Coping with cyberbullying: How can we prevent cyberbullying and how victims can cope with it?

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Chapter 7

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter explores current knowledge on coping with cyberbullying. We define coping strategies as responses (behaviours, but also emotions/cognitions) that are successful (or not) against cyberbullying and against its impact on victims. In the current chapter, we differentiate between two domains of responses to cyberbullying: (a) how parents and schools can prevent cyberbullying through the reduction of risks, and (b) how victims can cope with cyberbullying in order to combat the problem and buffer its negative impact. In 2012 we published an extensive report on coping strategies based on a systematic literature review (Perren et al., 2012a). The current chapter provides a summary of these findings and integrates most current literature on the topic.
RESPONSES TO CYBERBULLYING

One of the aims of the COST Action IS0801 was to review the available research evidence regarding how children, families, and schools cope with cyberbullying, so as to better inform those with an interest in developing guidelines for cyberbullying, and to detail the issues that would require further research exploration. Towards this aim, we specifically aimed to explore the empirical (scientific) literature regarding coping strategies against cyberbullying at the: (a) personal level; (b) family level; and (c) school level. The work has been published in an extensive report describing methods and results in detail (Perren et al., 2012a) as well as in an article reporting and discussing the question of successful responses with cyberbullying (Perren et al., 2012b).

As outlined in Perren et al. (2012a, 2012b), we systematically explored empirical findings related to reducing risk, combating cyberbullying and buffering the negative impact on victims (see Figure 1).
First, from a preventive perspective, students, parents and schools may try to cope with the emerging problem of cyberbullying by means of reducing known risks. As cyberbullying is strongly associated with traditional bullying (Dooley, Pyzalski, & Cross, 2009; Gradinger, Strohmeier, & Spiel 2009; Sticca, Ruggieri, Alsaker, & Perren, 2013), we may assume that taking action against traditional bullying and associated risk factors through such interventions as whole-school approaches and policies, social skills training or improvement of the school climate could also reduce the risk of cyberbullying. As cyberbullying occurs via the Internet or mobile phone use, it is also associated with general online risks such as risky online contacts or seeing inappropriate content (Livingstone, Haddon, Görzig, & Ólafsson, 2011). Therefore, strategies such as parental mediation or Internet safety measures might also be effective in reducing cyberbullying.
Secondly, when cyberbullying occurs, a different set of coping strategies to stop these negative behaviours may be applied by students, parents or schools. These strategies include technical solutions (e.g., blocking contact), confronting the bully (e.g., constructive contact or retaliation), ignoring (e.g., doing nothing, avoidant behaviour or emotion regulation) and instrumental support (e.g., asking someone else for help).

Third, as cyberbullying has negative consequences for victims (Gradinger et al., 2009; Juvonen & Gross, 2008; Perren, Dooley, Shaw, & Cross, 2010; Sourander et al., 2010), specific coping strategies might also be applied to enhance victims’ well-being and to buffer the negative impact. Victims themselves may try to cope emotionally with the problem by adopting individual strategies, which may be healthy or unhealthy strategies. Parents, friends or peers may offer emotional and instrumental support (see also Perren et al., 2012b).

**What are "successful" responses?**

Our literature review specifically addressed the question of what responses are successful and not only what coping strategies are used (Perren et al., 2012a, 2012b). Various methodological approaches have been applied, using different study designs and assessment methods and targeting different populations. From a purely methodological point of view, these approaches may range from subjective evaluations to experimental designs. In reviewing the selected studies, we have identified the following taxonomy:

a) What do people, in general, think is effective?

b) Retrospective accounts of cybervictims regarding the success of chosen coping strategies.
c) Cross-sectional studies investigating associations between certain preventive strategies or coping strategies, cybervictimization and victim’s well-being.

d) Longitudinal studies investigating whether certain preventive strategies or coping strategies are related to decreasing levels of cybervictimization or victim’s well-being.

e) Experimental studies investigating the impact of selected preventive strategies or coping strategies on changes in cybervictimization and victim’s well-being.

