Youth Study Series **44**

香港中學生網上欺凌研究
A Study on Cyber-bullying among Hong Kong Secondary Students

青少年問題研究系列

HKFYG 青協

A Study on Cyber-bullying among Hong Kong Secondary Students

Summary Report

The "Be Net-wise" Internet Education Campaign was launched in 2009. It was supported by the Office of the Government Chief Information Officer (OGCIO) and organized with central coordination of The Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups (the Federation) and concerted efforts of 14 other non-governmental organizations. This research was part of the Campaign sponsored by the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government (HKSARG).

In recent years, there have been many cases of youngsters being bullied online. With advances in information technology, the world has entered a new digital era which has revolutionized daily life. Overseas research has revealed an upward trend in cyber-bullying, one of the problems that has emerged concurrently and attracted attention worldwide.

Hong Kong education authorities provide guidelines to all schools on face-to-face bullying and help to set up school-based bully-handling skills. However there are little in-depth public discussions of cyber-bullying and little research has been done. That is why this research has been conducted.

The Federation has long been actively promoting civic education. We are very concerned that youth should use the internet wisely and safely. The Federation has been also conducted many surveys on youth and information technology to improve understanding of youth attitudes. What are the nature and the extent of cyber-bullying among Hong Kong secondary students? What are young people's emotional and behavioural reactions to cyber-bullying and how can we prevent cyber-bullying? This research attempts to answer the above questions. By a questionnaire survey of a sample group of Hong Kong secondary students, interviews with academics and experts coupled with in-depth case interviews, we hope to provide a clearer picture of the issues concerned and make recommendations for the way forward.

In this research, "secondary students" refer to students studying in F.1 to F.7 during the survey. We adopt Bill Belsey's definition of cyber-bullying, "the use of

information and communication technologies to support deliberate, repeated, and hostile behavior by an individual or a group that is intended to harm others."[1] Its form of expression includes photos and videos other than words.

Data collection in this research includes a questionnaire survey and individual interviews to understand the features of cyber-bullying. The survey which employed two layers of samples stratified by school and by class respectively was conducted from April to May 2010.   A total of 2,981 valid self-administered questionnaires were collected from junior and senior secondary students in 18 secondary schools.

For in-depth understanding of the situation, case studies were also carried out from April to May 2010. A total of 18 secondary students who had experienced some form of cyber-bullying over the previous year were interviewed. All those interviewed (1) had been cyber-bullied or had cyber-bullied others in the past year, (2) were secondary students when being interviewed, and (3) had volunteered to be interviewed.

Interviews with experts and academics were conducted from April to May 2010. A total of 10 academics and experts were interviewed, among them were council members, educational practitioners, social workers and representatives from the Hong Kong Internet Society.

In this chapter, the results of our research are summarized, conclusions are drawn and recommendations are made.

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Discussion

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1. **According to the latest surveys, the prevalence of cyber-bullying and the penetrative use of information technology show that cyber-bullying is on the rise.**

Cyber-bullying is worthy of attention for the following three reasons: (1) Figures from the latest surveys on secondary students' cyber-bullying; (2) Cyber-bullying often occurs in various forms and the cyber-bullied suffer different levels of hurt, implying that cyber-bullying has become prevalent among secondary students; and

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[1] Belsey B. (2004). Cyber bullying - an emerging threat to the always-on generation.   Retrieved from: http://www.cyberbullying.ca/pdf/Cyberbullying_Presentation_Description.pdf on February 2010.

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(3) Penetrative use of information technology and the Internet has provided a convenient platform for cyber-bullying.

(1) Figures from the latest surveys on secondary students' cyber-bullying.

A cyber-bullying questionnaire survey[2] was conducted by the "Happy Teens Club" of the Hong Kong Christian Service from January to February 2009 for P.4 to F.6 students. Figures revealed that 18% of the interviewed students had been cyber-bullied over the past year, while 13% had cyber-bullied others in the same period of time.

