

No respite

24/7 from schoolyard bullies

Being digital natives has left young people open to new and insidious methods of abuse. How do we protect them, asks *Beau Donelly*

Caoimhe* was on the school bus when the anonymous posts appeared online. The first one said she looked like a lesbian; the second claimed she was having sex with her best friend. Then they got more graphic.

“I don’t even know how it spiralled so fast,” she said. “There were just so many insults, all these awful things they were saying about me. I was thinking, is this what everyone thinks of me?”

Caoimhe, then 14, suspected a group of girls on the bus were behind the online taunts. She did everything that experts advise victims of cyberbullying to do: she refused to engage but told her parents and reported it to gardai and the principal of her rural school.

The next day Caoimhe’s classmates were taken out one by one and asked who was responsible. No one owned up. Then came a barrage of messages, sent in a group chat that Caoimhe did not ask to be added to, from three girls at school.

“You can’t accuse us.” “Who the f*** do you think you are, you stupid f***ing bitch?” “No one actually gives a shit about you.” “You’re nothing and nobody.” “Kill yourself.”

Over 24 hours, even while she slept, more than 100 threatening messages were fired like tiny missiles to Caoimhe’s iPhone. “They were sending them for hours on end. They were telling me to kill myself in every other message,” she told The Sunday Times. “I didn’t want to go into school, I was afraid to step out my door. I was in a really dark place.”

How Caoimhe was terrorised online is not rare: in an Irish classroom of 25 primary or secondary school students, at least three have been cyberbullied.

Most children say they would not tell their parents if they were. Research from the US shows that adolescents who suffer cyberbullying are more than four times more likely to think about or attempt suicide. Unicef says that, in extreme cases, cyberbullying can lead to suicide.

Experts say the scourge is as insidious as it is pervasive. Tactics include online harassment, impersonation, exclusion, spreading rumours or secrets, posting intimate content, publishing private or identifying information (doxing), cyberstalking and ghosting.

Victoria Howson, anti-bullying co-ordinator at the Irish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (ISPCC), said while access to technology offers many positives for young people, “a darkness has crept in” over the past decade.

“In the past if you were a child being bullied you could go home – it was something that was very much in the classroom or in the club or the playground,” she said. “But now children and young people can’t escape it. Cyberbullying is affecting them in their homes and in the places where they should feel safe.”

Howson said a single incident of cyberbullying could be just as harmful as prolonged online abuse. The negative effects range from short-term anxiety and low self-esteem to long-term impacts such as drug and alcohol abuse, an increased risk of being a victim of crime and a higher likelihood of depression. In the most severe cases, she said, cyberbullying can contribute to self-harm and suicide.

“Some people will say young people should just turn off their device or not look at the messages. But we’re talking about digital natives – this is a whole generation who have never known a world without technology. That’s like telling an older generation not to go down to the post office or the GAA match because someone might say something harmful.”

The ISPCC runs the 24-hour Childline support service, fielding about 165,000 phone calls a year, a growing number of which relate to cyberbullying. Transcripts make for grim reading. In one 59-minute call, a teenage girl told how other students were threatening her, and calling her a “slut” and “ugly” online. She told her mum but no one else, and felt alone. If she could wave a magic wand, the volunteer asked, what did she want to happen? To be asked if she was OK, the girl replied, and for people to “really listen to what I’m saying”.

A World Health Organisation survey of 45 countries ranked Ireland among the ten worst for teenagers being cyberbullied. Research by the DCU Anti-Bullying Centre found 28 per cent of children aged 10-17 were bullied online in the first lockdown. Fifty per cent saw it happen to others.

Mark Smyth, former president of the Psychological Society of Ireland and a clinical psychologist who works with high-risk adolescents, said children were often reluctant to disclose cyberbullying. Being accepted online is now just as important for teenagers’ identity development as fitting in the real world, he said, and many feared that telling their parents would mean losing their devices.

A survey by Barnardos last year found 60 per cent of children aged 8-12 would never tell their parents if they were being



ILLUSTRATION: HAYLEY DALRYMPLE

“These devices are conduits to abuse, porn and grooming

cyberbullied and they would not know how to raise the problem anyway.

Smyth and other experts said it was vital for parents to talk to their children about online safety and how they will react to any disclosures before letting them use technology. “It’s happening with such frequency that we have to expect cyberbullying,” he said.

