

# Key attributes and experiences of cyberbullying among children in the UK

**Authors:** Sarah Sharrock, Nathan Hudson, Jane Kerr, Charlotte Chalker and Maria David  
(National Centre for Social Research)

Dr Carrie-Anne Myers (City, University of London)

**Prepared for:** Ofcom



---

# We believe that social research has the power to make life better.

By really understanding the complexity of people's lives and what they think about the issues that affect them, we give the public a powerful and influential role in shaping decisions and services that can make a difference to everyone. And as an independent, not for profit organisation we're able to put all our time and energy into delivering social research that works for society.

National Centre  
for Social Research  
35 Northampton Square  
London EC1V 0AX  
020 7250 1866

[www.natcen.ac.uk](http://www.natcen.ac.uk)

A Company Limited by  
Guarantee

Registered in England  
No.4392418

A Charity registered in England  
and Wales (1091768) and  
Scotland (SC038454)

This project was carried out  
in compliance with ISO20252

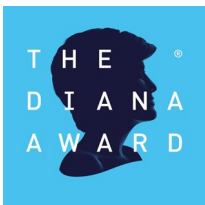
[designbysoapbox.com](http://designbysoapbox.com)

---

## Research partners



The Anti-Bullying Alliance a unique coalition working together to unite against bullying and create safer environments for children to learn, play and live. We: share learning and best practice; raise awareness of bullying especially through Anti-Bullying Week, help stop bullying and bring lasting change to children's lives. [www.anti-bullyingalliance.org.uk](http://www.anti-bullyingalliance.org.uk)



The Diana Award is proud to be the only charity set up in memory of the late Diana, Princess of Wales, and her belief that young people have the power to change the world. Our mission is to empower young people to lead that change through a range of initiatives which unlock their potential, inspire action and create opportunities, ensuring that no young person is left out or left behind.

---

## **Acknowledgements**

NatCen and Ofcom would like to thank the Anti-Bullying Alliance and The Diana Award for their support in recruitment of schools, and review of the report.

We are grateful to Dr Holly Powell-Jones for her support with fieldwork in schools.

Finally, we are indebted to the school staff, practitioners and children who took part in this research for sharing their insights and their time.

---

# Contents

<b>Ofcom foreword</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Executive Summary</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>14</b>
1.1 Background and context to the research	14
1.2 Research aims	14
1.3 Methodology	15
1.4 Limitations of the research	16
1.5 Note for interpretation	16
1.6 Report overview	17
<b>Understanding of cyberbullying</b>	<b>18</b>
2.1 Describing cyberbullying	18
2.2 Views on prevalence of cyberbullying	20
2.3 Content, activity and behaviour viewed as cyberbullying	20
2.4 Who cyberbullying involves and affects	21
2.5 Differing experiences across different groups	23
2.6 Motivations of cyberbullying	24
<b>Cyberbullying pathways</b>	<b>26</b>
3.1 Where cyberbullying takes place online	26
3.2 How different functionalities contribute to cyberbullying	27
<b>Impacts of cyberbullying</b>	<b>31</b>
4.1 Impacts of cyberbullying	31
4.2 Impacts of cyberbullying on different groups of children	33
4.3 Impacts of cyberbullying compared to offline bullying	35
<b>Existing measures to mitigate cyberbullying</b>	<b>37</b>
5.1 Proactive moderation by platforms	37
5.2 Parental controls	38
5.3 Privacy settings and user controls	38
5.4 Screenshots and notifications	39
5.5 Restricting or removing contacts	39
5.6 Blocking	40
5.7 Reporting	42

---

<b>Participant recommendations</b>	<b>46</b>
6.1 Participant recommendations for online platforms	46
6.2 Participants' wider recommendations: education and information-sharing	49
<b>Appendix A: Methodology</b>	<b>52</b>
Sampling	52
Recruitment	53
Data collection and analysis	53
<b>Appendix B: Topic Guides</b>	<b>56</b>

---

---

# Ofcom foreword

This report explores the pathways through which children encounter cyberbullying, the impact of encountering cyberbullying and the perceptions and use of existing measures to address cyberbullying and recommendations.

