asbae
ADDRESSING SEXUAL BULLYING ACROSS EUROPE

SEXUAL BULLYING IN YOUNG PEOPLE ACROSS FIVE EUROPEAN COUNTRIES

Summary research report for the Addressing Sexual Bullying Across Europe (ASBAE) project

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Sexual bullying in young people across five European countries

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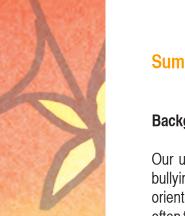- Vicki Crossley for administrative support throughout the project.

Summary

Background

Our understanding of sexual bullying refers to unwanted sexual behaviour or conduct, and bullying or harassment due to a person's actual/perceived sexual (in)experience, interests or orientation, or due to their gender-related appearance, identity or practices. Sexual bullying often takes place online via smartphones, instant messaging and social networks. It is a growing problem among young people, and can have a serious impact on the person being bullied, including reduced self-esteem, anxiety and depression, and sometimes, suicidal behaviour. Research to date has been limited in terms of methods (mainly survey-based), geographical location (USA; Western Europe), and focus (typically on a single problem, e.g. homophobic bullying). Consequently, our aim was to design a predominantly qualitative research project that was young-people centred and encompassed the full repertoire of sexual bullying practices in under-researched countries.

The research

The ASBAE (Addressing Sexual Bullying Across Europe) project was funded by the European Commission's Daphne III programme, which aims to protect children, young people and women against all forms of violence. The focus of the project was the programme's funding priority of 'empowerment work at grassroots level'. The project was led by Leeds Beckett University in the UK and included partners from NGOs in Bulgaria (Demetra), Italy (Pepita), Latvia (MARTA Centre), Slovenia (Papilot) and the UK (Leap). Over the five countries, 253 young people (aged 13-18) and 37 professionals in child education and protection participated in focus group discussions and completed questionnaires. The voices of young people were prioritised throughout the project, assisted by a Young People's Advisory Group (YPAG) in each country. Our analysis of this dataset helped to inform the development of our peer-to-peer intervention on sexual bullying (see 'The ACT pack' at www.asbae.eu).

Questionnaire findings

We found that nearly three-quarters of the young people had been subject to one or more sexual bullying behaviour on more than one occasion; this prevalence rate was similar across the five countries. We identified five types of experiences of being sexually bullied. From most frequently experienced, to least frequently experienced, these were: appearance-based bullying, physical sexual bullying, sexual harassment, bullying about or for sexual experience, and pressure to be heterosexually active. Young women experienced the first three of these more often than young men, while young women and men experienced pressure to be heterosexually active with similar frequencies, and the findings for sexual experience depended on the country being examined. However, there were a number of similarities in the frequency of experiences across countries, particularly for appearance-based bullying, physical sexual bullying and pressure to be heterosexually active.

We also found that over two-fifths of young people had engaged in one or more sexual bullying behaviour against others on more than one occasion. We identified two types of

sexual bullying behaviours that the participants engaged in: appearance-based bullying and sexual harassment, with the former being most frequent. Young women and men engaged in appearance-based bullying with similar frequency, while young men engaged in sexual harassment more frequently than young women. While there were some cross-country differences on appearance-based bullying, the frequency of engaging in sexual harassment was similar across countries.

Overall, nearly two-fifths of young people had both experienced and enacted sexual bullying behaviours, while only one-fifth of young people did not report any experience of, or involvement in, sexual bullying.

Focus group themes

Our analysis of the young people's focus group data generated five core themes:

The first theme indicated that despite sexual bullying being commonplace amongst young people and having a damaging impact on those being bullied, it was also largely unrecognised. We therefore argue that it is a pernicious problem for young people.

The second theme referred specifically to technologically facilitated forms of sexual bullying. The young people described how personal information shared in confidence with a peer could subsequently be modified, uploaded and distributed rapidly to the wider community via smartphones and social media. They also talked about the use of technology (mainly by young men) to pressurise others (mainly young women) for sexual contact or material.

The third theme highlighted the gendered nature of sexual bullying. This included: the construction of young men and women as opposites in terms of their characteristics, the types of sexual bullying behaviours that they engaged in, and their reactions to sexual bullying; gendered ideas around reputations and responsibilities as leading to different pressures and different forms of sexual bullying for young men and women; female objectification as leading to sexual bullying for young women; and homophobic bullying as a 'male problem'.

The fourth theme related to young people's perceptions about the causes of sexual bullying. Sexual bullying was explained: as being biologically or developmentally driven; as a reaction to 'difference'; as a form of revenge or retaliation; as a result of poor upbringing, a problematic background or peer influence; as harmless or unintended; and as stemming from the (in)actions of the person experiencing the bullying. This theme highlighted a number of assumptions being made by young people that are potentially problematic and the project's ACT pack has been designed to encourage young people to scrutinise and challenge such assumptions.

