

# Prevention and reduction of cyberbullying of young people

A submission to the:  
**The Queensland Anti-Cyberbullying  
Taskforce**

Prepared by:  
**yourtown**, Strategy and Research,  
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## About yourtown

**yourtown** is a national organisation and registered charity that aims to tackle the issues affecting the lives of young people. Established in 1961, **yourtown's** mission is **to enable young people, especially those who are marginalised and without voice, to improve their quality of life.**

**yourtown** provides a range of face to face and virtual services to young people and families seeking support. These services include:

- Kids Helpline, a national 24/7 telephone and on-line counselling and support service for 5 to 25 year olds with special capacity for young people with mental health issues
- Accommodation responses to young parents with children who experience homelessness and women and children seeking refuge from domestic and family violence
- Young Parent Programs offering case work, individual and group work support and child development programs for young parents and their children
- Parentline, a telephone counselling service for parents and carers'
- Expressive Therapy interventions for young children and infants who have experienced trauma and abuse or been exposed to violence
- Employment programs and social enterprises, which support young people to re-engage with education and/or employment, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander specific services.

## Kids Helpline

Kids Helpline (KHL) is Australia's only national 24/7, private support and counselling service specifically for children and young people aged 5 to 25 years. It offers counselling support via telephone, email and a real-time web platform. Kids Helpline is staffed by a paid professional workforce, with all counsellors holding a tertiary qualification.

Since March 1991, young Australians have been contacting Kids Helpline about a diverse group of issues ranging from everyday topics such as family, friends and school to more serious issues of child abuse, bullying, mental health issues, drug and alcohol use, self-injury and suicide.

In 2017, Kids Helpline counsellors responded to over 150,000 contacts from children and young people across the nation, with an additional 600,000 unique visitors accessing online support resources from the website.

## Introduction

We greatly welcome the leadership that the Queensland Government has demonstrated in setting up the Queensland Cyberbullying Taskforce (the Taskforce) and commend its commitment to driving change across Australia. We are delighted to present our submission to the Taskforce, which is based on the understanding we have gained through our services and research we have undertaken on this issue.

Whilst prevalence rates of cyberbullying vary widely (often depending on its definition), it is an issue of growing concern and continuing evolution as cyber users experiment with and explore behaviours and relationships online and new digital software continues to be developed which shape and frame online interactions. Cyberbullying is also a relatively new phenomenon set in a continuously changing digital world, through which we increasingly interact with friends, peers, family and the wider community, but where the same set of norms or guidelines about our behaviour do not seem to apply. As the very nature of the internet means that its users' inhibitions - governed by a range of long-established but evolving culturally accepted rules in daily face-to-face interactions - are reduced, too often encounters between individuals and groups, both known and unknown to each other, are aggressive, problematic and bullying.

In short, the absence of accepted codes of conduct or standards online have allowed cyberbullying and acts of cyber aggression to flourish, whilst governments, support service providers, social media providers, online users, and the wider community grapple with managing the detrimental side-effects that engaging online can have on the health and wellbeing of cyber victims. Indeed, with 24/7 access and no physical barriers to targets, possible anonymity, few repercussions for perpetrators, and a global audience - many of whom may be willing to join in - the online world is a powerful tool for bullies and aggressors, resulting in arguably more severe and long-lasting consequences for their victims than traditional forms.<sup>1</sup>

As we are increasingly and too often seeing, these consequences include significant impacts on the emotional and mental health of victims, and tragically can include contributing to their suicide. It is also clear from our daily newsfeed, however, that cyberbullying and cyber aggression is not the preserve of children and young people. For anyone using social media and the internet: be that politicians, celebrities, business chiefs, online stars, teachers, parents and young or old - online bullying and aggression has become a possible outcome of online activity. Hence, cyberbullying is a community-wide issue, with the potential to affect us all indiscriminately.

As a community-wide issue and as children and young people are likely to mimic the behaviours of the wider online community, we strongly believe that effective responses to preventing cyberbullying amongst children and young people, will require community-wide solutions. We therefore recommend that the Taskforce takes a public health approach to addressing cyberbullying requiring a long-term commitment, in acknowledgement that there can be no quick or overnight wins, as well as appropriate mechanisms for measuring progress towards its reduction.

Although real progress on this issue cannot solely be achieved by focusing on children and young people alone, the experiences, views, needs and preferences of children and young people are clearly important to informing interventions and policies within a broader public health approach. It is also important to note that social media and mobile apps - their functions and way in which they can be used - is an area in which children and young people are experts, and about which they often know much more than their parents, teachers and adults more broadly. To this end, in this submission, we share the insight we have gained about the online experiences of children and young people.

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<sup>1</sup> Katz, I, Kelley, M, Spears, B, Taddeo, C, Swirski, T and Bates, S (June 2014). Research on youth exposure to, and management of, cyber-bullying incidents in Australia: Synthesis report prepared for the Australian Government Department of Communications.

**yourtown** has long been a source of support for children and young people affected by bullying, with Kids Helpline (KHL) hearing from and providing support to its victim, bystanders and perpetrators. In recent years, we have increasingly also heard from young people who have experienced cyberbullying in some way. Indeed, since 2016 when KHL counsellors began to record cyber safety concerns disclosed to them, contacts relating to cyberbullying have been by far the most common cyber safety concern.<sup>2</sup> As a result, we have committed to seeking evidence-based improvements to our counselling practices in this area as well as our advocacy work, which aims to ensure that policy and service design are directly informed by the views and experiences of children and young people.