Ofcom is the independent regulator for communications services in the UK and has statutory duties in relation to media literacy and online safety. The Online Safety Act 2023 ('the Act') includes the requirement for services in scope to have systems and process in place designed to protect children from content that is harmful to them.

Content that is harmful to children is separated into 3 categories in the Act – primary priority content, priority content and non-designated content. Some of the duties which apply to regulated services are focused on primary priority content, priority content and/or non-designated content. The Act lists 'bullying content' as one of the categories of priority content. This research was commissioned while the Online Safety Bill was progressing through parliamentary processes. While Ofcom was aware that bullying content would likely be deemed as 'priority content', the definition of this type of content, that is now contained in the Act, had not been confirmed. The research therefore took a participant-led approach in terms of the range of cyberbullying experiences discussed. As a result, some of the content and behavior discussed in this report may not match that set out in the Act and Ofcom's forthcoming guidance on content that is harmful to children.<sup>1</sup>

All findings contained in this report reflect the perceptions of children and professionals interviewed, not Ofcom or The National Centre for Social Research (NatCen). The report includes participant accounts and perceptions of various platform functionalities including potential safety measures or features. Participants suggestions of what should be improved have not been assessed by the research team and should not be seen as validation of technical feasibility, proportionality or effectiveness of the suggested solutions. Participant views have also not been verified to ensure they provide an accurate reflection of the functionalities or safety processes deployed by the platforms mentioned by participants. Some of the children in the study are under the age of 13 (the age at which many social media services allow children access) and reported using these services and encountering cyberbullying.

Specific online platforms are referenced throughout the report reflecting the participants' views and experiences. This should not be interpreted as an indication of the prevalence or origination of cyberbullying on particular platforms, but rather indicative of the platforms used by those taking part in the research and their experiences.

**This research was commissioned to build Ofcom's evidence base regarding how children encounter bullying content online. The findings should not be considered a reflection of any policy position that Ofcom may adopt as part of our role as the online safety regulator.**

---

<sup>1</sup> See section 62(12) of the Act which provides that content may, in particular, be 'bullying content' if it is content targeted against a person which a) conveys a serious threat; b) is humiliating or degrading; c) forms part of a campaign of mistreatment.





---

# Executive Summary

The National Centre for Social Research (NatCen), in partnership with City University and supported by the Anti-Bullying Alliance and The Diana Award, was commissioned by Ofcom to undertake qualitative research to understand key attributes and experiences of cyberbullying among children in the UK. The research aimed to explore four primary research questions:

- What does cyberbullying look like among children?
- What are the pathways for children being exposed to cyberbullying?
- What impacts does cyberbullying have on children?
- What works to address cyberbullying?

Three stages of research were undertaken:

- One-to-one interviews with 10 youth practitioners with self-reported experience supporting children who had experienced cyberbullying.
- Qualitative research in six secondary schools across England, Wales, and Scotland. This included paired or triad interviews with 14 members of school staff, and 12 focus groups with 50 children (aged 12-16).
- One-to-one interviews with 12 children with direct experience of cyberbullying (aged 14-17).

A summary of the key findings from the research are set out below.

## **Understanding cyberbullying**

Descriptions of what cyberbullying comprised were largely consistent between participant groups. Practitioners, school staff and children described cyberbullying as negative behaviour that causes harm or upset to someone else, conducted through a screen or device anywhere online. Repetition and intentionality were described as key elements of cyberbullying. Determining whether communication or behaviour between children was intentionally harmful was, however, described by some participants as sometimes challenging. School staff and practitioners attributed this challenge to the normalisation of aggressive and/or offensive communication between children, as well as children often engaging in jokes or 'banter' which could be easily misconstrued as, or not recognised by children to be, cyberbullying. Also central to participants' accounts was a view that cyberbullying often did not happen in isolation from face-to-face bullying. Rather, online and offline bullying were frequently interlinked, often through in-person connection in shared places such as school.