The final theme concerned proposals for preventing sexual bullying. While young people felt it was important to report sexual bullying, there was a lot of discussion about the potential problems associated with doing so (e.g. a lack of interest or action on the part of the person they were reporting it to, or reporting it possibly leading to further bullying). Young people themselves were seen to be an important source of support for peers who had been bullied and awareness-raising and stricter regulation of the internet were seen as important strategies for prevention.
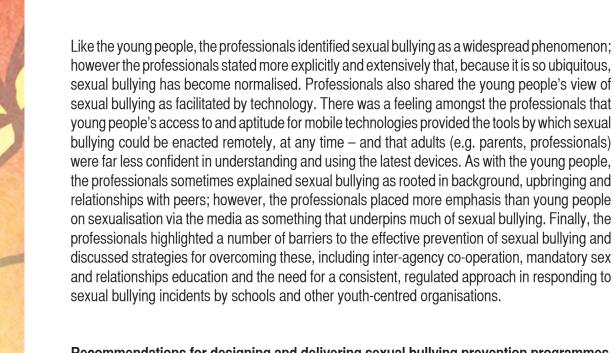
Like the young people, the professionals identified sexual bullying as a widespread phenomenon; however the professionals stated more explicitly and extensively that, because it is so ubiquitous, sexual bullying has become normalised. Professionals also shared the young people's view of sexual bullying as facilitated by technology. There was a feeling amongst the professionals that young people's access to and aptitude for mobile technologies provided the tools by which sexual bullying could be enacted remotely, at any time – and that adults (e.g. parents, professionals) were far less confident in understanding and using the latest devices. As with the young people, the professionals sometimes explained sexual bullying as rooted in background, upbringing and relationships with peers; however, the professionals placed more emphasis than young people on sexualisation via the media as something that underpins much of sexual bullying. Finally, the professionals highlighted a number of barriers to the effective prevention of sexual bullying and discussed strategies for overcoming these, including inter-agency co-operation, mandatory sex and relationships education and the need for a consistent, regulated approach in responding to sexual bullying incidents by schools and other youth-centred organisations.

Recommendations for designing and delivering sexual bullying prevention programmes

We make 12 recommendations for designing and delivering primary prevention programmes for sexual bullying.

Prevention programmes should:

1. Raise awareness of what constitutes sexual bullying and stress that it is not limited to extreme or physical examples.
2. Highlight and address the full range of sexual bullying practices that young people experience.
3. Discuss technology-mediated forms of sexual bullying and how young people can take steps towards protecting themselves and others from sexual cyberbullying.
4. Discuss differences between joking and bullying, and the emotional impact and consequences that sexual bullying can have for those being bullied.
5. Question and challenge prejudices and stereotypes around gender and sexuality that can give rise to and perpetuate sexual bullying.
6. Examine and critique the role of the media in creating and sustaining appearance-based bullying and the sexualisation of young women.
7. Discuss and challenge victim-blaming so that young people's experiences of sexual bullying are not rationalised, downplayed or dismissed by their peers.
8. Acknowledge and address young people's concerns about reporting sexual bullying to adults.
9. Provide information on what to do if a young person experiences sexual bullying and what sources of appropriate advice and support are available within their school/youth organisation and wider community.
10. Capitalise on young people's eagerness to help and support each other by providing guidance on safe and effective bystander intervention.
11. Include young people in the co-delivery of the programme.
12. Include training for both young people and adults facilitating the programme.

Wider policy and practice implications of the findings

We make 11 recommendations for schools, other professionals working with/for children, and internet service and site providers:

Schools

1. A whole school approach should be employed, incorporating head-teachers, teachers, school counsellors, parents, and young people themselves.

2. School anti-bullying policies should cover sexual bullying and sexual cyberbullying specifically and make clear the reporting procedures and how incidents of sexual bullying will be dealt with.

3. Schools should engage in primary prevention programmes with young people that: raise awareness of sexual bullying; challenge the prejudices and stereotypes about gender and sexuality that can give rise to it; discuss technology-mediated forms of sexual bullying and how young people can take steps to protect themselves and others from sexual cyberbullying; highlight the effects of sexual bullying on those being bullied; and empower young people with the knowledge and skills to respond to sexual bullying acts that they might witness or experience (e.g. by employing the ASBAE project's 'ACT pack').

4. Schools should provide Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) classes to all students, which should include discussion of how to develop and maintain healthy, respectful relationships (including sexual relationships) with peers.

5. Classroom lessons (e.g. Information Technology, PSHE) should focus on responsible and safe use of locally relevant technologies and social networking sites.

6. Teachers should be provided with training on sexual bullying, its forms and prevention in order to lead provision around sexual bullying issues.

Professionals working with/for children

7. Inter-agency co-operation is required to ensure a coherent and consistent response to sexual bullying situations.

8. On-going training is required to ensure that professionals are knowledgeable about the most current forms of sexual bullying among young people in their community.

9. Community-based, trained professionals should be visible, available and active in working with young people around sexual bullying.

Internet service and site providers

10. More secure and effective controls on access to pornographic websites.

11. Greater regulation of the content of third party pop-ups.

The full ASBAE research report, as detailed below, can be downloaded for free from www.asbae.eu.

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