*, las características de los ciberacosadores y de las cibervíctimas, la repercusión del *cyberbullying* y el papel que juega la supervisión adulta. Los participantes por lo general eran conscientes del *cyberbullying* y de sus variadas formas y pensaban que podría darse en los alumnos de primaria. Se utilizó el análisis temático para detectar los temas que surgían de los grupos focales. Relacionados con la aparición del *cyberbullying*, los temas incluían las abilidades de los niños (conocimientos y destrezas informáticas), el acceso a las tecnologías de la información y comunicación (TIC) y factores externos como la presión de compañeros. Cuando se les preguntaba por las características de los niños que se veían afectados por el *cyberbullying*, entre los temas estaba la relación entre implicación en el *cyberbullying* y el *bullying* tradicional,

* Corresponding author. Department of Psychology. Social Work and Counselling. University of Greenwich. London, SE9 2UG, England.
E-mail address: c.p.monks@greenwich.ac.uk (C.P. Monks).

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el papel del género y la motivación por el *cyberbullying*. Ninguno de los grupos creyó que el *cyberbullying* fuese menos molesto para las víctimas que el *bullying* tradicional y los temas alrededor del impacto del *cyberbullying* aludían a la naturaleza del *cyberbullying*, suscitándose debates relativos a las características de la victima. Cuando se hablaba del papel de la intervención adulta, los participantes mencionaban la utilización de reglas/restricciones y de la brecha generacional que se percibía en las destrezas en el uso de las TIC. Los participantes estaban de acuerdo en que la supervisión del uso de Internet y móvil en casa sería beneficiosa, pero estaban menos de acuerdo en la utilidad de la supervisión en el colegio. Se comentan los resultados en cuanto a su implicación para la investigación y las intervenciones.

Research indicates that children have access to ICT (Information and Communication Technology) and are making use of it from a young age. In the UK, almost all children aged between 8 and 17 years report using the Internet, with approximately 80% of households with children having Internet access (Byron Review, 2008). Similar levels of Internet access are reported in Australia: 91% of households with children under 15 years have access to the Internet (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011). Children are using the Internet regularly. In the Netherlands, 84% of seven year olds had access to the Internet at home, with more than a quarter using the Internet daily or almost every day (27%) (Pääjärvi, 2012). Furthermore, children appear to have access to the Internet in more private areas of their homes (such as their bedrooms). In a sample in the USA, a fifth of three to six year olds had a computer in their bedroom (Vittrup, Snider, Rose, & Rippy, 2014) and approximately a third of 9 to 10 year olds surveyed in seven European countries reported going online at least weekly in their bedrooms (using a variety of different devices) (Livingstone, Mascheroni, Ólafsson, & Haddon, 2014).

Children are using the Internet to connect with others; in Australia, 11% of 9 to 11 year olds reported using the Internet for social networking, rising to almost half of those aged 12-14 years (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011). More than a quarter of 9 to 10 year olds (27%) in a European study of seven countries reported having a profile on a social networking site (Livingstone et al., 2014a,b). In the UK, 30% of 7 to 11 year olds reported having social networking accounts (Broadbent, Fell, Green, & Gardner, 2013) and virtual world accounts (Holloway, Green, & Livingstone, 2013). There is also a high level of mobile phone access among children (Byron Review, 2008; Mobile Life Youth Report, 2006). Monks, Ortega, Robinson, and Worlidge (2009) found that 72% of 7 to 11 year olds in a UK sample owned a mobile phone (although whether these were smartphones was not reported). More recently, a large-scale European study indicated that 46% of 9 to 16 year olds owned a smartphone, with variability across countries; smartphone ownership was highest in Denmark compared with the UK, Italy, Ireland, Belgium, Portugal, and Romania (Mascheroni & Ólafsson, 2015). With the growth in Internet-enabled smartphones and access to the Internet through game consoles, televisions, and laptops, Internet access is becoming more available most of the time. Although there are many social and academic benefits to children going online, there are potential risks including involvement in cyberbullying.

Cyberbullying

A considerable and growing international body of research has focused on the nature and extent of cyberbullying (Cassidy, Faucher, & Jackson, 2013a). Generally, cyberbullying has been defined as a form of intimidation, harassment, and mistreatment on the part of an individual or group towards another, which involves the use of technological means to channel the aggression repeatedly and involving an imbalance of power between the perpetrator and the target (Mishna, Cook, Gadalla, Daciuk, & Solomon, 2010; Mora-Merchán & Ortega, 2007; Ortega, Calmaestra, & Mora-Merchán, 2008; Smith et al., 2008; Talwar, Gomez-Garibello, & Shariff, 2014). Rivers, Chesney, and Coyne (2011) note that cyberbullying can include abusive or silent phone calls, harassment via text or picture/video messages, in online games, on websites and social networking sites, in chatrooms, using instant messenger or email, twitter, posting abusive comments in blogs, or harassment in virtual environments (e.g., Second Life.) However, as Paul, Smith, and Blumberg (2012) highlight, the nature of technology, and consequently the nature of cyberbullying, is constantly changing, with different methods becoming more popular at different time points.