Participants collectively identified a wide range of activities and behaviours as cyberbullying. These included exclusionary behaviours, posting and/or sharing content (including text, images, and audio) about another

---

person, adapting, and editing others content to encourage negative reactions, and targeting someone with threats or abuse.

### **Motivations for cyberbullying**

Identified motivations for children to engage in cyberbullying included a desire for power or control, social and peer pressure (including a desire to fit-in), and the normalisation of negative behaviours online. Reasons as to why children might be cyberbullied varied and ranged from perceptions of difference between children (based on factors including physical appearance, character, or interests), to personal disagreements and relationship breakdowns. The extent to which participants suggested children were cyberbullied because of protected characteristics varied. Some reported that children were commonly targeted because of their race, ethnicity, disability, gender identity, sexual orientation and/or special educational needs. Others felt that children were generally accepting of diversity, resulting in very few cases of identity-based cyberbullying. The only exception to this was sexism and misogyny, which some participants across all groups linked to the common targeting of girls online.

### **Cyberbullying pathways**

Children, school staff and practitioners reported that cyberbullying happened anywhere children interacted online and tended to concentrate on whichever platforms were most popular at the time. Participants identified many examples of social media sites, video sharing and gaming platforms where cyberbullying takes place and reported that cyberbullying could occur on single or across multiple platforms. Some participants suggested that cyberbullying behaviour and content differed between platform types. For example, some described negative comments about people's appearance to be more likely to occur on image-based social media.

Participants identified a variety of platform functionalities as facilitators of cyberbullying. This included the ability to set up anonymous, fake, or multiple accounts; interactive features (such as comment and chat functionality); shareable content; and features that limited the extent to which evidence of bullying could be collected, such as time-limited posts. Children reported that it was easy to create accounts on most online platforms, often without identity verification. Children also reported that on some platforms multiple accounts could be created by a single user, which could enable the creation of alias or fake accounts from which cyberbullying could take place. The ability to create and use multiple accounts was also described as enabling the circumvention of restrictions imposed by platforms in response to cyberbullying, allowing children to reinitiate contact with somebody they had previously targeted. The children who took part in this research reported little personal information was needed to find and add contacts. It was also reported that some platforms allowed people to message each other (individually or within group chats) without first having to be approved, reducing individuals' control over who could contact them and the kinds of messages they might receive.

Interactive elements such as direct messaging and comment functionalities were seen as key facilitators of cyberbullying by all participants. Examples included children being sent written messages, voice notes, and verbal abuse in real time via voice chat. Interactive elements also included communication in group chats or public posts visible to others. Practitioners suggested that group or public posts could encourage a normalisation of negativity or audience-seeking behaviours, enabling 'piling on' behaviour. Children also described how notifications signposting they had left a group chat reduced their willingness to distance themselves from online spaces in which they were targeted or witnessing negative behaviour.

---

Features that enabled collecting and sharing of content about a person were also described by participants across all groups as facilitators of cyberbullying. The ability to share original posts, take and share screenshots or recordings, and autosave content to phone galleries meant children were able to easily save and share content from or about someone to other users and/or sites. Participants across all groups also discussed disappearing messages as limiting children's ability to collect evidence of cyberbullying. Some also suggested that screenshot/save notifications discouraged children from collecting evidence of cyberbullying. Screenshot/save notifications were, however also described as mitigating cyberbullying, by deterring others to save and use content as the user would be notified. Participants also said that restricted access to particular areas on online platforms (such as private channels and separate group chats) could be exclusionary and/or used as spaces to be abusive behind someone's back.

## **Impacts**

Cyberbullying was described as having wide-ranging negative impacts on children's emotional wellbeing, including feelings of sadness, annoyance, anger, and fear. Cyberbullying was also described as negatively impacting children's mental and physical health and resulting in online and offline social withdrawal. Some school staff and youth practitioners also described incidences of cyberbullying resulting in substance misuse, self-harm, and suicidal ideation, as well as the onset of eating disorders. Some participants across groups also suggested that the longer a child was exposed to cyberbullying, the worse and longer-term the effects. Other participants, however, emphasized that one-off incidents can also have significant negative effects. Examples of long-term effects of cyberbullying provided by practitioners and school staff included worsened educational and employment outcomes, and hindered ability to avoid or disengage from unhealthy or unsafe relationships in the future.