“The conversation needs to be, ‘Here is what I will do in order to keep you safe if something bad happens.’ There needs to be a discussion and agreement about what these measures are. And if a young person does make a disclosure about something upsetting online, the first thing a parent should do is validate the behaviour. ‘Thank you for telling me.’”

Young people are spending more time online, with Irish research showing 95 per cent of children aged 8-12 own a smart device. Cases of children being cyberbullied has grown in tandem with increased access to technology, according to Danielle McKenna, a project manager at Dublin’s Rialto Youth Project.

“It’s got bigger and bigger every year,” she said. “We see bullying on mainstream platforms but the real issue is the instant messaging apps and the more closed social media spaces – they’re breeding grounds for cyberbullying.”

“If we look at the 10 to 25-year-olds we work with – there’s about 150 of them – I would confidently say every single one has experienced cyberbullying, been part of cyberbullying or has witnessed cyberbullying. But we don’t even know the half of what they’re going through.”

A big part of Rialto’s work is educating young people about how to stay safe online. McKenna said some of the main problems that come up include cyberbullying in online gaming, known as griefing, and children being “cancelled” by peers if they “say or do anything wrong”. It goes hand in hand with racism and hate speech around sexuality.

McKenna added that sharing screenshots of texts and photos was also a big concern. “Young people build collections of screenshots and they often distort images by using different apps and editing tools to make things more explicit,”

she said. “So you could have a class of second years and one person creates a group chat and then shares a text that someone else sent once upon a time and that can be used against them online.”

Saoirse Kerfoot, 16, believes all teenagers have experienced cyberbullying but it is not openly discussed. This is partly because it is not always viewed as serious, she said, and partly because victims might feel judged or shamed. Tyler Lawrence, 13, had one friend who was bullied online by an anonymous account. “It really changed him,” Tyler said. “He just stopped talking to everyone.”

Reece Wosser, 12, said he had seen a lot of online bullying. “You could just be added to a group chat with 100 people and a photo is shared around and everybody is slagging,” he said. “It can go further – sometimes it changes to who the person loves or stuff about their religion.”

Dr Liam Challenor, a chartered psychologist and lecturer in cyberpsychology at the Dun Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design and Technology, said cyberbullying does not occur in isolation but happens alongside bullying in the real world, which means the best intervention is offline. Dealing with the issue before it escalates, he said, involves teaching positive communication, acceptable behaviour and strategies for conflict resolution.

“Unfortunately when we get aspects like anonymity in a digital space it starts to blur that boundary,” he said. “The fact I can be anonymous means I don’t feel the emotional consequence I would if I was victimising someone face-to-face.”

Challenor, who has run workshops about bullying and online safety in more than 100 schools, said cyberbullying statistics, though high, were unlikely to be capturing the full extent. He said adults should be more vigilant for signs such as social withdrawal and changes in the patterns of how children use their devices.

Patricia Kennedy believes a more radical approach is needed. The founder of Sticks & Stones, an anti-bullying programme, wants to be put out of a job but instead is busy taking calls from schools around the

country about how to combat cyberbullying. She said no school was immune.

Parents, she said, felt helpless but were not doing enough to protect their children. She believes they must monitor their children’s online activity.

“These devices are conduits not just to cyberbullying but to pornography, highly sexualised content, grooming, aggressive games and sexist influencers,” she said. “This is the culture they’re being soaked in. We hand this device to kids and it is a weapon of mobile destruction.”

Kennedy agrees the conversation must start when children are first allowed online but proposes further measures, such as agreeing for all passwords to be put in a sealed envelope in case of an emergency, blocking access to some platforms, and enforcing time limits. She said parents cannot “sleepwalk” through what their children deal with online.

“If it was drugs or alcohol we wouldn’t be giving children free rein, you wouldn’t let them out on the street to chat to their friends at 11pm,” she said. “Cyberbullying is 24/7 if you allow your child access to a device 24/7 ... Sometimes being a parent means being the wisest one in the room, setting boundaries and saying no.”

Kate Winslet, the British actress, recently said parents felt “utterly powerless” to help their children navigate social media. Winslet, whose children are not allowed on the platforms, said: “It’s possible to just say, ‘No, you can’t have it. You can’t have it because I want you to enjoy your life. I want you to be a child.’”

