

# Introduction

## Cyberbullying: Nature, impact and prevention

Ciberacoso: Naturaleza, impacto y prevención

*Guest-edited special issue:*

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ICT facilitates instant, unrestricted communication, but its use also poses a great risk to adolescents, since they can become “hooked” to social networks and this threatens their privacy. The 2016 UNICEF study entitled “System of indicators on child well-being in Spain”, points out that the majority of young people exhibit high levels of dependence on TV and Internet consumption in comparison to activities such as reading and physical exercise. It also shows that a high percentage of them are relatively satisfied with life (7.6 points on average on a scale of 0-10). Another relevant fact is that 10.7 percent report having suffered some form of physical aggression at their primary or secondary school in the last two months.

Additionally, and with increasing frequency, situations of harassment involving ICT are being identified. Therefore, we are faced with a form of cyber-harassment or “cyberbullying” that displays its own set of characteristics when compared to traditional face-to-face harassment. Firstly, the attackers hide behind anonymity and their aggressions spread very quickly to a large number of participants. Secondly, offensive messages have no expiration date or specific scenario, so the victim is not only harassed by one person, but by a large group of faceless people; furthermore, they have nowhere to hide in order to avoid the abusive messages.

Harassment through ICT shares characteristics with face-to-face harassment in that both are intentional, harmful and persistent forms of mistreatment on the part of a student or group of students towards another, generally weaker, peer who then becomes their habitual victim. It is violent and continuous behaviour by which, when a relationship of intimidation has been established, the peer group creates a pattern of behaviour that reinforces their capacity to arouse fear. Consequently, cyberbullying can take a wide range of forms, ranging from the sending of offensive messages aimed at spreading unfounded rumours in order to discredit others, making private information public without consent, identity theft, broadcasting images recorded without permission or uploading videos containing an offense against the victim.

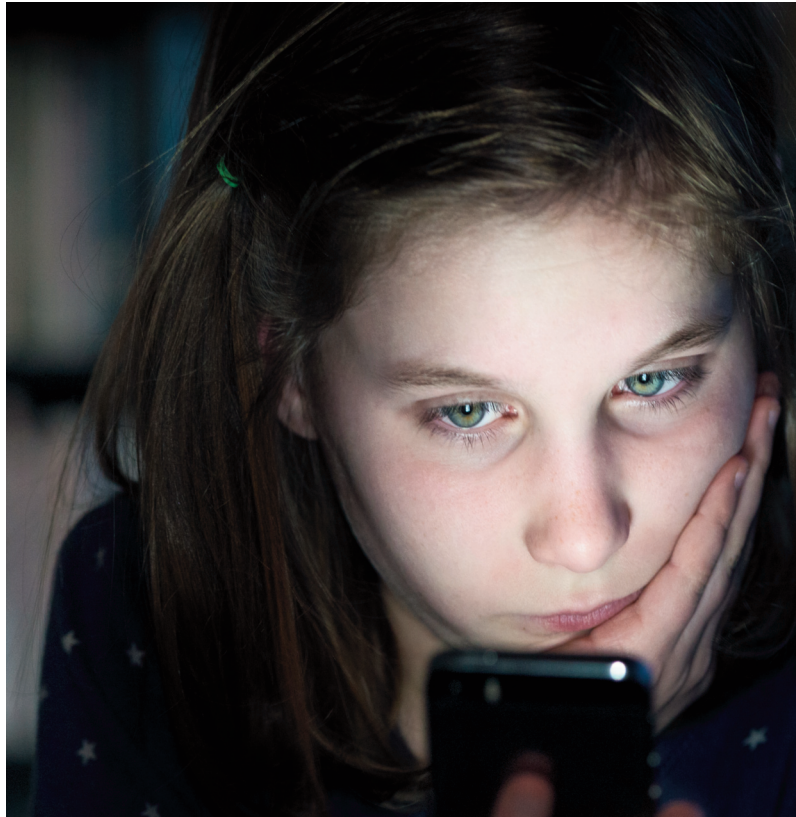
Studies on the subject indicate that it is during the teenage years (13-18 years old) when there is a greater incidence of this phenomenon. It is noted that this is occurring at an increasingly younger age. The age range of 9-12 years old has already been established as an at risk period. It is equally visible by gender, educational level, background, belonging to a vulnerable group, presenting with special educational needs, previous involvement in the phenomena of “bullying”, the abusive use of ICT and participation in social networks, all of which are variables related to cyberbullying. When confronting the triggers of cyberbullying, aspects that may favour its prevention such as parental supervision, accurate information on the risks of ICT and education are highlighted. All these aspects can be addressed with educational programs.

Preparing young people to confront cyberbullying requires prior teacher training and good organization in schools

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in order to achieve this purpose. Only through early detection and the inclusion of programs and strategies in the social, school and family contexts will the problem be reduced.

Thus, it is very important to reflect upon the risks of Internet use by adolescents, such as: can we control these risks? If yes, then: who should do it? We are witnessing the enactment of legal measures against cyberbullying, but to what extent are they effective in controlling of the problem? To what extent do they deal with the need to redress the harm caused to the victim? Furthermore, from a general approach, since ICT allows us to impersonate characters, “hide” and blur the lines of responsibility, we could discuss whether ICT facilitates violent and criminal behaviour.