The Hong Kong Family Welfare Society commissioned the Social Work Department of the Chinese University of Hong Kong to investigate the cyber-bullying of F.1 to F.7 students in the period December 2009 to February 2010. The results showed that 30.9% had suffered different levels of cyber-bullying and 17.8% had cyber-bullied others[3].

This research showed that 30.2% of interviewed secondary students had been cyber-bullied over the past year; while 22.0% said that they had cyber-bullied others.

The above-mentioned surveys indicate that cyber-bullying is becoming more prevalent in secondary schools.

(2) Incidents of cyber-bullying in recent years.

Taking into account the cyber-bullying incidents occurred in recent years, we found that there were many cyber-bullying cases of personal information exposed, photos merged with other pictures, serious insults and public "trial" online.

Regarding interviewees' opinions of cyber-bullying, they thought that teenagers could access and hide their identities easily without supervision online, and that the

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[2] Research conducted by Happy Teens Club of the Hong Kong Christian Service from January to February 2009. It is a questionnaire survey on cyber-bullying for students from P.4 to F.6. 908 questionnaires were collected. Results at:
http://www.hkcs.org/commu/2009press/press20090509.html
[3] Research conducted by Social Work Department of Chinese University of Hong Kong commissioned by Hong Kong Family Welfare Society from December 2009 to February 2010, targeting F.1 to F.7 students, successfully interviewed more than 1800 students. Hong Kong Daily News: "30% of Secondary Students had once cyber-bullied", link listed below:
http://www.hkdailynews.com.hk/news.php?id=109233

possibility of bullying without time or geographic constraints had prompted the spread of such the phenomenon.

Cyber-bullying is prevalent among teenagers not just because the Internet is a familiar platform, but also because bullying online seems less risk.   The anonymity of the Internet allows cyber-bullies to hide their identities and do what they dare not do in the real world.

(3)   Penetrative use of information technology.

Some experts / academics interviewed said that penetrative use of information technology and the use of social networking were influential.   In the age of Web 2.0, teenagers surf information online and voice opinions in online, interactive discussion groups like Facebook, YouTube and blogs. Compared with the one-way communication of Web 1.0, it was harder to ignore messages, even if they were repeated. With Web 2.0 communication became more interactive, and sparked online discussions and disputes with more people joining in to worsen the situation and cause conflict.

Figures from the Hong Kong Census and Statistics Department indicated that almost all teenagers aged 10-24 used the computer and the Internet. Those aged 10-14 used the computer for 17.6 hours and the Internet for 15.5 hours every week on average and those aged 15-24 used the computer for 30.7 hours and the Internet for 25.9 hours[4]. From April to May 2010, the Public Opinion Programme of the University of Hong Kong successfully conducted a poll survey with 825 teenagers aged 12 to 23.   Results revealed that nearly 100% of the interviewees had surfed Internet in the past 12 months and 53% of them said they wanted to "browse social net-working sites"[5].

The Internet has become a vital part of teenagers' lives. It is an important platform for meeting friends, chatting, learning and entertainment.   Yet, at the same time it acts as a convenient platform to bully others.   Every coin has two sides and so the best way to make good use of Internet to enhance our quality of life lies in good online conduct and values.

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[4] Hong Kong Census and Statistics Department (2009): "Thematic Household Survey Report No.43: Information technology usage and penetration".
[5] The Public Opinion Programme, the University of Hong Kong (2010): "Youth Survey on Usage of Internet and Social Networking Sites".

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2. **The literature and both cases and interviews with experts and academics show that cyber-bullying and face-to-face bullying differ greatly in forms, levels of hurt, roles to play, anonymity, coverage, convenience and problem solving.**

The table below illustrates the major differences between cyber-bullying and face-to-face bullying (Table 6.1).