In our review involving empirical findings published up to the end of 2010, we had to conclude that there is a clear lack of evidence concerning successful responses (Perren et al., 2012a). A few studies reported perceived success, and very few measured the success of the strategies in relation to risks and outcomes. In the meantime, some further studies have been published, which have expanded our knowledge, but still only few of them yield a strong evidence base. However, awareness of effective and ineffective strategies is essential if schools are to develop programs that are informed by the most up-to-date research findings.

**PREVENTING CYBERBULLYING**

In this section, we focus specifically on the research addressing preventive strategies against cyberbullying. The literature on prevention of cyberbullying seems to be broad. However, it predominantly puts forward conclusions about, and implications for, prevention measures rather than actual empirical evidence on the usage and success of such measures (Perren et al., 2012a). There are two different approaches on how to address the issue of cyberbullying prevention. The first one argues that prevention measures should draw upon experience from
the prevention of face-to-face bullying (Campbell, 2005; Gradinger, Yanagida, Strohmeier, Stefanek, Schiller, & Spiel, 2012). Specifically, some scholars argue these measures can be extended to prevent cyberbullying without structural changes (Slonje, Smith, & Frisén, 2013). The second approach expands the first one by putting an emphasis on the distinctive nature of the cyberbullying phenomenon and on the need to address this (Tangen & Campbell, 2010). Prevention measures like parental mediation strategies and education of safe Internet use have been suggested.

**General anti-bullying strategies**

The prevention strategies used for traditional bullying stress the role of school, specifically teachers who consider the school environment to be important for their protection (DiBasilio, 2008). Several researchers argue that many suggestions concerning teaching, curriculum, and policies which were originally developed for preventing traditional bullying, might be useful for stopping cyberbullying. The main argument for this comes from the fact that cyberbullying is very strongly associated with traditional bullying and only very few students engage only in online-forms of bullying and not in offline-bullying (Dehue, Bolman, Völlink, & Pouwelse, 2012; Gradinger et al., 2009; Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2007; Smith, 2011; Smith & Slonje, 2010; Sticca et al., 2013).

Especially, there is an agreement among scholars on the need to train students in developing social skills, which can be done through curriculum programs or special intervention programs (Campbell, 2005; Dranoff, 2008; Mason, 2008). For instance, Gradinger and colleagues (2012), who found support for this approach in their study, provided evidence that a general social competence program to prevent aggressive behaviour was also effective in
preventing cyberbullying and cybervictimization. Similarly, the evaluation of one general anti-bullying program KiVa, primarily designed for preventing traditional bullying, showed its positive effect in reducing cyberbullying (Salmivalli, Kärnä, & Poskiparta, 2011).

**Media education for young people and parental mediation**

But other recent studies have come to a different conclusion - that addressing traditional bullying may not be sufficient for tackling cyberbullying and special attention should be paid to specifics of the phenomena, including technologies (Campbell, 2005). Students often express their need to see that adult authorities such as parents or teachers understand new technologies and are familiar with cyberbullying (Mishna, Saini, & Solomon, 2009). This goes hand–in-hand with the first recommendation – to heighten awareness of cyberbullying and its consequences among teachers, parents and students (Campbell, 2005; Juvonen & Gross, 2008; Li, 2007; Wright, Burnham, Inman, & Ogorchock, 2009; Young, Young, & Fullwood, 2007). In the literature there is an emphasis on all the actors and their responsibility for internet/mobile phone safety (i.e., preventing cyberbullying). This concern is related to results showing that some occurrences of cyberbullying have features (especially the huge audience and anonymity) which may make cyberbullying worse than traditional bullying (Sticca & Perren, 2012).