When we focus on cyberbullying, it will be necessary to document whether it exhibits specific characteristics compared to traditional bullying and, therefore, whether intervention programs should be specific and merit digital support. It is necessary to recognize the problem and its consequences, not only to raise awareness to those concerned, especially the students, but also as a preliminary phase for the design of effective prevention and action programs to solve this phenomenon of bullying within the school and family environments.

“Comunicar” delves into this problem in its current edition, addressing cyberbullying from a psycho-pedagogical perspective, with the purpose of advancing understanding, prevention and intervention. Firstly, we find an article presented by Lourdes del Rey, Cirenía Quintana-Orts, Sergio Mérida-López and Natalio Extremera, from the University of Málaga entitled “Emotional intelligence and cybervictimization in adolescents. Gender as a moderator”, which considers whether the different dimensions of Emotional Intelligence are related to cybervictimization in Secondary Education students (12-18 years old), and what is the moderating role of gender in this possible association. The results obtained provide empirical evidence that Emotional Intelligence is related to cybervictimization and that girls in adolescence are more likely to suffer episodes of harassment. These findings are of great interest for the training of professionals in cyberbullying, and it is clear that emotional intelligence skills should be included as well as anti-bullying programs with gender-adapted foci.

The second article, “Socio-cognitive and emotional factors in cyberbullying aggression”, authored by Elisa Larrañaga, Raúl Navarro and Santiago Yubero, from the University of Castilla-La Mancha. The literature has highlighted the need to study the different variables related to cyberbullying but the innovation of this study is that it is

not done from the usual perspective of the victims, but from that of the cyberbullies. The role played by socio-cognitive and emotional variables in a sample of students in Secondary Education, Vocational courses and A Level studies (12-19 years old) is analysed. The findings of this study show that there is a correlation between socio-cognitive and emotional variables and participation in cyberbullying, and reduces it to fundamental lessons to be taken into account when designing prevention and intervention programs to confront the problem.

In the pedagogical field we find the third paper by Ana-M<sup>a</sup> Giménez-Gualdo (Catholic University of San Antonio de Murcia), Pilar Arnaiz-Sánchez, Fuensanta Cerezo-Ramírez (University of Murcia) and Elaine Prodóximo (State University of Campinas, Brazil), "Teachers' and students' perception of cyberbullying: intervention and coping strategies in primary and secondary education". This study analyses the perception of teachers and students of the educational stages (11-16 years old) towards cyberbullying as well as the coping strategies used by both groups. Their conclusions highlight the lack of preparation teachers and educational guidance services exhibit when confronting the issue of cyberbullying in their schools, consequently students do not consider their teachers as support figures in confronting this problem. There is evidence of the need for teachers to have action models to help with prevention and intervention in their classrooms, to raise awareness of this problem among students so that they can take on the risks involved and ensure that the entire educational community is involved in the fight against it.

The paper "Be Yourself Safe Program: effects of cyber-aggression and its risk factors", by authors Rosario del Rey, Joaquín A. Mora-Merchan (University of Seville), José-A Casas, Rosario Ortega-Ruiz and Paz Elipe (University of Córdoba) is another important contribution to this monograph that highlights the benefits of teachers applying intervention programs against cyberbullying. The effectiveness of this program, applied to students from 12 to 18 years old, is clear in that it has produced a decrease in the cyberbully behaviour. This is its great value, since cyberbullying programs have so far yielded good results with victims but not so much with cyberbullies as is the case in this study. Additionally, the prevalence of other risk factors associated with cyberbullying such as sexting and abusive use of the Internet also decreased, therefore its application in schools is highly recommended.

Bringing this monograph to a close is the article "Cyberbullying and problematic use of the Internet in Colombia, Uruguay and Spain: A cross-cultural study" which, on an international basis, has been carried out by Carolina Yudes-Gómez, Daniela Baridon-Chauvie and Joaquín-Manuel González Cabrera. International University of La Rioja. They present an interesting comparative study of cyberbullying within different cultural contexts, with respect to which there are few previous studies, it was conducted with a cohort of 10-18 years old. The Colombian cohort is the one that gets the highest results in cyberbullying and in the inappropriate use of the Internet, which curiously is attributed to the fact that the perpetration of these behaviours is not perceived as problematic or as cyber-violence, but as normalized behaviour between peers that arises from an individualized perspective of how each person solves their own problems.

By way of conclusion, we would like to stress that the articles presented highlight the complexity of the problem of cyberbullying in both its prevention and treatment and therefore there is a need for continued research in order to increase understanding of its causes. We trust that the contributions compiled here contribute to improving prevention and intervention in cyberbullying so that we can move closer to its eradication in schools. The training of teachers, the design of programs to address this phenomenon, raising self-awareness within cyberbullies and their behavior, and their responsibility for the pain and suffering caused to victims are key elements in the fight against cyberbullying that must be taken into account to devise successful and effective actions for society as a whole.