Table 6.1: Differences between cyber-bullying and face-to-face bullying

Aspects	Cyber-bullying	Face-to-Face bullying
Forms of bullying	Cyber-bullying uses words, pictures, etc. and online communication technology.	Face-to-face bullying involves both physical and verbal insults.
Levels of hurt	It usually hurts people psychologically and may have long-lasting effects.	It can hurt people physically and may have psychological adverse effects too.
Roles to play	Cyber-bullies, the cyber-bullied and witnesses may swap roles; today's bullies could be tomorrow's bullied.	Bullies, the bullied and witnesses all have clear roles to play.
Anonymity	Bullies can hide their identities.	Face-to-face bullies can almost always recognized.
Coverage	Messages in cyber-bullying can spread rapidly and widely and so hundreds of people can magnify the incident.	The number of people involved in and coverage of face-to-face bullying are limited.
Convenience	Cyber-bullying has no time or geographical constraints, and there is no need to consider physical strength.	In face-to-face bullying, convenience and availability may impose time or place constraints.
Problem solving	Cyber-bullying is a more complex problem due to its swift and widespread nature and the difficulty in finding the source.	Face-to-face bullying is less complicated because fewer people are involved. Spread is limited and both bullies and bullied can be brought together.

3. **This research reveals that the cyber-bullied, cyber-bullies and witnesses all have their own special features. In addition, It is easier for males and F.2 students to be cyber-bullies or cyber-bullied.**

According to the questionnaire survey for secondary students in Hong Kong and interviews with experts and academics, we find that the cyber-bullied, cyber-bullies and witnesses all have their own features.   Moreover, we found that males and F.2 students were more likely to be cyber-bullies or cyber-bullied, which may constitute an indicative marker for social services for reference.

(1) Cyber-bullied:

The results of the questionnaire survey for secondary students in Hong Kong revealed that approximately 30% (30.2%), or 899 of the interviewees had been cyber-bullied, with a preponderance of males and F.2 respondents.

The questionnaire survey found that most of those who had seen cyber-bullied had also experienced face-to-face bullying. The results imply that people involved in cyber-bullying swap roles.

In addition, it was found that the male cyber-bullied were usually repeatedly insulted and the female cyber-bullied were usually sent indecent or embarrassing photos.   Moreover, the cyber-bullied in junior forms were usually repeatedly insulted and the cyber-bullied in senior forms were usually sent embarrassing or indecent photos.

(2) Cyber-bullies:

The questionnaire survey found that more than 20% (22.0%), or 656 of interviewees had cyber-bullied others, with a preponderance of male and F.2 respondents. Results also revealed that most cyber-bullies had also been cyber-bullied.

In addition, looking at gender and educational attainment, it was found that male cyber-bullies usually insulted others repeatedly, while female cyber-bullies usually spread rumours online.   Moreover, junior form cyber-bullies usually deliberately boycott or exclude others while senior form cyber-bullies usually spread rumours about others.

(3) Witnesses:

The questionnaire survey found that 1,712 had witnessed cyber-bullying, which represents more than 55% (57.7%) of the interviewees. Most of them are males and F.4 students.

Based on the above mentioned research findings, in the past year, 899 people (30.2%) of the interviewees had been cyber-bullied; 656 people (22.0%) of the interviewees had cyber-bullied others; and 1,712 people (57.7%) of the interviewees had witnessed cyber-bullying.

Regarding the interviewees' roles in cyber-bullying, it was found that 413 interviewees were both the cyber-bullied and cyber-bullies. 608 interviewees had been both cyber-bullied and witnesses. 453 interviewees had been both cyber-bullies and witnesses. 354 interviewees had been cyber-bullied, were cyber-bullies and had also been witnesses of cyber-bullying (Fig. 6.1).

The above figures revealed that the cyber-bullied, the cyber-bullies and the witnesses did not have fixed roles. Their roles may be swapped which could exacerbate the situation. Also, this research finds that, males and F.2 students are more likely to be cyber-bullies and cyber-bullied respectively. According to past research, F.2 students are a group worth of concern. This is because F.1 is a crucial period for students to adapt to new school life and normally the school will offer them special services or attention. Relatively speaking, F.2 students would easily be neglected.