Specifically, parents should be encouraged to play a greater role in supervising their children’s’ use of technology (Rosen, Cheever, & Carier, 2008). Some scholars also point out that it is important to take into consideration where the home computer is located (Rosen et al., 2008). On the other hand, the recent large-scale EU Kids Online II project did not find any effect of computer location on reducing cyberbullying (Livingstone et al., 2011).
Regarding teachers and school education, school curriculum and policy should implement a range of preventive strategies such as direct teaching of values and empathy along with 'netiquette' (Campbell, 2005; Dranoff, 2008; Mason, 2008; Stacey, 2009). The term ‘netiquette’ arises from the combination of the words network and etiquette (Scheuermann & Taylor, 1997) and describes appropriate personal judgment about interpersonal Internet communication (Kumazaki, Suzuki, Katsura, Sakamoto, & Kashibuchi, 2011). Many guidelines on safe Internet use emphasize the role of privacy and warn young people not to publish potentially embarrassing photos or videos on the Internet. Whereas this recommendation is certainly an important cybersafety measure, we have to be aware that it cannot protect children from being bullied. As we have seen that many victims blame themselves for bullying and that self-blame may increase the negative impact of cybervictimization (Machmutow, Perren, Sticca, & Alsaker, 2012), we have to be aware that these kinds of recommendations may even have an adverse side effect.

Furthermore, schools should adopt programmes for motivating all students, including bystanders, towards taking action against cyberbullying (Campbell, 2005; Stacey, 2009). Finally, the cyberbullying literature stresses the need for empowering children and young people, and making them the key actors in terms of deciding about and implementing prevention strategies and relevant psychosocial interventions (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004; Young et al., 2007).

To conclude, it seems that traditional anti-bullying programs aimed at systematically tackling cyberbullying, including the participation of students and their parents, might yield fruitful results in terms of preventing cyberbullying or handling it. However, special programs which take into account the specific characteristics of cyberbullying seem to be needed.
VICTIMS’ COPING WITH CYBERBULLYING

This section explores successful and unsuccessful strategies that students use to cope with bullying in general. It also takes account of the impact of the contexts in which such strategies are adopted.

Research evidence indicates that children and young people who are already vulnerable in some way are likely to need support in building up the personal resilience necessary for coping with being bullied by their peers (Frydenberg et al., 2004). Parents and educators need to be sensitive to the young person’s feelings of being trapped in a downward spiral in which low self-esteem and interpersonal difficulties can undermine the ability to defend oneself against social exclusion, rejection and intimidation. One outcome is likely to be that the bullied student comes to expect negative treatment from the peer group. Behaviour that more resilient students might brush off is therefore experienced even more negatively leading to further victimisation, and so the cycle continues (Escobar, Fernández-Baena, Miranda, Trianes, & Cowie, 2011).

It can be difficult to differentiate among the range of possible ways of addressing the problem since the success can be strongly influenced by such factors as the age of the student, their developmental needs and their gender, as well as by the form that the bullying takes, whether it involves social exclusion, physical attack or online intimidation. Furthermore, the coping mechanism adopted cannot be viewed in isolation from its social context. For example, the response of bystanders can be critical, whether they display indifference to the plight of the victim, actively join the bully or intervene to defend. Younger students are more likely to
seek support from adults while adolescents are more likely to seek support from peers. In comparison to girls, adolescent boys prefer to manage the problem themselves in order to enhance their status in the eyes of the peer group (Kochenderfer-Ladd & Skinner, 2002).

**Combating cyberbullying through technical and communicative means**

Combating cyberbullying covers a wide scale of coping strategies that victims of cyberbullying apply. They range from technical solutions, confronting a bully including retaliation and avoidant strategies through seeking instrumental support (Perren et al., 2012b).

Starting with *technical* solutions, the cyberbullying literature provides evidence that deleting or blocking threatening messages are generally used and considered as being helpful (Aricak et al., 2008; Juvonen & Gross, 2008; Kowalski, Limber, & Agatston, 2008; Livingstone et al., 2011; Smith, Mahdavi, Carvalho, Fisher, Russell, & Tippett, 2008; Stacey, 2009). However, qualitative research on coping with cyberbullying questions the long-term effect of technical solutions. Specifically, victims and students did not consider them helpful in terms of stopping cyberbullying, since the aggressor who wants to bully always find ways to bypass them (Parris, Varjas, Meyers, & Cutts, 2012; Šléglová & Černá, 2011).