Research with secondary school pupils indicates that, although it is not as commonly reported as traditional forms of bullying, cyberbullying is experienced by young people (Modecki, Minchin, Harbaugh, Guerra, & Runions, 2014). A meta-analysis of international research found mean prevalence rates of around 15% (Modecki et al., 2014). Whilst researchers have shown that prevalence rates have stabilised over recent years (Kowalski, Giumetti, Schroeder, & Lattanner, 2014), it remains difficult to make direct comparisons of the levels of cyberbullying reported in different studies due to rapid historical changes in the use and availability of technology as well as methodological differences between studies (Rivers et al., 2011).

Young people are concerned about cyberbullying (Livingstone, Kirwil, Ponte, & Staksrud, 2014). It is perceived by children and adolescents as being as upsetting as traditional (non-cyber) forms of bullying (Monks et al., 2009; Smith et al., 2008). Sakellariou, Carroll, and Houghton (2012) found that 45% of boys who had experienced cyberbullying felt that it was just as upsetting as, or more upsetting than, traditional forms of bullying. Young people who were victims of cyberbullying reported feeling sad and wanting to avoid school (Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2007). Cyber-victimization was related to increased social anxiety, even when controlling for experiences of traditional bullying (Juvonen & Gross, 2008). Campbell, Spears, Slee, Butler, and Kift, (2012) found that cybervictims reported higher levels of anxiety and depression than victims of traditional bullying. A meta-analysis of 131 studies found that stress and suicidal ideation were associated with cyber-victimization (Kowalski et al., 2014). Research has also found that involvement in cyberbullying as a perpetrator was related to higher levels of suicidal ideation and suicide attempts among 10-16 year olds (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010).

Little research has examined specific motivations to cyberbully, although some are thought to be similar to those found for traditional bullying, such as increasing the perpetrator's feelings of power (Mishna et al., 2010). Hoff and Mitchell (2009) suggested that the anonymity of the perpetrator was also a motivating factor. Compton, Campbell, and Mergler (2014) found that different participant groups considered different motivations for cyberbullying: parents of adolescents felt that the anonymity was important, adolescents reported the avoidance of consequences; and teachers highlighted the ease with which an individual could cyberbully.

Experiences of Cyberbullying by Primary School Pupils

To date, most research on cyberbullying has focussed on adolescence. Comparatively little has been carried out with children under 12 years of age. Those studies with children under 12 have often included them within a broad age range which has not specifically examined the experiences of younger children (Ey, Taddeo, & Spears, 2015). Among those studies which have focussed specifically on a younger age group, Arslan, Savaser, Hallett, and Balci (2012) found that, among 8 to 11 year olds in Turkey, 27% self-reported as cybervictims, 18% as cyberbullies, and 15% as both cyberbullies and cybervictims. In a sample of 7 to 11 year olds in the UK, 5% self-reported as being an aggressor and 23% as a victim (Monks et al., 2009). Similar figures were found in Canada (Holfeld & Leadbeater, 2015) with 10 to 12 year olds, where 22% of children reported cyber-victimisation at the start of the school year, increasing to 27% at the end of the school year. Whilst they did not find any gender differences in cyberbullying perpetration, females were more likely to be victims. Monks, Robinson, and Worlidge (2012) found no overall gender differences in being a cyberbully or victim among 7 to 11 year olds, but girls were more likely to experience cyberbullying over the Internet and boys via mobile phone, perhaps reflecting their differing uses of ICT as a mode of communication. A meta-analysis of studies from different age groups indicated that overall there was a slight tendency for males to engage in cyberbullying more than females, but that this varied as a function of age with higher levels amongst females in early adolescence and higher levels amongst males in later adolescence (Bartlett & Coyne, 2014).

The Role of Parents/Teachers in Combating Cyberbullying

When examining the role of parent/guardian and teacher supervision in child/adolescent involvement in cyberbullying, researchers have looked at where the cyberbullying occurs (at home or at school) and the impact of adults' attempts to limit cyberbullying.

Although most cyberbullying occurs outside of school (Dehue, Bolman, & Völlink, 2008), research has suggested that the precipitating event often occurs at school and leads to cyberbullying at home (Cassidy, Jackson, & Brown, 2009). Relatedly, children frequently know their cyberbully, often from school (Juvonen & Gross, 2008). This suggests that cyberbullying, although arguably mainly occurring out of school hours, is related to school and may have a negative impact on children and young people within school, as they are being cyberbullied by other children from their school. Juvonen and Gross (2008) suggest that cyberspace is an extension of the school playground where the same children are exposed to victimization within school and in cyberspace. Research has supported this by finding that children tend to take a similar role in traditional bullying and cyberbullying (Kowalski, Morgan, & Limber, 2012; Monks et al., 2012; Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2007). Juvonen and Gross (2008) propose that cyberbullying should be addressed by parents and teachers alike and note that "there is no reason why cyberbullying should be 'beyond' the school's responsibility to address." (p. 504).

Most (80%) parents/guardians report that they attempt to regulate their child's Internet access (Dehue et al., 2008) which can have an effect on cyberbullying involvement. Research has suggested that lower levels of parental involvement in child Internet access is related to increased risk of becoming a cyberbully (Vandebosch & Van Cleemput, 2009). The ways in which parents regulate their children's Internet use vary and tend to be described as restrictive or evaluative (Mesch, 2009). Restrictive mediation is carried out by the parent and involves activities that restrict the young person's use of the Internet. Evaluative mediation is where the adult and young person discuss Internet use and develop rules together regarding time spent and content accessed. In a sample of adolescents, Mesch (2009) found some evidence for the relation between these forms of mediation and decreased risk of cybervictimization. More broadly, parental and family support are negatively related to involvement in cyberbullying (either as a bully or victim) (Fanti, Demetriou, & Hawa, 2012; Wang, Iannotti, & Nansel, 2009). Among a sample of 8 to 11 year olds, Arslan et al. (2012) found that paternal unemployment was associated with an increased risk of a child being involved in cyberbullying (either as a perpetrator or victim). They suggest that this may be related to increased stress levels at home, which may affect the relationship between the child and their parents as well as supervision (including supervision of ICT use).