Cyber-bullies	**Cyber-bullied**

23   59   111

354

99   254

666

Witness   **548**
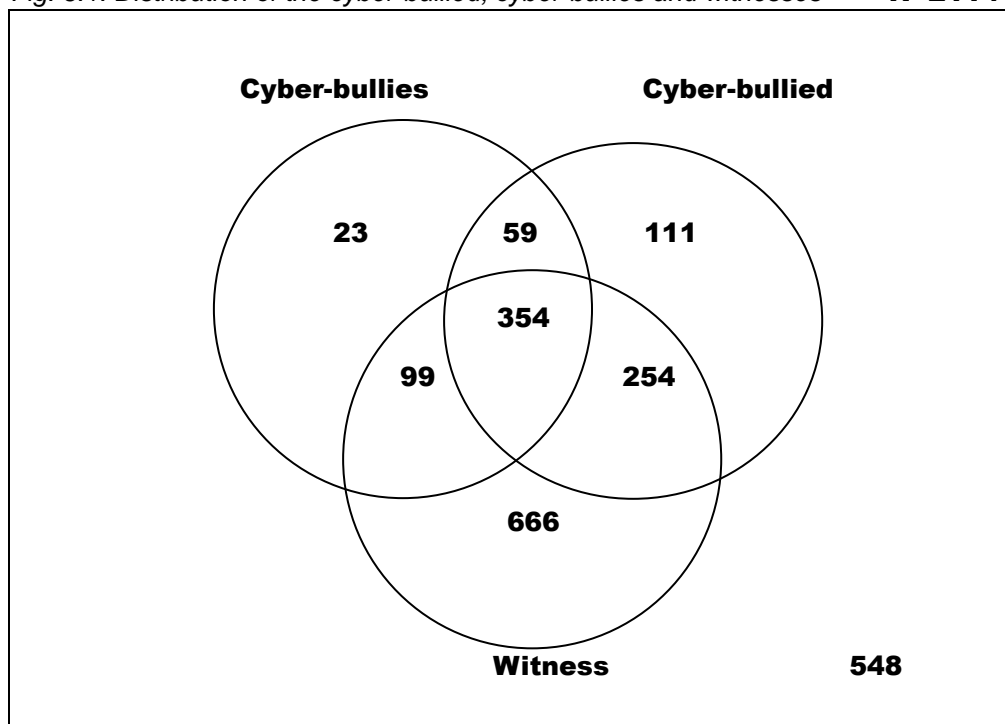
4.   **Based on the results of questionnaire survey, case studies and experts and academics interviews, there are 5 features of cyber-bullying among Hong Kong secondary students: (1) the form of cyber-bullying is mainly rumour-spreading; (2) "social networking sites" are the major platform for cyber-bullying; (3) students usually cyber-bully others after school and use personal computers at home to do so; (4) cyber-bullies and the cyber-bullied are usually classmates; and (5) cyber-bullying is regarded as a kind of fun-making rather than a problem.**

(1)   **Ways to bully others: Hong Kong secondary students cyber-bully others mainly by spreading rumours about others, insulting others, boycotting and excluding others, exposing others' personal information and editing others' photos.**

In this survey, 8 common means of cyber-bullying are listed as options for interviewees.   No matter whether the interviewees are with cyber-bullies or the cyber-bullied, the top 5 common ways of cyber-bullying are: (a) spreading rumours about others online; (b) deliberately boycotting or excluding others; (c) repeatedly insulting others online; (d) posting embarrassing or indecent photos online; and (e)

exposing others personal information online without their permission.

Besides, based on the results of 18 case interviews, it was found that the following are common ways of cyber-bullying: (a) insulting others; (b) exposing personal information; (c) editing others' pictures or photos to mock them; and (d) establishing groups to specifically target others.