In the following submission, we present four broad recommendations to the Taskforce that have stemmed directly from the findings of our research which includes:

- **KHL data analyses.** As discussed above, KHL counsellors record cyber safety concerns of contacts to KHL including disclosures of cyberbullying. In 2017, 5% of the 66,386 counselling contacts responded to by Kids Helpline counsellors involved a disclosure of cyber-safety concerns, 31% of those related to cyberbullying.
- **A survey of children and young people (2018).**<sup>3</sup> This online survey of 1,264 young people aimed to examine the help-seeking behaviour of young people who have experienced cyberbullying and cyber aggression. The study provided insight into the nature of cyberbullying experiences including those of cyberbullying victims, bystanders and cyberbullies themselves, and allowed for estimates of the prevalence of help-seeking behaviour and for the identification of the most helpful sources of support.
- **A survey of parents (2018).**<sup>4</sup> This study surveyed 510 Australian parents online about their experiences of and confidence in being able to identify, prevent, report, and stop cyberbullying among their children, including those who are victims of cyberbullying and/or cyberbullying perpetrators.
- **A literature search (2018).** This search explored contemporary literature and research into cyberbullying, including national and international research, and covering prevention and response approaches and interventions.

The reports from our two surveys are included as appendices to this submission:

- Appendix 1: Cyberbullying, Cyber Aggression and Help-Seeking: A Survey of Young Australians' Experiences (2018).
- Appendix 2: Parents' Confidence in their Ability to Identify and Respond to Cyberbullying: A Survey of Australian Parents (2018)

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<sup>2</sup> Cyberbullying concerns are only recorded if the contact discloses the issue and reports it to be negatively affecting their lives or wellbeing in some way.

<sup>3</sup> Collyer, B. (2018). Cyberbullying, Cyber Aggression and Help-Seeking: A Survey of Young Australians' Experiences. Brisbane: **yourtown**.

<sup>4</sup> Smith, C. (2018). Parents' Confidence in their Ability to Identify and Respond to Cyberbullying: A Survey of Australian Parents. Brisbane: **yourtown**.

## Our submission

**yourtown** has developed four broad recommendations on how to prevent cyberbullying and better support those experiencing it, which frame our submission. Our recommendations include:

1. Seek to engender a consistent, community-wide understanding of cyberbullying:

**Recommendation:**

**yourtown** recommends that the Taskforce commits long-term to taking a number of different approaches to help engender a consistent understanding of cyberbullying amongst the community, supported by consistent federal and state legal definitions and legal responses, as well as community-wide education programs (see recommendation 3 for more on education) and responses to prevent one-off and random acts of aggressive online behaviours.

2. Take a public health approach to reducing and managing cyberbullying

**Recommendation:**

**yourtown** recommends that a nation-wide suite of education programs and campaigns be rolled-out to children, young people, parents, teachers, schools and the media in order to effectively prevent cyberbullying and manage and respond to it. Australian governments must recognise the importance, impact and potential value of the behaviour and responses of not just cyberbullying victims and perpetrators but also of bystanders, parents, teachers and the media, including social media providers in moderating the impact of this behaviour.

3. Encourage help-seeking

**Recommendation:**

**yourtown** recommends that considerable efforts are made to help encourage help-seeking behaviour amongst children and young people in relation to cyberbullying. Children and young people need to know that cyberbullying is not an issue with which they should have to deal alone or about which they should be ashamed, embarrassed or feel weak for seeking help.

Educating the key groups of people in the lives of children and young people and ensuring that these groups understand and know how to receive disclosure and be a source of help to children and young people, as well as educating children and young people about the sources of support available to them, will undoubtedly help minimise the impact of cyberbullying on them.

4. Include the views, experiences and knowledge of young people in the development of responses to cyberbullying

**Recommendation 4**

**yourtown** believes that the use of the views, preferences and needs of children and young people is critical to the design, development and implementation of interventions to prevent and reduce cyberbullying and to support those who have been cyberbullied and who have cyberbullied. We strongly suggest that the Taskforce and any actions that result from its work appropriately consult with children and young people. This could include specifically working with a range of children and young people to develop interventions such as effective social media responses to cyberbullying, or more broadly consulting with children and young people through their representative bodies, including the Queensland Youth Parliament.

## yourtown recommendations

### I. Seek to engender a consistent, community-wide understanding of cyberbullying

Following years of debate, no agreement has yet been made amongst legislators, policy-makers, academics, and service providers about the definition of cyberbullying. Most commonly, cyberbullying has been defined as sharing the same traits as traditional bullying - repetitive and targeted behaviour intended to harm its victim - but carried out online. However, as we noted in our submission to the Senate about the adequacy of national criminal laws to address cyberbullying and due to the nature of the internet and digital devices, cyberbullying diverges from traditional bullying in a number of ways, including:<sup>5</sup>

- **Victims are not necessarily repeatedly targeted by a bully/lies.** Cyberbullying differs from traditional bullying in that once bullying behaviour has been committed online, subsequent bullying is no longer solely at the instigation of the original bully or bullies. Instead, potentially anyone, anywhere can contribute to an attack on someone they may not know, meaning the targeted nature of the behaviour is in doubt.<sup>6</sup> Yet the impact on the victim of one negative comment, with 1,000 likes from a range of people, and that can be repeatedly relived by the victim and shared by others on the internet, is undoubtedly significant.
- **Harm to the victim is not necessarily intended.** Whether harm is intended by a comment posted online about someone may be in doubt: for example, a friend may have posted a joke about or a 'funny' photo of someone. However, either the victim or the online community itself can misinterpret its intention and numerous subsequent comments may ensue that again cause the victim significant harm.
- **Impact is potentially more severe and long-lasting.** Interactions that may include any aggressive behaviour and/or conflict and that arguably may constitute 'normal' developmental behaviour and the exploration of relationships and their boundaries, are clearly more problematic when taking place online as their repercussions are not in the sole control of those involved and can occur in the safety of young Australians' own homes, take place 24/7, be carried out anonymously, remain online in a number of different forums and be repeatedly recalled.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, there seems to be a common lack of consideration of or understanding about the power of the internet amongst the online community in terms of causing harm, and the serious implications that any activity online can have on the emotional and mental health of other users.