When examining the role of schools, pupils report that cyberbullying is not always proactively addressed at school (Agatson, Kowalski, & Limber, 2007), although Li (2006) found that most pupils (64%) believed that teachers tried to stop cyberbullying if they were told about it. Despite a recommendation by the government that schools in the UK include cyberbullying in their anti-bullying policies, Smith et al. (2012) found that in 2002 only 8.5% of schools (7.8% of primary schools) mentioned cyberbullying in their anti-bullying policy, rising to 32.3% overall (26.6% for primary schools) by 2008. This indicates that the majority of anti-bullying policies for primary schools did not explicitly address cyberbullying.

In sum, the limited research conducted with primary school-aged pupils has indicated that many use mobile phones and the Internet regularly. Furthermore, research has shown that some primary school children are involved in cyberbullying (as perpetrators and/or targets) and that many children view cyberbullying as being as upsetting as traditional forms of bullying. To date, there is no research which has directly looked at adult (school staff and parents/guardians) perceptions and awareness of cyberbullying among primary school-aged pupils. The current study aimed to examine these issues among primary school staff and parents/guardians of primary school-aged pupils, looking specifically at their awareness of cyberbullying and how they would define it, whether they thought it occurred among primary school-aged children, the roles of parents and teachers in helping to prevent and reduce it, and their perceptions of the impact of cyberbullying in relation to traditional bullying.

Method

Participants

Focus groups with 3 to 10 participants were carried out with parents/guardians of children in school Years three to six (age 7 to 11 years) and school staff (teachers and teaching assistants) working with children of the same age. Participants worked or educated their children at a number of schools, both state and independent, single sex and mixed, in the South East and North Midlands of England.

Parents/guardians. The participants in the four parent/guardian groups were all female ($N = 21$). The majority were aged between 36 and 45 years ($N = 11$, 52%). Seven participants were aged 46 to 55 years old (33%) and the remaining three participants between 26 and 35 years old (15%). Eleven of the participating parents/guardians had two children (52%), four had one child (19%) and six had three children (29%); all had a child aged between 7 and 11 years.

Staff. Most of the participants in the four staff groups ($N = 20$) were female ($N = 17$, 80.95%). The majority were aged 26 to 35 years old ($N = 8$, 40%), a quarter were 36 to 45 years old ($N = 5$), 15% ($N = 3$) were 46 to 55 years of age and 20% ($N = 4$) were 56 or older. Most of the staff were experienced teachers or teaching assistants with 45% ($N = 9$) having 5 to 10 years experience and 45% having more than 10 years' experience ($N = 9$). The remaining two participating members of staff had less than one year's experience of working in school. All school staff taking part worked with pupils within the target age range.

Materials and Stimuli

A focus group prompt sheet was prepared by the authors (CPM and JM). Topics were structured around four main themes: the definition and emergence of cyberbullying, whether this was affected by children's individual characteristics, the effect of supervision and access to technology, and the perceived severity of cyberbullying in relation to traditional bullying. Focus groups were recorded using a standard audio recording device.

Procedure

The research was approved by the relevant University Research Ethics Committee. Participants were recruited through primary schools. Initially, the headteacher was contacted about the research and asked if they would agree for staff and parents/guardians to be approached to participate. After obtaining agreement from the headteacher, letters were sent informing teachers and parents/guardians of the nature of the study and inviting them to take part. Focus groups lasting approximately 30 minutes took place in a neutral environment. After collecting completed participant information sheets and consent forms, the researcher reminded the group that participation was voluntary and that participation could be withdrawn at any time.

Parent/guardian groups were conducted in an agreed upon setting (usually the home of one of the participants). Staff groups were composed of participants from the same school and were conducted at the school outside of school hours. Participants were encouraged to discuss between themselves a mixture of questions and prompts rather than simply take turns to answer. Questions were designed to be open and to promote discussion within the focus group. Although the topics were there to guide discussion, discussion could (and did) depart from the agenda set by the topic guide. Group discussion was prompted by the researcher if necessary.

At the end of the study a debrief sheet was handed out containing sources of support and advice on bullying and cyberbullying. All focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed to ensure anonymity of the participants. Four focus groups for each participant type were conducted (eight focus groups were conducted in total). At this point participant recruitment and data collection stopped as it was felt that no new information was emerging.

Analysis

The transcripts were analysed across four key areas of cyberbullying including definition and emergence, child involvement, adult prevention, and the impact upon children. In some cases, content analysis was conducted by counting the responses to particular questions, for example the number of focus groups who put the youngest cyberbullies/victims within primary age, or who thought supervision of ICT access at home/school was important. The focus group content was also subjected to thematic analysis across the four areas.

Results

Results have been structured by the four key focus areas on which the focus groups were based, with both quantitative and qualitative findings presented.