> *"Established a group to unveil bad things she did and exposed her personal information, private photos to let others know her wrongs and judge her openly."*
>
> *Female/ F.5*

> *"I edited one classmate's photo.   I merged her photos with others to demonize her and posted the edited photos on a forum saying that they were amazing to attract others to have a look at that stuff.   People would be astonished finding those edited photos."*
>
> *Male/ F.2*

(2) Bullying platform: Hong Kong secondary students mainly use "social networking sites" as a platform to bully others.

This research found that among the 899 who had been cyber-bullied, more than half (52.3%) said they had been cyber-bullied on "social networking sites".   Among the 656 cyber-bullies, 54.0% said that they had cyber-bullied others on "social networking sites".   Some experts and academics who were interviewed said that quite a lot of cyber-bullying occurred at social networking sites, since social networking sites are a platform which teenagers love to use to meet friends, to chat with others, to voice opinions or even to cyber-bully others.

According to the latest survey conducted by the Public Opinion Programme of the University of Hong Kong[6], more than half (53.0%) of the respondents surf the Internet because they want to go to "social networking sites".   Social networking sites have become a part of teenagers' lives.   They are instant and interactive and can prompt cyber-bullying.

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[6] Public Opinion Programme, the University of Hong Kong (2010): "Youth Survey on Usage of Internet and Social Networking Sites"

(3) Time and place of cyber-bullying: Hong Kong secondary students usually cyber-bully others after school; most students cyber-bully others on personal computers at home.

The results of the survey revealed that, among 656 cyber-bullies, 39.6% said that they cyber-bullied others after school; and 36.9% and 33.1% respectively said that they cyber-bullied others at irregular times or at night.

Most of the interviewees (87.5%) said that they used their personal computers to cyber-bully others. Some experts and academics also indicated that secondary students cyber-bullied others with personal computers at home owing to the fact that there was no supervision and they rarely cyber-bullied at school for fear that their identities would be exposed.

(4) Relationship between cyber-bullies and cyber-bullied: Cyber-bullies and cyber-bullied are usually classmates.

This research showed that among 899 cyber-bullied, nearly 40% (39.7%) said the cyber-bullies were their "classmates", "schoolmates" (34.3%) or "strangers" (18.8%). On the other hand, among 656 cyber-bullies, 47.3% said that they cyber-bullied their "classmates", followed by "schoolmates" (37.3%) and "strangers" (24.2%).

Based on the 18 case interviews, it was found that, whether they were cyber-bullies or cyber-bullied, they knew the cyber-bullies / cyber-bullied well and they were usually classmates. Only a few of the interviewees said that the cyber-bullied / cyber-bullies were netizens or hi-bye friends.

> *"It was what my classmate did! She uploaded my personal photos online without my permission. I felt I was betrayed!"*
>
> *Female/ F.5*

> *"He was my classmate but everyone in class hated him very much so we always played tricks on him for the fun of it."*
>
> *Male/ F.2*

The above results show that cyber-bullies and the cyber-bullied most likely know each other and they are usually classmates. Some experts and academics who

were interviewed indicated that cyber-bullying may be the extension of school bullying. It is because student conflicts have existed in schools and students may further vent their grievances online other than in school.

(5) Understanding cyber-bullying: Hong Kong secondary students may regard cyber-bullying as a form of entertainment rather than a problem.

This survey found that among 899 cyber-bullied, 46.6% said that they had done nothing in response to cyber-bullying; and of them, 56.5% said the reason was they "did not regard it as a problem". Perhaps interviewees lack knowledge about cyber-bullying and underestimate its seriousness. How can one teach teenagers that enhancing their awareness about cyber-bullying and online security is of the greatest importance?

On the other side, among 656 cyber-bullies, 34.8% claimed that they cyber-bullied others just for fun or to make a joke of it. It reflected that cyber-bullying may sometimes be attributed to the cyber-bullies' playfulness and those cyber-bullies may not realize that cyber-bullying is a kind of problem.

Also, some experts and academics indicated that secondary students regarded the Internet as a platform to vent their grievances and never thought of the consequences of cyber-bullying. It is because many secondary students may only have a blurred picture of cyber-bullying.