As a result of these differences, it follows that one-off acts of aggression or conflict can have as significant repercussions for victims as cyberbullying conforming to a more traditional definition of bullying, and be considered cyberbullying themselves therefore. Indeed, one-off acts such as name-calling, trolling, sharing of a photo, sexting and exclusion are often widely seen as cyberbullying by the media, the online community, parents and teachers, and children and young people. Our survey with children and young people about their help-seeking experiences suggest that many children and young people consider one-off acts of cyberbullying behaviour or cyber aggression as cyberbullying itself. Furthermore, we also know from this survey that one-off acts of aggression can be normalised or create a culture of cyberbullying, where victims resort to cyberbullying themselves (see section on lack of knowledge and skills amongst children and young people in recommendation 2 for more detail). It may therefore be useful to consider

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<sup>5</sup> yourtown (2017) A submission to the Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee on the adequacy of existing offences in the Commonwealth Criminal Code and of state and territory criminal laws to capture cyberbullying.

<sup>6</sup> Katz, I, Kelley, M, Spears, B, Taddeo, C, Swirski, T and Bates, S (June 2014). Research on youth exposure to, and management of, cyber-bullying incidents in Australia: Synthesis report prepared for the Australian Government Department of Communications.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid

cyberbullying's definition from the perspective of the subsequent harms aggressive acts carried out online have on their victims as well as the types of behaviours that cyberbullying includes.

The lack of a common definition of cyberbullying amongst all stakeholders, its complexity and its continuing evolution as a result of new technologies makes understanding, measuring and effectively addressing it difficult. Nonetheless, many intractable contemporary issues face the same challenges – family violence is a case in point. Yet, given the significant emotional toll that cyberbullying can have on its victims, including its links to the suicide of victims, it is also important that children and young people – as well as all other online users – understand what constitutes bullying behaviour so that they can effectively act on it when they see it and ensure that its repercussions are limited.

We see that through a well-planned, long-term public health approach to addressing cyberbullying, a consistent understanding of cyberbullying can be engendered over generations so that perhaps today's children will be better equipped to deal with cyberbullying when they are parents. As a first step, we recommend the development of consistent federal and state legal terms to define cyberbullying and believe these would undoubtedly help all stakeholders more easily monitor cyberbullying and identify targeted solutions.

**Recommendation 1:**

**yourtown** recommends that the Taskforce commits long-term to taking a number of different approaches to help engender a consistent understanding of cyberbullying amongst the community, supported by consistent federal and state legal definitions and legal responses, as well as community-wide education programs (see recommendation 3 for more on education) and responses to prevent one-off and random acts of aggressive online behaviours.



## 2. Take a public health approach to reducing and managing cyberbullying

To date the response to cyberbullying has not been coordinated or system-wide and this means despite initiatives, such as the Student Wellbeing Hub, the eSafety Commissioner or Kids Helpline@School (of which the eSafety Commissioner is a partner), more investment in resources to better educate children, young people, adults and stakeholders is still required. Through our KHL contacts on cyber safety, we know that children and young people are unsure about what to do and who to turn to for support and action, and feel powerless and isolated. We also know that often they do not feel that their parents or teachers can be confided in or will help them. Hence, there is clearly a need to address these gaps.

To effectively prevent and address cyberbullying, a multi-sectoral and coordinated approach is required. This approach should seek to prevent cyberbullying through society-wide and targeted education programs and support victims and perpetrators through adequate counselling, rehabilitation and other support services. It should also aim to appropriately use the law to deter and prosecute serious cyberbullying offences as well as placing legal duties and social expectations on social media providers to remove offensive material in a timely manner and to develop supporting technologies to more effectively deal with harmful and unwanted online use. Without this multipronged approach and investment, the impact of any legal consequences or action will continue to remain minimal, whilst critically, our children and young people will not be equipped, know where to turn or find adequately resourced support services, to effectively deal with their cyberbullying experiences.

In this section, we highlight specific areas amongst the community where a lack of knowledge and skills is hampering the effective management and reduction of cyberbullying, and most worryingly, is even exacerbating cyberbullying and its impact.

### Lack of knowledge and skills amongst children and young people

At **yourtown** we highly value early education as a powerful tool to improve the lives and resilience of children and young people confronted with a range of complex and challenging issues. That is why we offer free intervention and prevention sessions to primary schools across Australia delivered by counsellors on issues such as peer relationships, bullying, cyber safety and help-seeking.<sup>8</sup> However, from analysing the KHL data and our survey datasets, it is clear that children and young people lack knowledge and skills about online safety, behaviour and relationships and do not know where to seek help when confronted by an issue (see recommendation 3 for detailed information about help-seeking).

- Respectful relationships

Our survey with children and young people about their cyberbullying experiences revealed that there are significant differences between diverse groups and the levels and types of cyberbullying that they experience. For example, respondents who reported being cyberbullied were significantly more likely to be female even when accounting for the higher respondent rate of females. In addition, more females reported receiving rude or upsetting images than males (34% and 24% respectively) and to have embarrassing images of them shared (36% and 28% respectively). The latter two findings are in keeping with research that has shown girls and women are more at risk of image-based abuse than boys and men.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> There are two streams offered by Kids Helpline at school: 1) The Optus Digital Thumbprint stream aims to promote digital respect, responsibility, resilience and empathy and online safety, 2) The Bupa Wellbeing stream covers topics such as developing resilience, bullying, peer and friendship related issues and transitioning to high school.