Last month marked five years since Nicole Fox, a 21-year-old Dubliner known as Coco, took her own life after being bullied physically and online since she was a teenager. Her mother, Jackie Fox, fears Irish children are continuing to take their own lives after online abuse. “They’re still dying due to cyberbullying,” she told The Sunday Times. “It’s still happening.”

Fox campaigned for new laws to criminalise online abuse, resulting in the Harassment, Harmful Communications and Related Offences Act. Known as Coco’s Law, it made it an offence to share intimate images online without consent and also criminalised publishing threatening

or grossly offensive communications intended to cause harm.

“Coco’s Law is huge, there’s been a big change, but I don’t think it’s ever going to be enough. You’re never going to get rid of every bully,” Fox said. “But I know the guards are taking it really seriously. There’s so many up for prosecution at the moment under Coco’s Law, and so many being investigated, so the awareness is getting bigger. But it’s so important that people who are attacked online, when they go down to the guards with all the screenshots and proof, that they say they want this investigated under Coco’s Law.”

The Online Safety and Media Regulation Act, introduced last year, has also been hailed for offering better protections. The law provides for a dedicated online safety commissioner who can hold platforms accountable for harm that occurs on their sites, including cyberbullying, and includes provisions for an individual complaints mechanism.

Tanya Ward, chief executive of the Children’s Rights Alliance, said there had been “little to no action” from platforms to protect children from harmful content online but the new law “puts an end to that level of self-regulation”. She said the online safety commissioner would help to ensure that platforms redesign their services to make them safer for children.

“The commissioner will be tasked with developing online safety codes, which will focus on issues like cyberbullying and ensure that when this does occur, quick and affirmative action is taken to minimise the impact,” Ward said.

Dr Angela Mazzone, a postdoctoral researcher at the DCU Anti-Bullying Centre, said while recent legislation helped frame the discourse on online abuse, anti-bullying policies and regulations might not be enough to influence cyberbullying prevention and intervention.

She wants greater transparency on how social media platforms tackle bullying. “Social media companies should ... promptly remove even a one-off cyberbullying incident. That is, cyberbullying posts should not be removed only when they are repeated over time. Artificial Intelligence-based moderation tools could be used to promptly take down harmful content,” she said.

Social media companies say they have policies against bullying, harassment and content that endangers children, encourage users to report cyberbullying, and provide mental health resources.

Snapchat said there is “no place” for bullying on its platform. It said its guidelines prohibit bullying, intimidation and harassment and most reports are responded to within 24 hours.

TikTok said it removes content or blocks accounts that violate its bullying and harassment guidelines. Between July and September, it said nine out of ten removed videos were taken down before they had a single view. “We are open about the fact that we won’t catch every instance of violative content, and we continue to invest at scale in our trust and safety operations,” a spokesman said.

According to YouTube, tens of thousands of accounts belonging to under-13s are terminated every week. It said over 100,000 channels and two million videos were removed for violations of its child safety policies in the third quarter last year. It took down over 560,000 videos for violating its harassment policies.

Meta, which owns Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp, said it took bullying very seriously. “As well as removing content that breaks our rules, we default under-18s into private accounts when they sign up to Instagram and Facebook,” it said. “On Instagram, our hidden words tool filters offensive comments and DM requests so you never have to see them. We’re also focused on encouraging kinder behaviour by showing comment warnings to help people think twice before posting something hurtful.”

In December the Department of Education published its latest action plan on bullying, which includes provisions for training teachers to deal with cyberbullying. Through Webwise, the internet safety centre, the department also supports Safer Internet Day each February. Webwise has created two online courses for teachers on understanding, preventing and responding to online bullying.

At ISPCC’s Childline, some calls stay with the volunteers. Megan Sarl, who has been working on the phones for ten years, said: “Bullying now, it’s around the clock. The biggest threat to a lot of young people’s lives is what’s in their hand.”

A couple of years ago a girl rang to talk about being taunted by anonymous accounts and hurtful memes. The teenager said she had been self-harming for a year and was thinking a lot about suicide. “She didn’t necessarily want to go through with suicide, but she felt like there was no other way out,” Sarl said. “Those calls are really hard because you could be the last person that they talk to.”

*Name has been changed

For 24/7 support, call Childline on 1800 666 666. To find a psychologist, visit psychologicalsociety.ie