> *"The bullied who suffered cyber-bullying very badly will, of course, understand its influence. Yet, the bullies think that they are merely voicing their own opinions so they may not consider it as a problem or even as cyber-bullying. In fact, their concepts of cyber-bullying may not be clear."*
>
> *Master of Discipline Board and*
> *Counseling Service Team in a secondary school*

> *"They do not regard cyber-bullying as a problem but just a kind of fun making. They are gossiping and joking online; and they simply underestimate the influence of the Internet. The Internet may spread the messages rapidly without regarding others' privacy and this hurts others directly. Initially they may only want to share the fun with their*

buddies but never thought that it would hurt others."

Principal Chow Ping Yan/ Chairperson of Education Convergence

5. Cyber-bullying has greatly influenced the bullied which is worth our attention.

What is the effect of cyber-bullying on the cyber-bullied? These research findings show that among 899 cyber-bullied, more than 20% (21.5%) had lower self-esteem. Moreover, about 20% (19.7%) and 15% (14.1%) respectively said "they had lost their trust in people around them" and "the incident had made them cyber-bully others". It is worthy of attention that the 11 interviewees (1.2%) who had been cyber-bullied claimed that they attempted to commit suicide. Indeed, cyber-bullying has a great influence on the victims.

In addition, the effect of cyber-bullying differs depending on the severity and continuity of the act, what was said or done, and the tolerance of the victims. Some interviewees could not take stress and wanted to commit suicide. Others were very upset and would avoid facing classmates. Some had lost confidence in their fellow students. Some had fought back which could worsen the situation. The cyber-bully's influence is so great that it is even more serious than school-bullying.

"I felt extremely unhappy and angry. That incident led to my loss of confidence and good mood, and I wanted to avoid meeting others or going to school to hide myself. I had once come up with the idea of attempting suicide."

Male/ F.2

"I felt extremely unhappy and lost my confidence and would like to escape from the crowd. Fearing that others recognised me, I always bowed my head down when going out."

Female/ F.3

6. This research finds that the responses to cyber-bullying are different. Some had to seek help from people around them or fight back. Some did nothing since they did not regard it as a problem or were afraid of the family stopping them from surfing the Internet.

This questionnaire survey showed that among 899 cyber-bullied, 37.2% claimed that they had done something in response to cyber-bullying. This included "taking revenge on the cyber-bullies" (32.4%); "asking help from classmates / friends" (31.1%); "blacklisting the cyber-bullies" (24.2%): "asking for clarification / explanation regarding incidents" (19.8%) and "deleting related messages / pictures" (18.7%).

Some asked help from people around them including parents, teachers, social workers and friends. Some would report cyber-bullying to the police. Nevertheless, some interviewees said they had not sought help from anyone, believing that they could handle cyber-bullying themselves, i.e. fight back. Some chose to blacklist the bullies' accounts and some chose to ask website administrators to delete inappropriate messages.

This survey found that 46.6% of respondents had not employed any method to fight against cyber-bullying. Of them, 56.5% said they did nothing because they did not regard it as a problem. Apart from the case interviews, some said they had told their parents but their parents did not consider it to be a problem. This also undermined the sense of seriousness of cyber-bullying. However, some interviewees had not told their parents about incidents to avoid being forbidden from surfing the Internet.

The above results have brought out 4 points: (1) A relatively high proportion of those who had responded to cyber-bullying had resorted to revenge, and this might have worsened the situation; (2) A lot of interviewees were likely to ask for help from classmates / friends hence strengthening mutual trust between peers; (3) Those who did nothing in response to cyber-bullying thought it was not a problem. This shows that many secondary students may lack knowledge about cyber-bullying and underestimate the harm it can do. It is essential to teach teenagers the importance of knowing more about cyber-bullying and thus enhance their awareness of the need for online security; and (4) Parents' attitudes towards incidents directly influence how teenagers solve the problem. If parents underestimate the seriousness of cyber-bullying or over-protect their children it may lead to teenagers being reluctant to tell their parents about the incidents.