<sup>9</sup> For example, see the Report 2/56 of the Committee on Children and Young People of the Parliament of New South Wales' (November, 2016) on the Sexualisation of children and young people.

Respondents with a disability were also significantly more likely than respondents who did not have a disability to be cyberbully victims, with 34% of all those who had been cyberbullied reporting to have a disability. Like traditional forms of bullying, this finding seemingly shows that difference to established cultural 'norms' can be seen as a target of cyberbullies and that there is an issue around respecting diversity that needs to be addressed. Furthermore, the very nature of the internet and social media mean that their users may be more likely to engage in disrespectful behaviour given that they do not physically see the response of those who they upset and therefore have less empathy with them, and that they can attack others anonymously, freeing their inhibitions and allowing them to say whatever they like with little consequence.

To reduce such cyberbullying and ensure that children and young people value and embrace their own differences and the differences of others, age appropriate and developmentally appropriate education programs for children of all ages are required, tailored to their specific communication preferences. Such education will have obvious benefits for our communities and relationships more broadly and help to ensure greater understanding about people and their backgrounds and more positive interactions between people as a result.

- Victims, cyberbullies and bystanders

Children and young people are clearly widely affected by cyberbullying as a victim, bystander, cyberbully, as two of these or all three. We therefore believe that it is important that education seeks to assist all children and young people to effectively manage and support these situations. This will include:

- **How to effectively respond to aggressive or bullying behaviour online.** Findings from our survey with children and young people showed that a pervading culture of cyberbullying and/or cyber aggression seems to foster further acts of cyberbullying, and that some cyberbullies are motivated by having been a victim of cyberbullying or cyber aggression themselves. For example, 53% of respondents who had perpetrated cyberbullying had been cyberbullied themselves, with many reportedly engaging in cyberbullying purely as an act of retaliation or justice-seeking. Furthermore, almost 100% of perpetrators had witnessed cyberbullying. In short, it seems that aggressive online behaviours reproduce and can result in further aggression or a cyberbullying culture, highlighting the need for online users to be effectively equipped with the knowledge and skills in how to keep calm in the face of aggressive or bullying behaviour and take appropriate action, which will not cause further issues.
- **How to be an “upstander”.** As bystander intervention is an extremely effective strategy for dealing with bullies (now sometimes promoted as “upstander” intervention), we believe that significant attention must be given to educating bystanders. Again, in our survey of children and young people’s experiences of cyberbullying, some 96% of participants reported witnessing cyberbullying acts online, suggestive of how prevalent witnessing cyberbullying may be in young people’s lives and that it could be a significant resource to help reduce cyberbullying behaviour. Indeed, a large percentage of respondents had witnessed all forms of cyberbullying, including someone being called names (87%), having embarrassing photos shared (67%) and being physically threatened (57%). Hence, children and young people need to be encouraged and empowered to appropriately stand up - e.g. through not exacerbating the situation and minimising the risk that they too become a target - to a range of different forms of cyberbullying.
- **Understanding the seriousness of cyberbullying.** 62% of respondents to our survey of children and young people reported having carried out cyberbullying acts and many of them glossed over their behaviour as normal child behaviour and development. For example, one respondent said:

“It’s simply child culture. If you’re not mean then you end up with no friends and that itself is pretty crushing”. We strongly believe that whilst conflict is a part of human interactions and children and young people should be equipped to effectively engage in and deal with conflict, (cyber)bullying should never be tolerated.

In addition, other perpetrators suggested that they cyberbullied as a result of their peers’ actions, as one respondent explained: “Other people starting doing it and I joined in”. Another significant group of perpetrators reported that they engaged in cyberbullying as a result of being cyberbullied themselves (53% of respondents who reported perpetrating a cyberbullying act had been cyberbullied themselves). One respondent stated: “[I had] trouble with expressing anger or sadness after being bullied before - [and it’s] easier to hide on social media. [I] would never do it again regardless”.

With nearly all respondents (99.6%) who had committed cyberbullying acts having witnessed cyberbullying themselves, it may be that they feel such behaviour is commonplace and therefore not a serious issue, and instead simply ‘normal’ behaviour. All children and young people need to understand the serious impact that cyberbullying can have on the long-term wellbeing of their peers and other people.

- Effective education programs

We are aware that some schools in Australia have their own education programs that aim to prevent and reduce cyberbullying. However, we strongly believe that the development and implementation of a nation-wide framework specifically on cyberbullying would be most effective to ensure that all children and young people receive adequate education in this area. A notable international example of an evidenced-based program designed to combat cyberbullying is Finland’s KiVA (kindness in Finnish) program.<sup>10</sup> The elements of the program include teaching communication and social skills, empathy and coping skills and digital citizenship through a range of face-to-face and online delivery strategies. Subject areas as outlined in the KiVa initiative need to be incorporated into the national curriculum. In addition, our literature search uncovered the following factors as important success factors in school-based, anti-cyberbullying programs:

- Whole-school approach to curriculum delivery
- Program endorsement and leadership by principal
- Teachers trained in program delivery
- Pastoral care staff trained in dealing with cyberbullying issues
- Clear school protocol for reporting and responding to cyberbullying
- High levels of confidence amongst teachers in dealing with cyberbullying issues
- High levels of confidence amongst teachers in their own digital literacy skills and understanding
- High levels of student confidence in program delivery
- Long-term program
- Involvement of parents

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<sup>10</sup> <http://www.kivaprogram.net>

## Lack of knowledge and skills amongst parents:

Our survey with parents about their experiences of and confidence in being able to identify, prevent, report, and stop cyberbullying among their children revealed some important findings. For example, a significant proportion of parents did not feel that they have the knowledge and skills to be able to identify, manage and respond to their children's cyberbullying experiences. They also showed that parents who have current or past experience of their child/ren having been cyberbullied (22% of total respondents) were less confident than those who stated that their child/ren had not been the target of cyberbullying (75%), as shown in Figure I below.