Interpretation and Emergence of Cyberbullying

Interpretation of cyberbullying. When asked what they thought cyberbullying meant, participants provided examples of behaviours. All groups mentioned the Internet and in particular social networking sites as media through which cyberbullying occurred. Texting was also reported by all parent/guardian groups and three out of four groups of staff. Half the parent/guardian groups and half the staff groups made reference to MSN/Instant messenger and mobile phones. Chat rooms were also mentioned by three groups. Email was referenced by three groups of parents/guardians, but not by any school staff and 'happy slapping', which refers to somebody filming an act of aggression and posting this on the Internet, was referred to by two groups of school staff, but not by any parents/guardians.

Emergence of cyberbullying. When discussing the emergence of cyberbullying with participants, the youngest age mentioned was five years old. Participants reported that emergence was affected by several themes related to technology and communication methods more generally, including *ability*, *access*, and *external factors*.

Ability describes levels of ability displayed by the individual children involved. Participants felt that rather than age, ability in the use of ICT as well as literacy were important, e.g., "I would say as soon as a child can use a computer or a mobile phone" (staff), ". . .as soon as they can read and write" (parent/guardian). It was also noted that some participants felt that children may become targets through 'naive' use of the Internet, where they lacked understanding and/or knowledge about what was possible on the Internet. This was closely linked to the theme of *access*, where participants felt that access to ICT was becoming more widespread and at increasingly younger ages, meaning that children were at risk of being involved in cyberbullying at younger ages. Participants highlighted that certain social networking sites (such as Facebook) might not be as attractive to younger children, but they may be interested in sites specifically directed at younger children, ". . .things like Club Penguin which is aimed at very young children" (parent/guardian). They also talked about the ease with which age-limits set on certain sites (such as Facebook) can be circumvented, "Well, it's like PG films isn't it, some parents allow their child to watch 15s, even 18s in cinemas, you know, it's amazing really" (school staff). "I'm sure that the age of it is 12 [age limit for Facebook]. We were talking about it, some people that I know who teach, and they were saying about children lying about their age to get on" (school staff). Participants also expressed an opinion that cyberbullying becomes not only more common, but also more severe as children get older, "I would think [it would be] more [common among] the teenage 13, 14, 15 because it's serious by then" (parent/guardian). Participants also noted that forms of cyberbullying would likely change with children's age, "I think they grow out of MSN and move on to Facebook" (parent/guardian). The children's *ability* to engage with ICT and technology and *access* to these were seen as affected by *external factors.* This included outside influences on children, such as peers, siblings, and issues such as school transitions. Participants talked about the role of peer pressure on their children:

> . . . they all say interestingly that everyone else has got one [mobile phone] but actually that happened a while ago in the playground the other group of mothers all said actually our son

> or daughter doesn't have one. And then it turned out that there was only one person who did and then everyone said everyone else has got one but actually only one person in the entire class actually had in reality. So it is very much peer pressure rather than it being a reality (parent/guardian).

Having an older sibling was identified as an *external factor* which has an impact on children's interest and use of ICT via modelling, "I have a child in year 11 [aged 15-16 years] and so obviously he does use Facebook and things like that. And obviously my other child is nine; he's just gone into year 5 so he sees his older brother do it" (parent/guardian). Participants also mentioned that having older siblings may increase a child's access to ICT, "so the age has come down so much they're getting more involved, especially if you've got a brother and sister they're going to try and get online, they might use their password, take their phone" (school staff). Participants also reported that older siblings pass their phones to younger siblings who may not otherwise have access to them, "Yes, I have the year threes [aged 7-8 years]: I think three cases but. . .I know they've got older brothers where it's [mobile phone] just been handed down as a sort of older sibling phone sort of thing" (school staff).

Another *external factor* seen to impact upon the emergence of cyberbullying amongst children was the transition to secondary school (at 11 years in the UK), where the desire to stay in touch with old friends may result in an increase in the use of ICT, in particular social networking sites, which may place children at risk of involvement in cyberbullying, "[they get involved] when they're approaching to leave school because they want to stay in contact with their friends" (parent/guardian).

Child Involvement in Cyberbullying

Participants considered whether particular attributes (individual differences) placed children at heightened risk of being involved in cyberbullying either as a victim or perpetrator. These were split into themes of *links with role in traditional bullying, gender*, and *motivations*.

In relation to *links with role in traditional bullying*, participants discussed whether the same children were likely to be involved in cyberbullying and traditional bullying. According to participants, victims of cyberbullying were more likely to also be victims of traditional bullying, "victims are victims" (school staff) and were perhaps targeted because they were less likely to fight back or viewed as being less skilled users of ICT. Also, participants felt that generally cyberbullies and cybervictims would know each other in 'real-life', "[the cyberbully and cybervictim are] more like the same, same sort of year group. . .as they tend to be friends" (school staff).

There was disagreement regarding the links between being a cyberbully and a traditional bully. Some participants thought that bullies were bullies regardless of the context, "it's an addition [to the bully's repertoire]" (school staff), whereas others felt that those who cyberbullied were those who did not bully traditionally, "I think cyberbullies can actually be quite strange people, you wouldn't guess they were bullies" (school staff) and "[cyberbullies are] not the ones who traditionally are those bully-beef" (school staff). Many participants agreed with this view that cyberbullies differed from traditional bullies:

> You'd have to be far more confident to go up to someone and decide you're going to be aggressive towards that person, whereas it could be someone who's more an introvert who decides they want to bully, you know, in the class they're a little wimpy mousy person (school staff).