7. While understanding the characteristics of cyber-bullying, the following measures should be considered: strengthening cross-discipline cooperation and communication; promoting awareness of online security; setting clear reporting mechanisms; enhancing media literacy among teenagers to prevent and stop cyber-bullying.

Findings of this research suggested that the majority of interviewees were inclined to disapprove of cyber-bullying. Moreover, a relatively high proportion of interviewees think that the main reasons for cyber-bullying include: freedom of the Internet, ease with which personal identities can be hidden; poor awareness of cyber-bullying. Also, findings of this research revealed that 40.2% of the interviewees think that "penalizing cyber-bullies severely can effectively reduce cyber-bullying. Meanwhile, 37.4% and 33.8% of the interviewees respectively think that "enhancing self-discipline of the netizens" and "educating teenagers about cyber-bullying and its influence" can be effective solutions.

In addition, based on the opinions of experts and academics who were interviewed, we should investigate strategies with the Internet service providers, the community, schools, families and individuals to prevent and stop cyber-bullying. Cooperation and communication between different sectors is needed to raise awareness of online security. It is also suggested to set up a clear reporting mechanism and enhance media literacy among teenagers.

Recommendations

From the related data and evidence gathered, this research reveals that cyber-bullying in secondary schools has increased significantly and the problem should be addressed as soon as possible. Integrating the results of the research and the points of the discussion, we would like to put forward the following four proposals for future action:

1. To continuously collect data related to cyber-bullying, with an aim to provide related preventive measures.

Owing to the limited research on the phenomena of cyber-bullying and the public's lack of knowledge on the issue, collecting further information is of vital importance. <u>We think that continuous review and knowledge of current data and information about cyber-bullying will not only raise public awareness of the problem but also contribute to providing preventative measures.</u>

2. To strengthen training in Media Literacy at school and make sure teenage netizens are well informed.

<u>We suggest that schools strengthen training in Media Literacy for the students and advise that they should attend six sessions on the subject per semester in order to learn about information technology and know more about online safety.</u> Although cyber-bullying has not reached an uncontrollable level yet, it could be a formidable task if left unattended so it is worth taking early preventive measures. We think that the authorities and the schools should provide guidelines for procedures in handling cyber-bullying to equip educators facing challenge.

3. To consider setting up rules for network service providers to prevent cyber-bullying.

Some experts and scholars say involved parties should increase the transparency and rules of supervision system gradually, giving clear hints about "preventing and protecting" in website interfaces as well as, providing guidelines to protect personal online safety and increase youth's awareness of cyber bullying. <u>We suggest the network supplier should consider setting up rules suitable for use of specific terms, photos and videos to prevent cyber-bullying.</u>

4. To provide parents with clear guidelines to deal with their children's problem of cyber-bullying.

Research shows that parents' attitudes towards cyber-bullying directly influence how teenagers approach the problem. If

parents underestimate the seriousness of cyber-bullying or over-protect their children, it may lead to the teenagers being reluctant to tell their parents about the incident. For dealing with the problem of cyber bullying, parental education is particularly important. Parents may feel helpless to cope with their children's problems, no matter whether their child is the victim of cyber-bullying or the one who bullies others. <u>We suggest providing parents with clear guidelines to deal with their children's problems related to cyber-bullying.</u>

Eight hints for parents whose children have been cyber-bullied

(1) Do not scold your child
(2) Do not respond to the opinions online
(3) Collect evidence for reporting
(4) Report it to the school for help if the incident involves schoolmates
(5) Contact the parent of the bully if possible
(6) Contact the network supplier / administrator to delete related words or photos
(7) Seek a social worker for help if necessary
(8) Report it to the police for help if your child gets threatened

Four hints for parents whose children have cyber-bullied others

(1) understand the incident and to dissuade your child from bullying others online
(2) encourage your child to make an apology to the victim
(3) seek professional counselling
(4) teach your child about online security