Figure I: Parents who reported lack of knowledge and resources in relation to cyberbullying

Statement	% of parents who DISAGREED with each statement		
	Parents with children currently being cyberbullied	Parents with children cyberbullied in the past	Parents with children not ever cyberbullied
I know where to go to report cyberbullying	27%	49%	37%
I am confident that my child would tell me if they were being bullied online	20%	23%	12%
I have the resources I need to prevent my child being cyberbullied	26%	44%	37%
I have the resources I need to stop my child being cyberbullied if this were to happen	26%	41%	33%
I feel confident that I would respond effectively if my child told me they were being bullied online	33%	18%	13%

There were also a number of differences in confidence based on parental characteristics:

- fathers were significantly more confident than mothers that they have the resources to identify cyberbullying and to assist them in preventing and stopping their child from being bullied online.
- older parents (40s and 50s) were less confident than younger parents (20s and 30s) that they have the resources to prevent and stop their child from being bullied online.

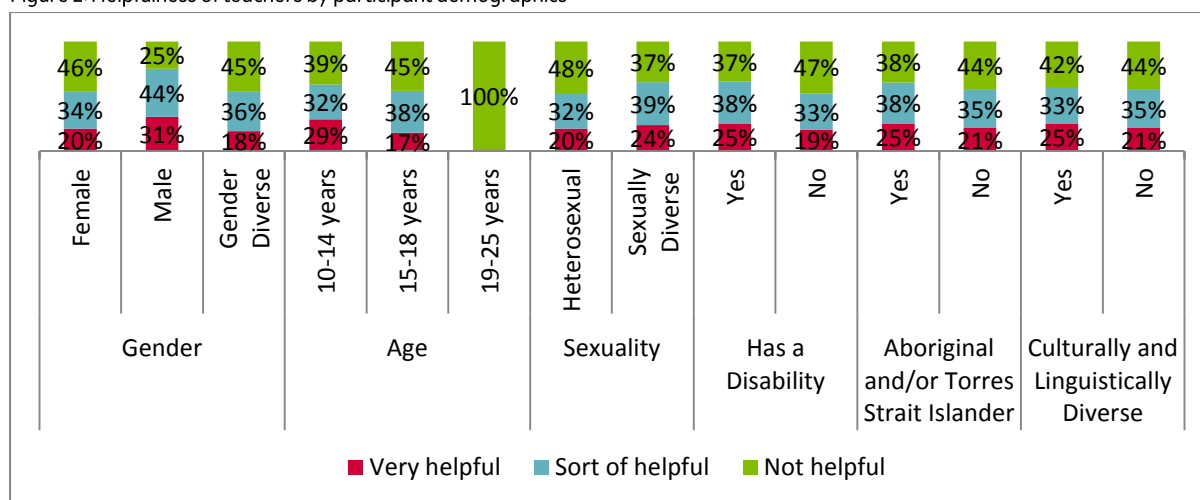
Ensuring that parents are equipped to support our children in relation to cyberbullying is important. Our survey with children and young people showed that when children did disclose to their parents that they were being cyberbullied, they were the most helpful (compared to their friends, teachers, counsellors, online community, e-Safety Commissioner and the police). One respondent said: "My parents helped me so much. They went to the school and demanded that more be done to stop the bullying done by the school students and a lot was done by the school". Given the importance of parents as a source of support and assistance to their children, parents must be appropriately equipped to encourage and receive help-seeking (for more information on this and on wider help-seeking sources see recommendation 3).

Finally, given the high rates of witnessing and perpetrating of cyberbullying and cyber aggression it is important that parents are encouraged and supported to speak to their children not just about being a victim of cyberbullying but also their role as a possible aggressor and bystander.

## Lack of knowledge and skills amongst teachers and resources at school

It is apparent from our survey with children and young people that some teachers lack the knowledge and skills required to resolve cyberbullying issues, with our young survey respondents rating them as unhelpful, with as much as 48% of one group of respondents (heterosexual group) rating them as unhelpful (males) - see the Figure 2 below. The 19-25 year old group would obviously not have had a teacher, explaining their rating.

Figure 2: Helpfulness of teachers by participant demographics



With most cyberbullied participants knowing who their bully was (81%) - often a friend or a school peer - and also being bullied in person (61%), we believe that teachers are likely to see or be aware of this bullying and be able to intervene. In addition, we know that the success of programs such as KiVA has depended in part on teachers' involvement and commitment to stamping out cyberbullying in their school and we therefore believe that teachers have an important role to play in reducing cyberbullying.

However, we also recognise that there is currently a high expectation on teachers and schools - arguably particularly of parents - that they are responsible for resolving many social issues. Whilst teachers and schools clearly have an important role in this sphere, their success will be limited if other key influencers in children and young people's lives, such as parents and the media, are not also appropriately educated and mirroring and promoting the same messages. Teachers and schools also require more resources to help them manage and respond to contemporary issues, like cyberbullying, which have no physical boundaries and can therefore play out at school or at home.