*Confronting a bully* and mainly *retaliation* have received great attention, as characteristics of the Internet, such as anonymity, were thought to encourage victims to retaliate or seek revenge (Perren et al., 2012a). However, Juvonen and Gross’s (2008) study showed that, whereas 60% of the cybervictims defended themselves against the bully with traditional face-to-face methods, 12% retaliated only in cyberspace, and 28% used both traditional and cyber forms of retaliation. In contrast to retaliation, non-aggressive confronting of a bully is
considered to be constructive and may contribute to reducing cyberbullying. Research seems to be inconsistent regarding the effectiveness of this strategy. While some studies have shown that this strategy could bring about positive outcomes (Huang & Chou, 2010; Parris et al., 2012), Price and Dalgleish (2010) found in their study that confrontation was the least effective. Therefore, greater effort is needed to understand in which context confronting cyberbully may be effective and helpful.

*Doing nothing or ignoring* is another action that victims may take against cyberbullying. This comprises reactions such as stop looking at websites where the events happened, staying offline or just ignoring (Price & Dalgleish, 2010). Even though this form of response seems to be passive, it was a relatively often used strategy and was generally proposed by students (Dehue, Bolman, & Völlink; 2008; Hoff & Mitchell, 2009; Livingstone et al., 2011; Price & Dalgleish, 2010; Smith et al., 2008; Wright et al., 2009). Therefore, not surprisingly, the effectiveness of these types of responses has become a subject of several studies. In general, it can be concluded that there is a lack of evidence regarding the success of doing nothing or ignoring what is happening. The cyberbullying research literature documents its ineffectiveness - or rather the fact that many victims do not know what else to do besides adopting this avoidance strategy (Hoff & Mitchell, 2009; Price & Dalgleish, 2010; Šléglová & Černá, 2011).

**Emotional coping and seeking support**

In addition to (or instead of) problem-oriented coping strategies, victims may use emotion-focused coping strategies which buffer the negative impact as they reduce strong negative emotions such as anger, fear, sadness, helpless or guilt and other internalizing difficulties
(e.g., depression or suicidal ideation) that cybervictimization may evoke (Beran & Li, 2005; Černá, Dědková, Macháčková, Ševčíková, Šmahel, in press; Dehue et al., 2008; Hinduja & Patchin, 2010; Livingstone et al., 2011; Perren et al., 2010; Price & Dagleish, 2010; Völlink, Bolman, Dehue, & Jacobs, 2013).

Seeking support has been generally found to be a very helpful strategy irrespective of the people whom victims confide in (Aricak et al., 2008; Livingstone et al., 2011; Macháčková, Dědková, Černá, & Ševčíková, 2013; Smith et al., 2008; Stacey, 2009; Topçu, Erdur-Baker, & Capa-Aydin, 2008). However, the cyberbullying literature does not distinguish what kind of support was studied, whether it dealt with instrumental or emotional support, or which type of support victims asked for (Perren et al., 2012a).

To buffer the negative impacts of cyberbullying victims have been found to seek emotional support, blame themselves or use other unhealthy coping strategies. Machmutow and colleagues (2012) provide sufficient evidence that seeking support from peers and parents is also effective in buffering depressive symptoms that cybervictims report. However, seeking support needs to be a part of the repertoire of coping strategies that individuals use when facing different stressful situations. Specifically, it is apparent that using ineffective coping strategies in daily life leads to their reproduction when facing cyberbullying, which in turn exacerbates depression and health complaints (Völlink et al., 2013). Apart from internalizing difficulties, some cybervictims also incline to externalizing behaviours such as drinking alcohol (26%) and smoking cigarettes (23%) (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004). Therefore, Völlink and colleagues (2013) stress the need for training children to employ more effective coping strategies which, in addition, should be followed by supportive and close relationships within peer groups and family.
Despite the perceived effectiveness of this coping strategy, the prevalence (and preference) of this behaviour has been shown to vary considerably across studies. For instance, cyberbullying research has shown that there are victims who, for various reasons, refrain from seeking support (Juvonen & Gross, 2008). If they do confide in others about cyberbullying incidents, they prefer their peers (Aricak et al., 2008; DiBasilio, 2008; Stacey 2009; Topcu et al., 2008) to adult authorities such as parents or teachers (Hoff & Mitchell, 2009; Juvonen & Gross, 2008; Li, 2006, 2007; Mishna et al., 2009) who, according to them, lack knowledge about ICT and cyberbullying, or might prefer a simple solution to stop bullying such as banning Internet access or mobile phones (Hoff & Mitchell, 2009; Kowalski et al., 2008; Mishna et al., 2009; Smith et al., 2008; Stacey, 2009). Therefore, according to Livingstone and colleagues (2011), caregivers and teachers should be encouraged to communicate with their children or students about ICT use and safety issues instead of restricting access to the Internet. Regarding the peer context, Macháčková and colleagues (2013) would add the recommendation that instead of waiting for bystanders’ help, victims should train to directly ask onlookers for support. This action has been found to trigger their supportive behaviours towards targets.