There was the suggestion that cyberbullies could be those who are victims of traditional bullying, "do you think it [cyberbullies] could possibly be the people who are used to being bullied at school?" (school staff).

There was no clear consensus regarding the role of *gender* in involvement in cyberbullying. Some participants felt that girls were more likely to cyberbully due to the less direct nature of the medium, "girls are less likely to, I think, be physical bullies, but they are very manipulative" (school staff). In contrast, other participants thought that boys would be more likely to cyberbully than girls due to the use of ICT, "boys are techy aren't they. . . so they kind of enjoy the technical side" (school staff).

Another key theme within focus groups was the *motivation* for cyberbullying. Some participants felt that the cyberbullies were bad or unhappy, "they're [cyberbullies] evil people because they've got such sad lives and they all go and do that just to make themselves feel better" (parent/guardian). Others agreed that bullies were unhappy, "if you're ever not very nice to someone it's because you don't feel good inside" (parent/guardian). Others suggested that cyberbullying was cowardly, "it's [cyberbullying] more easier because they are being cowards aren't they doing in that way which I think is really cruel" (parent/guardian). Participants noted the ease with which perpetrators of cyberbullying may maintain their anonymity, "if you just get a £1 chip [sim card]. . . they're never going to be able to trace it back [to you] because you don't register it" (parent/guardian), meaning that perpetrators may feel less constrained by the medium of cyberbullying, "it must be easier for a bully to go about bullying when you're faceless" (school staff). Another motivation to cyberbully was to feel more powerful, "it [cyberbullying] gives them a feeling of power when they go onto Facebook or onto a website, and they could be quite powerful and scare people, but that's not actually part of their personality within school" (school staff). The home life experienced by the child who was carrying out the cyberbullying was also cited as being of relevance, "the bullying. . . would have to start when. . . the child has got some experience of being bullied or having experiences at home" (parent/guardian), and, "if you look at [cyber]bullies they are children that probably their parents bully them at home" (parent/guardian).

Adult Supervision and Cyberbullying

Risk for involvement in cyberbullying (particularly as the perpetrator) was thought to be linked to levels of access and supervision by adults. The three main themes explored by participants were *rules and procedures, the technology gap between children and adults*, and *home and school* supervision.

When discussing supervision of children's use of ICT, participants made reference to school policies stating that mobile phones were handed into the school office each morning and collected when children left, as well as electronic restrictions on the computers and supervision of activities on computers. However, many participants felt that most cyberbullying occurred outside of school time, "I think it [cyberbullying] would occur outside school" (parent/guardian), although others noted that although the actual cyberbullying may occur outside of school it could spill over into school, "the other kids could talk about it [the cyberbullying] the next day at school" (parent/guardian). In addition, when asked whether supervision could limit cyberbullying only three of the eight groups thought that supervision at school could have a positive effect, whereas three groups thought that school supervision would not have an effect and two groups did not directly answer the question.

In contrast, nearly all groups (seven out of eight) thought that supervision at home could reduce or stop cyberbullying. However, it was noted by participants that supervision and monitoring of ICT use at home could vary markedly and take different forms. Participants talked about this at a number of different levels: monitoring

electronically through having the child's Facebook account linked to the parent's email, through setting up restrictions on the computer or through checking the browser history or child's mobile phone; physical monitoring such as being actively involved with the child's activities when they were online and being physically present when the child was online and positioning of the computer in a 'communal' area of the home were discussed. "Ours [computer] is in the communal area so I know exactly what he's [son] doing" (parent/guardian). Participants talked about the issue of balancing control with access and concerns about invading their child's privacy, "I also think it's totally wrong and I have never ever looked at their [children's] text messages or their Facebook, I never ever do that" (parent/guardian). Other issues raised related to parenting styles; in particular lax or permissive parenting was considered to be a factor which may increase the risk that a child may cyberbully others, "if a parent is conscious enough to watch what their child was doing online and texting. . . it was surprise to me whether that child would be the type. . . to bully" (parent/guardian).

The second theme relating to supervision of children's use of technology from adults was the idea that children were much more capable than adults in their use of ICT, which made it difficult for adults (in particular parents) to monitor or limit their use. There was a perceived skills gap between parents and children, with some parents lacking in the ability and/or confidence to supervise their child's ICT activities, "kids are showing their parents how to do it [use laptops/PCs]" (parent/guardian). "I wouldn't want them [my children] using it [Facebook] if I didn't understand it but I think there's probably a lot of people who don't" (parent/guardian). Children were seen as naturals or digital natives in their use of these forms of technology in contrast to their parents. Participants reported that, even with restrictions and supervision in place, children could find ways round restrictions and they could not be supervised all of the time, "they will find a way of using them [mobile phones even when they are banned at school]" (school staff).

The Impact of Cyberbullying

The groups were asked if they thought that cyberbullying was worse than, not as bad as, or the same as traditional forms of bullying in terms of its impact on the victim. Of the eight groups, two thought that cyberbullying was worse, two thought that they were both as bad as each other and two were of mixed opinion. The other two groups (25.0%) did not directly answer the question. None of the groups reported that cyberbullying was not as bad as traditional forms of bullying.

Given the varied nature of communication via ICT, participants felt that the impact on the victim may vary. However, certain characteristics were reported as being perceived to have an effect on the impact of cyberbullying on the recipient. Themes identified which were considered by participants as affecting the impact of cyberbullying were: *the nature of cyberbullying* and *characteristics of the victim*.