## Lack of knowledge, skills and responsibility amongst the media

The media in its widest form, including traditional media and social media providers and other online platforms, undoubtedly have an important part to play in reducing cyberbullying in a number of ways. These include:

- Responsible reporting of relevant stories.** For example, we were perturbed by the coverage of Dolly Everett's suicide, and the possibly related incidences of cyberbullying that she had suffered. We believe it was disrespectful to her name and memory, sensationalised cyberbullying and even provoked further aggressive behaviour within the community. To prevent similar situations from occurring in the future, it would be helpful if media organisations committed to responsible reporting of cyberbullying issues.

- **Responsible monitoring and moderation of online discussions and posts.** Online media providers – both traditional and social – must find more effective ways to monitor and moderate the discussions that they host as a result of their website. The aim must be to facilitate positive and healthy debate, whilst having a zero-tolerance approach to bullying and aggressive behaviour.

We are keen to stress that we are not advocating censorship of the media in any of its forms. Instead, we believe that the media has a role and responsibility to play in ensuring that it does not negatively impact on the health and wellbeing of the people and communities that it serves, and that it should be expected to take this role and responsibility seriously and act upon it accordingly. To this end, we would like to see the development of a cyberbullying media protocol, like Mindframe, covering guidelines about responsible reporting and media conduct in relation to cyberbullying stories and issues as well as about how to manage and respond to cyberbullying and cyber aggression taking place on their platforms.

**Recommendation 2:**

**yourtown** recommends that a nation-wide suite of education programs and campaigns be rolled-out to children, young people, parents, teachers, schools and the media in order to effectively prevent cyberbullying and manage and respond to it. Australian governments must recognise the importance, impact and potential value of the behaviour and responses of not just cyberbullying victims and perpetrators but also of bystanders, parents, teachers and the media, including social media providers in moderating the impact of this behaviour.

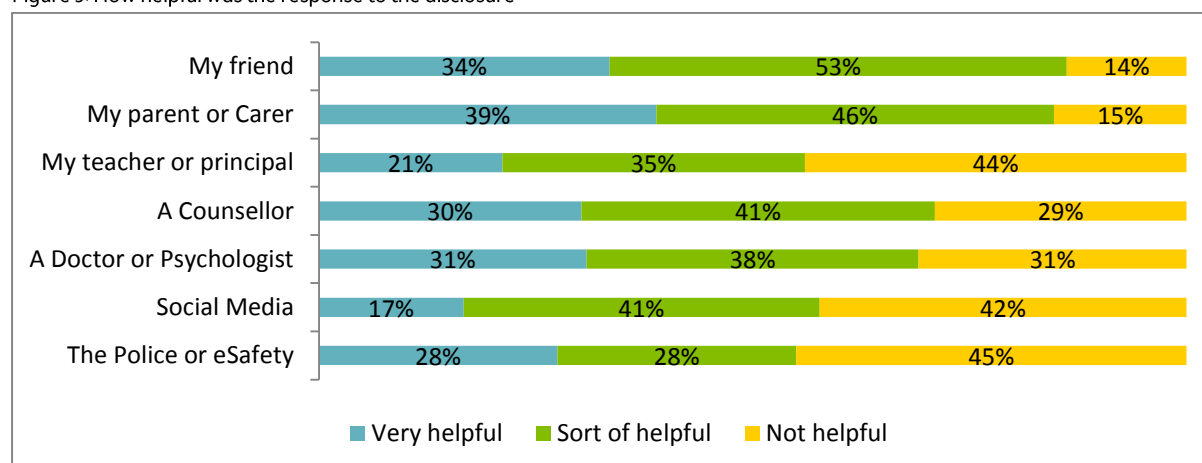
### 3. Encourage help-seeking

As an organisation that provides support to many children and young people confronted by a range of challenging issues, we know the value of help-seeking and the impact that seeking advice and support, or even of just having someone to listen following disclosure of an issue, has on the wellbeing of children and young people and their ability to effectively deal with these issues. In addition, much cyberbullying will take place out of the view of adults and detection will be unlikely; we need young people to turn to trusted adults to seek support. In our survey with children and young people about cyberbullying, respondents told us about the different sources of support they seek and which are the most helpful as well as the barriers and facilitators to accessing these supports.

The survey found that 78% of cyberbullied participants had told someone about their experience, most frequently a friend (59%). Parents and carers were the adults most frequently disclosed to with 41% of cyberbullied participants telling a parent or carer. Of potential concern, although it may be because they felt able to deal with the cyberbullying alone, 22% of participants had not told anyone, and that nearly half (45%) had not told any adult about being cyberbullied.

Figure 3 below presents who, amongst the sources of support about which we asked, they found to be most helpful, with parents being the most effective (39% found them to be very helpful) and teachers being found to be much less helpful (21% found them to be helpful).

Figure 3: How helpful was the response to the disclosure



There were some differences in the ways in which different groups of children and young people (by gender, age, cultural background and disability), sought help and whether they disclosed the issue itself to someone else:

- Young women were significantly more likely to disclose cyberbullying than young men or those who identify as gender diverse, perhaps indicative of cultural norms around females being more easily able to share their emotions than males who feel that to do so is weak.
- Gender diverse respondents were significantly more likely to rate their parents as not helpful, which may reflect their issues with their parents understanding and acceptance of their gender differences to the cultural “norm”.
- Young people who identified as having a disability were significantly more likely to disclose their cyberbullying to a counsellor and a health professional than those who did not. These findings may be indicative of the serious nature of the cyberbullying that this group encounters, that this group has fewer closer support networks in which they feel they can confide or that they are more likely to have a counsellor or see a health professional.

