

**The government should address the serious issue of
the cyber-bullying of children**

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Introduction

Cyber-bullying refers to the occurrence of bullying on the information and communication technology platform. It involves the use of information and communication technologies to support deliberate behaviour intended to harm an individual or a group, mainly through the repeated dissemination of overt or covert messages in the form of texts, audiovisual materials and others forms. Common forms of cyber-bullying include: the use of violent language, modification of pictures, manual search of the victim's personal data and publicizing the information - commonly referred to as "hei dai", as well as the repeated posting of meaningless content within a very short period of time in chatting or instant messaging systems, which is commonly referred to as "sai baan".

The use of the Internet has become more common in the light of the advancement in technology. However, owing to the rapid growth of cyber-bullying on the Internet in recent years, children are facing increasing potential danger of cyber-bullying. Besides, cyber-bullying can lead to psychophysical damage on children and this is a serious issue that should not be neglected. According to Article 16 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child of the United Nations, no child shall be subjected to arbitrary or unlawful interference with his or her privacy, family, home or correspondence, nor to unlawful attacks on his or her honour and reputation. Thus, we urge the government to address the serious issue of the cyber-bullying of children and call for improving the situation.

Current Situation

Cyber-bullying cases frequently occur and they can be found in Internet forums, personal blogs and even in social networks. According to a research report on "The Current Situation of Cyber-bullying among Hong Kong Secondary School Students" conducted by the Department of Social Work of the Chinese University of Hong Kong in 2010, out of 1,800 Form 1 to Form 7 students, nearly 30 per cent of the interviewees had been the victim of cyber-bullying; about 20 per cent of them had been derided, insulted and mocked by others, which demonstrated the seriousness of the situation.

In fact, children do not fully understand about cyber-bullying and its consequences. Our group has sent out questionnaires to 1,664 students, ranging from Primary 4 to Form 7, and among them, only 60 per cent of the interviewees considered the publicizing of other people's personal information and the malicious modification of pictures as cyber-bullying, and less than 20 per cent of them knew that repeatedly posting the same and meaningless statements within a very short period of time is a form of cyber-bullying. The survey shows that approximately 50 per cent out of 1,000 interviewees from secondary school have witnessed cyber-bullying incidents on the Internet; 10 per cent of the respondents even claimed they would join bullies in their attack. The negative impact of peer influence on the spread of bullying is of grave concern.

In addition, children do not have adequate access to information about cyber-bullying in their schools. About 60 per cent of the interviewees showed that they have not had any discussions or classes concerning cyber-bullying. Even when schools offer information or discussion on the topic they mostly introduce the definition of cyber-bullying and the causes rather than focus on how to deal with cyber-bullying and to how to relief the stress caused by cyber-bullying. Thus, children may not understand the importance of seeking help. In some cases, students even think the best solution of handling cyber-bullying is just to ignore it. Dr. Dennis Wong Sing Wing, Associate Professor from the Department of Applied Social Studies at City University of Hong Kong, says that due to the lack of governmental support, it is difficult to conduct research on cyber-bullying and develop supporting teaching materials. Moreover, teaching about cyber-bullying is not offered in all schools and existing teaching material on the subject is not used effectively. Therefore, the government should take the initiative to provide more support, both in terms of devoting extra resources and promoting teaching and discussion of cyber-bullying in all schools

Impact on Children

Cyber-bullying has a negative impact on children's social life. It does not only bring disgrace to the child-victims on the internet, but cyber-bullying acts, such as "hei dai", malicious attacks or invective and so on, also give rise to extended harm in the child-victims' daily lives causing them to be criticised, rejected and even discriminated against, making them feel frustrated and lose confidence in making friends. The negative impact on this interpersonal relationship and social development makes the child lose confidence again, in turn, it creates a vicious cycle, making the child afraid to express him/herself and feel excluded from the world. Thus, cyber-bullying is obstructive to the educational and social development of the child-victims.

Children who are cyber-bullied might suffer from an indelible harmful imprint on their memory. Their resulting actions might worsen the situation and lead to other irreparable consequences. Based on the survey conducted by our group, we have discovered that nearly 20 per cent of the interviewed children are willing to seek help from others, with the aim to retaliate on or even punish the bully in reality or on the Internet. According to "A Study on Cyber-bullying among Hong Kong Secondary School Students" conducted by the Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups in 2010, among the 3,000 students interviewed, the majority felt helpless when bullied by others. The victims may suffer from lowered self-esteem, becoming distrusting of others and may even a desire to lash out against others online. Besides, we should be alerted to the fact that 11 interviewees expressed an inclination to commit suicide. It is obvious that cyber-bullying does not only influence children's daily lives, but also causes psychological damage and, bringing profound and long-term harmful effects.