Regarding the role of the *nature of cyberbullying*, participants felt that as much cyberbullying is delivered through the written word it may be more upsetting to the recipient, "it's there, written on a screen, and it has a bigger impact I think" (school staff). Some participants noted that the permanence of much online content may mean it has a longer lasting effect on the target, "on the Internet it [the bullying] needn't be again and again because it is still there and the impact will go on and on" (parent/guardian).

Furthermore, cyberbullying may result in a large audience, and the victim may not even know how many people have viewed it, which may make them feel worse, "it can be very upsetting because not only do the person they're aiming it at see it but everyone on their friends list can see it" (parent/guardian). Furthermore, participants viewed cyberbullying as difficult for children to escape from, meaning that the impact may be exacerbated for children:

> Bullying [occurred] when they were coming into school or in the playground or at lunchtime, but now you've got them 24/7 you can ring that kid at goodness knows what time of the night or. . .they turn their computer on. . . and there it is. (parent/guardian).

Participants highlighted the fact that the home was no longer a 'safe haven' from bullying:

> If you used to be bullied at school then you went home and although it was still on your mind it was somewhere else whereas if you've got a mobile phone and you've got a computer it's still in your house as well. (parent/guardian).

Others noted that, although being online more regularly would place children at increased risk of involvement in cyberbullying, children could be victims of cyberbullying even if they were not online "So that boy wouldn't have to be an MSN user or a Facebook user or anything [to be bullied online]" (parent/guardian).

Participants also noted that the nature of contact via ICT led to different forms of pressure on young people to respond in certain ways within this environment, which could lead to problems. In particular they noted the perceived requirement to respond immediately, difficulties in 'deleting' or not accepting someone as a 'friend', and the pressure to have many 'friends'. Also issues of tone and of pretending that you've been hacked or did not mean something in the way it was interpreted by others, were raised.

Some participants mentioned that the victim would have physical evidence to prove that they had been cyberbullied by a particular individual, which may mean that they could use this to identify the cyberbullies, "if I sent someone a [nasty] text message or email they've actually got physical evidence that they can show" (school staff). However, it was also noted that the nature of cyberbullying meant that it was often difficult to identify a child who was being cyberbullied unless they (or someone else) told you, "the parent isn't seeing the kid with the torn blazer and the bloody nose or anything" (parent/guardian).

Participants also expressed the opinion that the impact of cyberbullying may also be affected by the *characteristics of the victim*. In particular they noted age as an important factor in affecting the impact on the recipient of cyberbullying. Participants noted that young people's relationships are often fragile, which may leave them more negatively affected by cyberbullying. Also, participants felt that young children may be more negatively affected than older children or adults by some forms of cyberbullying such as chain emails, "some of them [the children who received the chain email] took it extremely seriously because they were so young" (school staff).

Discussion

The aim of the current study was to examine the awareness and perceptions of cyberbullying among school staff and parents/guardians of primary school-aged pupils. There was a specific focus on the types of behaviours they considered to be cyberbullying; whether they thought it occurred among primary school children; the roles of parents/guardians and schools in helping to deal with it; and their perceptions of the relative impacts of cyberbullying and traditional bullying. All focus groups showed some awareness of cyberbullying and, in contrast with the findings of Compton et al. (2014) with teachers and parents of adolescents, there appeared to be little difference between the awareness of school staff and parents/guardians. There were also similarities between the perceptions of participants and the findings of

empirical studies with adolescents and the limited research conducted with primary school pupils.

Parents/guardians and school staff most commonly identified the Internet and social networking sites followed by texts, mobile phones, and instant messenger as potential fora for cyberbullying. Less commonly mentioned were cyberbullying via email, in chatrooms and happy slapping. These findings indicate that generally participants were aware of some of the varied forms that cyberbullying can take (Rivers et al., 2011).

The general consensus of opinion was that children under the age of 12 years could be the targets or perpetrators of this form of harassment. In each focus group, at least one participant indicated that they thought that cyberbullies and cybervictims could be younger than 12 years old, with some even suggesting that children as young as five years old could become involved. This supports the findings of the limited research to date, which has found that pupils younger than 12 years report experiencing cyberbullying (Arslan et al., 2012; Monks et al., 2009, 2012). Positively, it indicates that parents/guardians and staff are aware that primary school pupils are at risk of involvement in cyberbullying.

Participants considered several factors as having the potential to influence the point at which children may begin to be at risk of becoming involved in cyberbullying, which were closely linked to their emerging use of these technologies: ability (literacy and computer literacy), access (which participants felt was increasing and starting from increasingly younger ages), and external factors. Among the external factors noted by participants were the influences of peer pressure to have a mobile phone or to be using particular modes of communication online, the role of older siblings in passing down mobile phones which had Internet access to younger children who may not have had this more sophisticated type of phone otherwise, as well as modelling use of ICT. Parent/guardian groups also talked about the perceived need by children to join social networking sites when they were moving to different secondary schools as a way of keeping in touch with old friends.