Our report on these survey findings provides much greater detail on the actions and preferences of each group and we advise careful consideration of these findings to ensure that interventions are designed to meet the experiences, views and preferences of each group. Furthermore, some differences around the nature of help-seeking were also observed in relation to the type of cyberbullying the respondent was experiencing. For example, participants who had embarrassing images of themselves spread were significantly more likely to discuss experiencing cyberbullying with friends than those who had not, and much less likely to disclose this with their parents. This may be given the nature of the images, which if sexual may prevent children and young people from feeling like they can confide in their parents, as one respondent said: “The topic was rather sexual and shameful. I was afraid they would judge me as well”.

Respondents also identified a number of different enablers and barriers to help-seeking, which are listed and explained in Table I below, many of which young people often tell us are enablers and barriers to help-seeking regarding other issues:

Table I: Description of barriers and enablers to help-seeking

Relationship strength and trust (Barrier and Enabler)
When participants felt close to or trusted the object of disclosure it was easier for them to disclose; likewise, if they did not know the person well or did not feel they could trust them to keep them safe or protect their privacy they found it difficult to disclose. This applied in respect to their friends, parents and teachers. For example, referring to their parents, one respondent said: “I trust them with everything. I have a really open relationship and talking to them always helps me”.
Reaction and response (Barrier and Enabler)
Often an object of disclosure was chosen for the intervention the participant wanted them to make in the cyberbullying situation. However, if the participant felt they could not control the intervention or that an unwanted intervention would be put in place they were hesitant to disclose. In relation to disclosing to their parents specifically, many respondents suggested that barriers to telling them included parents over-reacting and taking a course of action that they did not want, and not fully listening and supporting their wishes. For example, respondents said: “I was worried about [the] actions [my mother] would take. I didn’t want anyone to get in trouble because I was worried it would make everything worse”, and “[I would tell them] if they would simply listen instead of jumping into action to try and fix the situation”.
Embarrassment and judgement (Barrier)
Separate from their trust in the individual participants feared they would be judged by the person they disclosed to, or be embarrassed by the details of their experience. When participants identified that they did not fear judgement or embarrassment they were more motivated to disclose. One respondent in relation to their teachers said that they would not confide in them from: “fear I would be judged for trying to get help and dobbing the bullies in.”
Belief and being taken seriously (Barrier)
Participants reported that if they felt they would not be believed or if they felt people would not take their issue seriously then they were unlikely to disclose that they are being cyberbullied. One respondents, referring to their teachers, stated: “They said I was being dramatic and need to get over myself and that because it was online the school couldn’t do anything even though I had proof of the events”.
Supportiveness (Barrier and Enabler)
Desiring emotional support and feeling that the object of disclosure would provide that support was a motivating factor in disclosure for some participants. Likewise, if the object of disclosure was considered unlikely to provide support this discouraged help seeking. For instance, one respondent stated: “[My mother] is quite a ‘tough love’ person, and I’m scared she wouldn’t be comforting”.
Understanding of the situation (Barrier and Enabler)
When the object of disclosure had a good understanding of social media and/or cyberbullying or if the



respondent felt that they understood their perspective, respondents were more comfortable disclosing to that person. Where this understanding was lacking, participants cited that as a barrier to disclosing to that person. For example, respondents told us that they would confide in their friends as: "It's someone my age and has experienced bullying who is close to me" and "Being the same age with the same problems happening a lot in the grade". Other respondents had told counsellors as: "I knew they would of [sic] had similar experiences" and "[the counsellor] understood the situation and listened."

#### Confidence, anxiety or distress (Barrier)

Distress around the cyberbullying was a barrier to help-seeking in that some respondents cited that it was too upsetting to talk about being cyberbullied or that they lacked the confidence to express themselves. Others mentioned that dealing with anxiety or depression made it difficult to seek support. For example, one respondent said: "I would break down every time I tried talking about it".

#### Stoicism (Barrier)

Functioning only as a barrier to disclosure, some young people felt the need to protect those around them from the details of their experience or felt that it was their responsibility to face it alone, or that others would be disappointed in them for being cyberbullied or not handling it themselves. With regards to their parents and why they had not disclosed to them, one respondent stated: "I didn't want them to think I was anything less than perfect I guess."

#### Lack of awareness about some support services (Barrier)

Some respondents said they had not contacted the police as they did not feel that they responded to such issues and that their problems were mostly emotional so they would not be able to help". One respondent said: "I feel as though bullying, especially cyber-bullying, will be treated as something trivial by everyone, so going to the police would be viewed like going to the hospital for a paper-cut". Very few respondents identified the e-Safety Commissioner and some said this was because they were not aware that they existed.

#### Cost of accessing support (Barrier)

A key issue with disclosing to a counsellor, doctor or psychologist was being able to access and afford them.

From these findings, we have developed a set of strategies that we believe would encourage children and young people to disclose and to help-seeking when they have been cyberbullied. These are set out in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Strategies to increase disclosure of and help-seeking for cyberbullying