Suggestions

1 Education and Publicity

1.1 School Education

The use of Internet is an irresistible trend and attention to Internet safety is on the rise. The issue of cyber-bullying is far under-discussed in the current humanities education in junior secondary schools. Although the Office of the Privacy Commissioner for Personal Data (PCPD) has published the Personal Data (Privacy) Ordinance Liberal Studies Teaching Kit, to assist secondary school teachers to teach students to protect their personal data and to respect that of others, the kit is not taken seriously. Therefore, our group suggests that the government should enforce the compulsory teaching of the curriculum on Internet safety in humanities education in schools. These courses should focus on the cultivation of student's online personal integrity as well as their respect of other people's values. Apart from the courses, lectures and forums should be held to teach children how to avoid cyber-bullying, protect their personal privacy and deal with cyber-bullying, etc.

1.2 Parental Education

According to our group's survey, out of 1,000 secondary school students, only 5 per cent of the interviewees think that teenagers are able to deal with cyber-bullying problems on their own. If they encountered cyber-bullying, about 40 per cent of them would seek help from their parents. Thus, parents, as the immediate or first-level contact point for their children, should be well informed about cyber-bullying so as to help their children when necessary. Our group suggests that the government should collaborate with community centres to launch workshops specially designed for parents, instructing them on the basic knowledge of internet usage and cyber-bullying, including what is cyber-bullying, the emotional changes of the victims and how to deal with them. Apart from reducing the risks of cyber-bullying for the children, the workshops can also equip the parents to offer adequate assistance and support when their children are cyber-bullied.

1.3 Multimedia Education & Publicity

The government can collaborate with radio and television stations to produce a series of radio and TV programmes, to let people in different groups of society have a better and deeper understanding of cyber-bullying. Meanwhile, the government can also cooperate with social welfare agencies and educational organisations to set up interactive games and animations, uploading them to social network websites and video sharing websites (e.g. Facebook, YouTube). They can also launch competitions on short video clip filming as well as broadcasting drama. In addition, the government can also work with multimedia producers to develop free cell phone software for citizens to download. These actions of greater entertainment appeal can draw the attention of children and adults alike, and in turn inform them about the correct online attitude and the methods and ways of seeking help when cyber-bullied, as to achieve the effects of educating the public and countering cyber-bullying.

2 Follow-up

2.1 Set up more Hotline Services

Based on our group's survey, about 70 per cent of the interviewees expressed their wish to talk to someone face-to-face or call someone to seek help if they experienced cyber-bullying. This shows that the victims wish to have an immediate response in order to solve the problems. However, nowadays in our society, there are not enough hotline and counselling services available to handle the problem of cyber-bullying, thus we suggest the government should provide more financial aid to the social welfare agencies, as well as set up more hotline services and train more social workers, equipping them the professional knowledge required to assist the victims, for example providing the victims with psychological counselling and implementing a frequent monitoring schedule for follow-up after the counselling.

2.2 Launch Cyber Youth Outreaching Projects

Currently, only a few agencies have launched cyber youth outreaching service to provide assistance and support to troubled children. The number of social workers in each team is small and their services place an emphasis on problems of drug abuse, compensated dating and suicides. Thus, our group suggests that the government should allocate more funding to social welfare agencies so that they may hire more online social workers, expand the scope of their services, and periodically browse the websites and teenager's online messages. If suspicion of cyber-bullying is noticed, the social workers should build up a relationship with the victim and mediate the incident by posting correct, healthy and legal information online, sometimes the social workers can also leave a message to each individual victim. The social worker will provide follow-up intervention when the victim agrees to develop a one-to-one dialogue. Moreover, the social workers can use their identity to warn the bullies in order to achieve a monitoring and deterrent effect. If the user continues to ignore the warning, the social worker will refer the individual case to the law enforcement agencies for further follow-ups and legal actions.

2.3 Amendment of the Personal Data (Privacy) Ordinance – Provide Legal Advice and Assistance to Party

According to section 66 in the Personal Data (Privacy) Ordinance, an individual who suffers damage by reason of a contravention by a data user shall be entitled to compensation from that data user for that damage. However, the Ordinance does not include the authorisation for the privacy commissioner to provide any means of legal aid when the victim files a proceeding based on section 66. The fact that individuals should self-fund his/her proceeding and obtain a legal representation by a solicitor has caused a decline of in the successful reports persecution on in relation to cyber-bullying cases in recent years. Our group thinks that the PCPD should be given authorisation to provide assistance and support, including the provision of legal advice and legal aid to the victim, whom would like to file a proceeding. In this way, on the one side, it can safeguard the rights and interests of the victim on one hand, on the other side, and on the other hand achieve a

deterrent effect when the rate of successful reporting cases of cyber-bullying is on the rise.

Conclusion

The problem of cyber-bullying is becoming increasingly common. To ignore and defer dealing with the problem would only lead to more children harmed by cyber-bullying. Thus, on behalf of the children, we wish to draw the serious attention of government to the problem of cyber-bullying. We hope government can undertake the above-mentioned suggestions so as to create a peaceful and healthier environment for the healthy growth and development of children. In conclusion, on behalf of the 16 Child Councillors in my group, I move that the motion “The government should address the serious issue of the cyber-bullying of children” be passed.

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