Guidelines for Professionals Around Cyber Bullying

Always take bullying and particularly cyber bullying seriously. Even if the bullying may seem minor, it can have devastating consequences for some young people[1]. In terms of psychological impact, putdowns and virtual harassment, may have the same impact as severe physical assaults. Bullying can attack a person's sense of safety, self-worth and security. Students who have been bullied often avoid school, have poorer academic outcomes and high rates of mental illness[2][3]. Many adults report that decades later the bullying they experienced at school is still having an effect on them[4].

Cyber Bullying is often much more pervasive than traditional bullying; young people who experience cyber bullying are more likely to become suicidal than those who experience regular bullying[5]. Technology means a young person can be bullied in their home, 24 hours a day, seven days a week[6]. Some young people face a constant barrage of abusive messages. Many young people feel like they simply cannot get a break. Furthermore, many thousands of people may see abusive posts online, making the impact greater.

Teenagers probably understand technology much better than adults. Attempts to put filters on devices are almost always ineffective, too many people know ways to beat the system[7].

As part of regular conversations and interactions with young people, professionals should ask about bullying. Two good questions to ask are, "Have you ever been sent messages that have upset you or hurt you?" "Is there anything that happens online that you wish you could stop."

Anyone can be at risk of cyber bullying, even children as young as five.

Research suggests that both victims of bullying and perpetrators of bullying may experience poorer outcomes in life and higher rates of anxiety and depression[8].

LGBTI communities often experience higher rates of bullying than the general population[9], as well as being from outside the community the bullying may be from within[10].

In 2015 the New Zealand Government brought in the Harmful Digital Communication Act, this recognises cyber bullying as a criminal offence and means there can be harsher penalties including fines for those who engage in it. https://www.netsafe.org.nz/hdc-act/

Professionals should not assume that young people know how to manage or respond to cyber bullying. For example, it may be obvious to an adult that changing a phone number or deleting a Facebook account may stop bullying, but many young people may not be aware of this as an option. Often young people require careful education about the options available.

Professionals should avoid talking about how cyber bullying can lead to suicide with young people. It may give people who are bullied ideas that suicide is a good option and the only way out. Messages like this may also encourage some bullies with anti-social tendencies to make the bullying more pervasive and destructive. Professionals should talk about where to find help and if they suspect someone is suicidal they should directly ask the person if they want to end their life and respond appropriately if they say yes.

Messages to young people should include what bullying is, where and how to find help. This information needs to be very specific. Rather than informing a young person to "tell someone", say "there are people that you can tell, eg a counsellor, a dean, a parent or a teacher."

Some of the most effective programs at stopping bullying include empowering everyone to speak up if they are aware of bullying[11]. In practical terms, this means telling young people that if you see any form of bullying, particularly online then you should talk to a safe parent, teacher or adult.

Professionals should always help young people to live without bullying. Bullying is unacceptable and should be stopped as soon as possible. Netsafe provide some great information about how to stop bullying, https://www.netsafe.org.nz/hdc/

Useful websites and helpline

https://www.netsafe.org.nz/advice/harmfuldigitalcommunications/

https://www.bullyingfree.nz/

http://www.bethechange.co.nz/

https://web.facebook.com/safety/bullying

Youthline: 0800 37-66-33, text 234

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This page was produced as a short summary for professionals. Professionals include teachers, counsellors, social and youth workers, nurses and doctors. It is intended as summary to quickly upskill professionals who may not know a lot about cyber bullying, it is not a comprehensive guide.

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