Although participants felt that cyberbullying could occur among primary school-aged pupils, they considered that it was likely to become more common during adolescence. This appears to reflect the research findings to date; for example, Smith et al. (2008) found that among secondary school pupils there appeared to be a peak in involvement in cyberbullying at about age 15 years, but contradicts findings by Cassidy, Faucher, and Jackson (2013b) that this peaks in middle childhood. Participants also suggested that cyberbullying among adolescents would be more serious than the cyberbullying experienced by younger pupils, although some felt that younger children may be more negatively affected by cyberbullying. They also expressed the opinion that the types of cyberbullying used by children would be likely to vary by age and that children may 'grow out of' certain types of cyberbullying when that mode of contact was no longer used by that particular age-group. This may have implications for intervention/prevention work, as it may be possible when discussing cyberbullying with younger children to use examples that are more resonant with their experiences. Other researchers have highlighted the fact that ICT is constantly changing and trends in use of different forms of communication online are also changing, which by extension means that types of cyberbullying are evolving (Paul, Smith, & Blumberg, 2012).

Participants also spoke about individual characteristics that may place children at risk of becoming involved in cyberbullying, either as a bully or victim. Participants made the link between an individual's role in traditional bullying and their role in cyberbullying. It was suggested that a child who was a victim of traditional bullying would be more at risk of being a cybervictim. Participants were less in accord about the links between being a traditional bully and a cyberbully and there was some feeling that cyberbullies were a distinct group to traditional bullies and were 'cowardly', resorting to the more anonymous forms of bullying. It was also suggested that some cyberbullies were those who were traditional victims, although empirical research has failed to find support for this (Kowalski et al., 2012). Others reported that cyberbullies were likely to be those children who also bullied others traditionally. The suggestion of a link between traditional and cyberbullying ties in empirical findings with adolescents (Cassidy et al., 2009; Juvonen & Gross, 2008; Kowalski et al., 2012; Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2007) and primary school-aged pupils (Monks et al., 2012), which have found that cyberbullies are often also traditional bullies. This suggests that some teachers/parents are less aware of the links between traditional bullying and cyberbullying and that it may be useful to raise awareness of this relationship.

Participants also discussed the role of gender in cyberbullying. Some participants thought that girls might be more likely than boys to be involved in cyberbullying as the perpetrators because of the more indirect nature of the communication. They suggested that girls may be less likely to bully physically, but may feel more able to bully when they are physically removed from the victim. Others indicated that they thought that boys might be more likely to be cyberbullies due to their perception that boys may be more interested in ICT than girls. Research with older samples has resulted in mixed findings regarding gender differences in cyberbullying (Rivers et al., 2011). Bartlett and Coyne (2014) noted that gender differences in cyberbullying varied with age during adolescence. The limited research with younger children has also reported inconsistent findings, with Arslan et al. (2012) finding that boys were more likely than girls to be cyberbullies, whereas Monks et al. (2012) reporting no gender differences overall, but that boys and girls differed in the forms of cyberbullying they experienced.

Participants also touched on possible motivations for individuals to cyberbully others. They suggested that cyberbullying, due to its more anonymous and indirect nature, was 'cowardly' and was undertaken by those who may not bully in other ways. This ties in with findings by other researchers. Hoff and Mitchell (2009) and Compton et al. (2014) also found that anonymity was highlighted as a motivator for cyberbullying. Participants suggested that a child who is being bullied at home might be more at risk of cyberbullying others. The link between home life and bullying has been explored by research into traditional bullying and has indicated that children who behave aggressively towards their peers may come from homes where bullying-type behaviour is modelled (e.g., Duncan, 2004). The limited research on this topic to date in relation to cyberbullying has indicated that cyberbullies may have poorer relationships with their parents (Arslan et al., 2012; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004).

Some mention was made by participants that cyberbullies may be unhappy individuals who cyberbully others to make themselves feel better. Relatedly, some felt that cyberbullies bullied to feel powerful. This motivation has been explored as a factor in traditional bullying (Olweus, 1996) and has also been found to be a possible motivating factor in cyberbullying (Mishna et al., 2010).

There were no differences between the perceptions of parents/guardians and school staff regarding the effects of supervision on cyberbullying. Groups were almost unanimous in feeling that supervision of Internet and mobile phone use at home could decrease cyberbullying. This supports research findings highlighting the potential for supervision of Internet use by parents/guardians to reduce a child's likelihood of being involved in cyberbullying (Mesch, 2009; Vandebosch & Van Cleemput, 2009; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004). However, they noted that parents may lack skill or confidence with ICT and that some parents were lax in their supervision of their child's online/mobile phone activities, although others discussed the fine line between intrusion and supervision. Participants proposed a number of different ways of supervising

online activity: electronically either through barring certain sites or linking their child's Facebook account to the parent's so that they were aware of any activity online, by situating the computer in a 'family' area of the home, or by being with the child when they were online. This shows a level of awareness of the various strategies that can be used to support Internet use and tie in with restrictive and evaluative forms of supervision (Mesch, 2009).

In contrast, findings were more mixed when participants were asked about the potential for supervision at school to reduce cyberbullying. Comments made by the participants showed that they felt that cyberbullying tended to occur more at home than at school, which may account for more concordant opinions that supervision at home would have the effect of reducing cyberbullying. Some of the participants raised the point that cyberbullying occurring outside of school would be talked about at school and that there would be a link between what happens in school and outside. Research has confirmed that most cyberbullying does occur outside of school, but that many of those involved know each other from school (Juvonen & Gross, 2008). This has led researchers to note that cyberbullying is an issue that needs to be addressed by schools and parents/guardians in tandem (Juvonen & Gross, 2008).