As Murray-Harvey, Skrzypiec, and Slee (2012) indicate in their study of coping strategies adopted by 1,223 bullied adolescents in three Australian high schools, students were more likely to try to solve the problem themselves rather than involve another person. One reason for this under-use of available support may have been the students’ lack of awareness of the school’s anti-bullying policies, poor lines of communication between school and students, and feelings on the part of victims that it would be unsafe to disclose through fear of retaliation by the bully and shaming in the eyes of the peer group. Bullied students reported
that they were not likely to use relationship-based interventions, despite the strong advocacy of relationship-based interventions on the part of the informed professionals who were also surveyed in this study about their opinions on the relative effectiveness or ineffectiveness of interventions (for example, restorative justice, peer mediation, peer support, counselling and assertiveness training). The authors concluded that there is a need for much greater dissemination of information about the range of interventions on offer and a need for more training opportunities on how to use them.

**DISCUSSION**

This chapter has drawn upon a systematic review and analysis of the cyberbullying literature, which was conducted for an extensive period of time in the past two years (2010 – 2012). It reports findings in relation to how cyberbullying can be tackled and it specifically discusses evidence on prevention measures and coping strategies.

The literature on prevention appears to be rather prescriptive, making recommendations for prevention measures and foreseeing implications for the future course of cyberbullying. However, there appears to be a lack of evidence on the use of prevention measures and results delivered. This seems to create a gap in the amount of evidence and knowledge available with respect to what measures really work and prevent cyberbullying, in what contexts and under what conditions or circumstances, if any. In this sense, the measures suggested by the literature rely either on descriptive, abstract accounts of the individual researcher or on involved actors’ subjective and often biased perceptions, and they mostly originate from lessons and experiences from preventing traditional bullying. Regarding the latter, existing accounts offer some limited evidence on the applicability of traditional
bullying prevention measures to bullying events in cyberspace. At the same time, the literature points out the challenges that new technologies pose to attempts to apply such traditional measures to new or emerging forms of technologically-mediated bullying. Hence, the literature aiming to make concrete proposals on prevention of cyberbullying appears to be trapped in a relentless struggle to account for and balance between the commonalities and differences of traditional bullying and cyberbullying.

For future research, we recommend that there is a need for a strong evidence base. That is, we need more experimental studies which investigate the impact of specific intervention and prevention strategies on the occurrence of cyberbullying (and at the same time considering that specific cyberbullying prevention does not increase traditional bullying).

As far as victims' coping strategies are concerned, the literature offers evidence on a range of solutions employed by victims to combat cyberbullying, such as technical solutions, retaliation or confronting a cyberbully, seeking support, ignoring, and buffering the negative impact. The available evidence informs us about the effectiveness of such coping strategies and paves the way for examining new, emerging means to combat cyberbullying, and for assessing associated challenges. However, there appears to be a degree of inconsistency and inconclusiveness in the existing evidence, especially with respect to the long-term effects of such solutions and coping strategies. Specifically, the literature does not provide sufficient support to answer questions regarding the long-term effectiveness of technical measures and the ability of technology itself to ensure lasting effects against bullying incidents in cyberspace. Likewise, accounts of strategies such as ‘doing nothing’ or ‘ignoring’ lack evidence on their degree of success and impact. Also, research that examines attempts of the victim to confront the cyberbully has not offered conclusive findings, and so we require
further research to understand in which context confronting a cyberbully may be effective and helpful. Similarly, the strategy of seeking support is approached in rather ‘clunky’ terms, with the literature not clearly distinguishing emotional and instrumental support sought by the victim, nor consistently exploring the prevalence of this coping strategy. Future research in this area should also aim to gain a stronger evidence base, in that we need longitudinal studies investigating whether certain coping strategies are related to decreasing levels of cybervictimization or victims’ well-being.