Strategies to increase disclosure of and help-seeking for cyberbullying	
<b>Parents &amp; Carers</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improve understanding of social media technologies and of the management of the risks of cyberbullying and its nature amongst parents and carers.</li> <li>• Educate parents and carers on the importance of listening to, believing, and supporting young people as victims</li> <li>• Educate parents and carers on the importance of giving young people a degree of control over the actions that follow a disclosure of cyberbullying.</li> <li>• Improve awareness of how and where to access support and resources for effectively managing and responding to cyberbullying including as a victim, bystander and perpetrator.</li> </ul>
<b>Teachers &amp; Principals</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Educate teachers and schools about effective responses to cyberbullying including for victims, bystanders and perpetrators.</li> <li>• Ensure that all students have trusted adults in the school community to whom they can disclose, especially students who may feel stigmatised within the school community.</li> <li>• Ensure every school has a policy on bullying that adequately addresses cyberbullying (and bullying within the school community off school grounds), and that meets nationally agreed criteria.</li> <li>• Consistently apply school policies within the school community to ensure all students feel they can access natural justice.</li> <li>• Foster norms of behaviour within the school community that encourage supportiveness and help-seeking, ideally through student-led processes.</li> </ul>
<b>Counsellors and Health Professionals</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase understanding amongst children and young people about the roles of counsellors, general practitioners, and psychologists in the mental health system and how these professionals can help them.</li> <li>• Improve access to subsidised and free appointments with counsellors, GPs and psychologists.</li> <li>• Improve physical access to counsellors, GPs and psychologists.</li> <li>• Promote telehealth and eMental health services to young people.</li> </ul>
<b>Office of the eSafety Commissioner</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase awareness of the role of the Office of the eSafety Commissioner.</li> <li>• Increase awareness of the resources offered by the Office of the eSafety Commissioner.</li> </ul>
<b>Police</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase awareness of the role of the police in cyberbullying and cyber-crime.</li> <li>• Develop a reporting process for young people that is supportive and not intimidating.</li> </ul>

### Recommendation 3:

**yourtown** recommends that considerable efforts are made to help encourage help-seeking behaviour amongst children and young people in relation to cyberbullying. Children and young people need to know that cyberbullying is not an issue with which they should have to deal alone or about which they should be ashamed, embarrassed or feel weak for seeking help.

Educating the key groups of people in the lives of children and young people and ensuring that these groups understand and know how to receive disclosure and be a source of help to children and young people, as well as educating children and young people about the sources of support available to them, will undoubtedly help minimise the impact of cyberbullying on them.

#### 4. Include the views, experiences and knowledge of young people in the development of responses to cyberbullying

As KHL data and our research about cyberbullying shows, children and young people have a wealth of different experiences relating to cyberbullying which can be drawn upon to inform policy and intervention design. For example, of the 1,264 young children and young people who responded to our survey on their experiences of cyberbullying:

- 1,092 (96%) respondents reported witnessing cyberbullying acts online
- 708 (62%) of participants reported perpetrating an act online that may be considered as an act of cyber aggression
- 266 (53%) of participants who reported perpetrating a cyberbullying act had been cyberbullied themselves and 705 (99.6%) of them had witnessed cyberbullying

As shown by KHL data in our submission to the Senate on the adequacy of criminal laws to capture cyberbullying, children and young people who participated in the survey also shared their wide experiences of a range of different types of cyberbullying behaviours including name-calling and receiving abusive messages, being ignored or excluded, threatened with physical violence and having personal images shared with others.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, it is important to remember that children are more likely to be the experts of social media, its functions and how they can be used to and are used to engage with others, be that positively or negatively.

In addition, survey findings also showed that whilst a broad range of individuals reported being cyberbullied, or that anyone can become a target of cyberbullying, not everyone's experience of cyberbullying was found to be the same. Significant differences between the experiences of different genders, ages, cultural background and those with a disability and those without a disability exist in terms of the levels and types of cyberbullying they experience as well as their help-seeking behaviours.

Furthermore, children and young people clearly have a number of considered ideas about how best to prevent and reduce cyberbullying that they are keen to share, as provided in response to open questions in the survey. These included the following broad themes (the quotations are the direct responses of respondents):

Better reporting, filtering, and monitoring
<i>'Cyberbullying is always going to be there as long as you give people the opportunity. So the most you can do is maybe set up key words or phrases that alert attention. That way text can be monitored online. But that would cause a multitude of problems as well.'</i>
<i>'Educate kids that it is okay to block people. Make the 'block' button more readily viewable and available on the page in which someone can receive messages.'</i>
Increase community education and awareness
<i>'Education about the issue, encourage people to stop being bystanders and actually do something if they witness it in action or suspect it.'</i>
Create deterrents
<i>'Stricter internet supervision and more internet police'</i>
<i>'Once someone is reported online...the person should be immediately prohibited. Online complaints</i>

<sup>11</sup>

<https://www.yourtown.com.au/sites/default/files/document/Adequacy%20Of%20Criminal%20Laws%20To%20Capture%20Cyber%20bullying.pdf>

<i>section should be provided and answered immediately.'</i>
<b>Reduce social media usage</b>
<i>'Don't have [a] phone when you [are] like 16. Have them when you [are] like 25; when you are older and mature'</i>
<i>'Go outdoors more often, stay off the phone and have a digital detox, have positive minds'</i>
<b>Educate and support cyberbullies</b>
<i>'Not just trying to help the victims but focusing more on the bullies and why they are doing such things to try and break the circle of bullying.'</i>
<i>'Maybe just talk to the person, ask why they're doing what they're doing'</i>
<b>Educate parents</b>
<i>'Parents should be aware of their kids online activity'</i>
<i>'Parents need to feel empowered to talk to their children about bullying and what their child should do if it's happening to them, they witness it or are part of it.'</i>
<b>Engender more supportive communities</b>
<i>'More people standing up for each other and themselves'</i>
<i>'Friends of the person being bullied to pay more attention to them and not let people harass others'</i>

#### **Recommendation 4:**

**yourtown** believes that the use of the views, preferences and needs of children and young people is critical to the design, development and implementation of interventions to prevent and reduce cyberbullying and to support those who have been cyberbullied and who have cyberbullied. We strongly suggest that the Taskforce and any actions that result from its work appropriately consult with children and young people. This could include specifically working with a range of children and young people to develop interventions such as effective social media responses to cyberbullying, or more broadly consulting with children and young people through their representative bodies, including the Queensland Youth Parliament.