Regarding the relative severity of the impact of cyberbullying and traditional bullying on the victim, few comments were made that cyberbullying was not as severe. Most groups either felt that it was as bad as or worse than traditional bullying. Similar results have also been reported with primary school children, who were also more likely to view cyberbullying as being as bad as or worse than traditional forms of bullying (Monks et al., 2009). Furthermore, research has also indicated that nearly half of those who have experienced cyberbullying (45%) felt that it was as bad as or worse than traditional bullying (Sakellariou et al., 2012). Participants in the current study felt that the nature of cyberbullying may influence the impact it would have on the victim. Those who felt that it was worse gave several reasons for this including the 24/7 nature of cyberbullying and the way in which cyberbullying invades places usually considered to be "safe" (e.g., at home). Furthermore, because of the enduring nature of some genres (e.g., SMS, MMS, comments made online, emails etc.), the unpleasant content would still be there when the child turned their phone back on or the next time they went online. Additionally, one group of participants noted that a pupil with no access to the Internet or a mobile phone could still experience cyberbullying if other pupils were aware of negative behaviour related to them online or being distributed via mobile phone. Participants talked about the additional pressures that communication via ICT can place on young people which may also be related to cyberbullying: the need to respond immediately, the lack of tone, the difficulties deciding on whom to accept as a 'friend'.

Participants mentioned the difficulty in identifying victims of cyberbullying as their 'wounds' may be more hidden. This is important as studies with adolescent victims of cyberbullying find that few have told an adult about the harassment they have experienced. Juvonen and Gross (2008) found that as few as 10% had told an adult about experiencing cyberbullying. Research with younger children aged 7-11 years indicates that the majority would advise someone who was being cyberbullied to tell someone (Monks et al., 2012). There was little discussion by participants about how to deal with cyberbullying and therefore, in line with findings by Holfeld and Grabe (2012), it may be that adults need support in knowing how to react when cyberbullying occurs, in addition to prevention strategies.

Participants felt that young people may be more negatively affected by cyberbullying than adults due to the perceived fragility of their relationships. Furthermore, it was suggested by some participants that younger children may be more affected than older children, although, as noted earlier, participants felt that the types of cyberbullying experienced by adolescents were often more serious.

In sum, this study has indicated that parents/guardians and school staff who work with primary school children have some understanding of the nature of cyberbullying and diverse forms that it can take. It should be noted that this sample was self-selecting and therefore, may be more interested in, and more aware of, the topic. However, it shows that parents/guardians and school staff are aware that cyberbullying may occur among primary school-aged pupils, with some suggesting that it can occur from the point at which children are sufficiently literate and have access to the Internet and mobile phones, highlighting a perception that this occurs at increasingly younger ages. The participants tended to be of the opinion that supervision of mobile phone use and Internet access at home would have a beneficial effect on reducing cyberbullying, but they were less sure about the potential effects of supervision at school. This may be because it was agreed that most cyberbullying occurred outside of school, perhaps because primary school pupils have no (or very limited) access to the Internet in school and because primary school pupils would not be allowed to have or use a mobile phone during school time. However, schools need to be involved in anti-cyberbullying work as it has been noted (by the participants in this study and by previous research, e.g., Juvonen & Gross, 2008) that children and young people are often cyberbullied by people they know from school and that cyberbullying outside of school may have an impact on young people within school.

From this research we can draw some tentative recommendations for prevention/intervention work on cyberbullying with primary school pupils. It is important that schools and families work in partnership to deal with cyberbullying. Although most cyberbullying arguably occurs outside of school, the effects spill over into the school environment. Furthermore, it is important that parents/guardians are given support and advice in protecting their children online. Many of the comments received from the focus group highlighted the perceptions of adults as being less skilled in their use of ICT than children. Participants were aware of the potentially damaging impact of cyberbullying on those who experience it, but some reported parents/guardians were insufficiently confident with technology to effectively monitor their child's use of ICT. Participants also noted that it would be difficult to spot a child who was being cyberbullied, as there are unlikely to be externally visible signs (such as a torn blazer or bruise). This means that children need to be encouraged to tell someone if they are being cyberbullied and that adults need to be given support to respond to this appropriately. This is already being done as part of the government recommendations for dealing with bullying and other studies have found that children aged 7 to 11 years would recommend a victim of cyberbullying to tell someone (Monks et al., 2012). What is important is that children feel that they can tell someone who will be able to help and an important step towards this is to provide parents/guardians and school staff with the skills and confidence to deal with these issues.

There are some limitations to this research which need to be considered. First, the majority of the participants were female; all of the parents/guardians and 81% of the school staff were female. Future research should attempt to recruit more fathers and ensure a representative proportion of male school staff are included in research. A further limitation of the research was that the participants were a self-selecting group who may have had different views on cyberbullying than those who did not choose to participate. Therefore, the generalisability of the findings needs to be considered carefully. Larger scale studies with parents/guardians and school staff in relation to their understanding of cyberbullying and perceptions of cyberbullying among this age-group are needed. However, this research, added to the limited research to date with this age group, supports the inclusion of cyberbullying in the

anti-bullying work of primary schools and work with families to address this issue. In accord with Ey et al. (2015), we highlight the need for future research to examine in more depth the emergence of cyberbullying among primary school-aged pupils, in particular large-scale studies with representative samples using age-appropriate methods to examine the prevalence, impact, and risk factors for involvement. It is vital that research examines the experiences of younger children in relation to cyberbullying in order that age-appropriate intervention and prevention work can be developed.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors of this article declare no conflict of interest.

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