**Practical implications**

The above findings pose questions regarding the current and future research agenda in this evolving and important area, while also directing our attention towards what practitioners should do to counter current and emerging aspects and harmful effects of cyberbullying.

Regarding prevention of cyberbullying, the identified gap regarding the evidence on what measures actually work and successfully prevent cyberbullying - in what contexts, and under what circumstances, requires empirical research alongside community and policy initiatives on implementing preventative measures, testing their applicability and benchmarking their results. To this end, researchers can set the key questions regarding prevention measures and associated challenges, inform on the effects of available or emerging prevention measures, and largely shape the future agenda of related prevention actions and goals accordingly.

At the same time, significant support from the policy and community (or social) forces (e.g., schools, community bodies, family, domestic groupings) is needed. Policy can offer the necessary financial means, regulatory frameworks and infrastructure for testing and
benchmarking prevention measures. Socio-community forces can promote the collaboration and engagement of collective bodies and individual actors who have a vested interest in preventing cyberbullying. In reality, what is required are the concerted efforts of key stakeholders and particularly the joint initiatives of researchers, policymakers and socio-community actors, so as on-going and future challenges in the complex and rapidly evolving field of cyberbullying can be addressed early on, at the stage before cyberbullying occurs and when its harmful effects can be prevented.

The generation of tested applicability and effectiveness of prevention measures will also answer the pending question whether such measures ought to be tailored to the particularities of cyberbullying, or whether they appropriate to deliver the desired results if associated with, and directly derived from, prevention means and techniques applied to traditional bullying. Specifically, conclusions concerning the results delivered from prevention measures could enable scholars and practitioners to assess whether such measures can be of similar structure, content and orientation to those used for preventing traditional bullying, or whether they should embrace features and elements which largely reflect and address the technological and other particularities of bullying occurred in online communication environments.

Regarding coping strategies, it becomes evident that future research should pursue further study into how victims successfully combat cyberbullying. Specifically, research work should focus on the contexts in which coping strategies apply in, and the effects they can account for when diverse contexts and/or actors are involved. Multiple contexts and actors must be considered when assessing coping strategies and their short- or long-term effects. Thus, it is imperative that policy-makers and community initiatives mobilise those contexts and the respective actors (i.e., school, neighbourhood, family etc.), facilitating research to obtain a
better understanding of how coping strategies take form, are put into action, and deliver results. Furthermore, and independently of future research activity, non-research actors in the field - spanning from official policy makers, police and other authorities, social bodies, community actors, and even domestic or individual actors - should be committed to their own range of efforts directed towards awareness-raising, mobilisation, training and knowledge enhancement. Then, they practically assist the spread, optimisation and efficient use of existing and future-coming strategies of coping and combating cyberbullying. Industry (e.g., Internet Service Providers, mobile phone companies, social networking sites) also has an important role in provision of technical features which can help with management of risks associated with technology and in the education of young people, parents, and educators with respect to safe technology use, and indeed there is evidence that many of those in the industry sector are doing this (e.g., self-regulation, Corporate Social Responsibility’: Coyne & Gountsidou, Chapter 5 this volume). However, Coyne and Gountsidou (Chapter 5 this volume) suggest that there is a need for industry to support and conform to national and European guidelines of best practice.

**Summary or Conclusion**

Most of the early findings have been in relation to general prevention strategies (e.g., anti-bullying policies or cybersafety strategies) and the use of victims’ coping strategies such as seeking support, reactions towards cyberbullies (retaliation or confronting), technical solutions and avoidant and emotion-focused strategies. Whilst a few studies reported on the perceived success of coping strategies, very few studies actually measured the success of the strategies in relation to cyberbullying, its risks and outcomes. The issues regarding the research agenda in this evolving and important area have been explored in the chapter, and
attention is directed towards what is known and to what those interested in the area should focus on for current and future research.
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