Broadly, participants felt that the impacts of cyberbullying on children varied on an individual basis rather than in relation to specific characteristics. Some school staff and youth practitioners suggested that boys were affected by cyberbullying equally to girls but were less likely to express the impacts to them. As a result, boys were considered less likely than girls to garner the attention of supportive adults and peers around them. Some children and school staff also suggested that age was a protective factor against the impacts of cyberbullying – suggesting children develop greater resilience to cyberbullying with age.

When asked to compare impacts of cyberbullying to bullying offline, participants across all groups noted that the two were interrelated and often experienced simultaneously. Key influences on perceived impacts related to the pervasiveness of cyberbullying (related to children's constant engagement with online platforms); the potential permanence of cyberbullying content and the risk of it being widely shared; and the variety of ways in which people could be targeted online when compared to in person. Some participants across groups also noted that anonymity of the perpetrator could exacerbate the impacts of cyberbullying, though views on this were mixed. Where the people involved were identifiable, school staff and children suggested cyberbullying among friendship groups could have a more negative impact than cyberbullying perpetrated by strangers.

## **Participants views of mitigation measures**

Participants across all groups shared mixed views on the effectiveness of existing measures that can help to mitigate and address cyberbullying. Measures discussed included moderation, parental controls, privacy settings and user controls, screenshot and save notifications, options to restrict or remove contacts, and reporting functionalities.

---

Blocking functionalities were described as important but differing across platforms, with effectiveness determined by whether blocking was applied to users' multiple accounts, and/or whether blocking prevented group-based interaction. The children who took part in this research reported several barriers to the success of blocking. These included concerns that others could tell and might respond negatively if they were blocked (which risked escalation); that blocking somebody would not prevent that person from posting content about them (resulting in a reluctance to block through a preference to know what was being posted); and impacts on users' own experiences of the platform (such as restricted access to multi-player gaming). The children who took part in this study also described a range of functionalities that allowed them to set limits around who could see and interact with them online as important mitigators to cyberbullying. These included switching comments off, disabling sharing for specific posts, and using options to limit access and/or interactivity to narrower groups or to shorter timeframes.

Participants across all groups said the ability to anonymously report incidences of cyberbullying to platforms was another important tool. The ease with which reports could be made was described as varying across platforms, and participants expressed mixed views as to whether simpler, detailed, or automated processes were preferable or encouraged children to submit reports. Key barriers to reporting as a mitigation measure against cyberbullying included a perception that no action would be taken, and/or that any repercussions would be ineffective. These were linked to a lack of transparency and understanding around the platforms' processes and decision-making, and a view that the ease with which restrictions could be circumvented (e.g., setting up new accounts) undermined their effectiveness and benefits. This led to scepticism among some participants around the value of reporting cyberbullying to platforms.

## **Recommendations**

Participants provided several recommendations on how to address cyberbullying. These included the provision of education and training for children, parents, and wider stakeholders such as schools – including platform-specific information and education on online safety and bullying more broadly. Participants also suggested that standards, monitoring, and accountability of online platforms should be implemented and enforced, and there could be more proactive moderation across platforms, reducing reliance on user reports to identify cyberbullying. Participants across all groups suggested that it should be more difficult to set up new accounts, and that age restrictions and age verification should be better enforced. Staff and practitioners also suggested accounts should default to the highest possible privacy/security settings at setup, and children suggested that, to reduce unwanted communication, it should be harder for contacts to be accessed on some platforms.

Children's recommendations for addressing cyberbullying included increasing user control over who could access, copy, and share their content, such as an option to disallow screenshots, downloads, or onward sharing of content by specific users. Offering children greater control over their appearance in others' content was also suggested – for example, introducing automated processes to screen and seek permission from individuals appearing in images before they could be posted. Alongside increased moderation, participants across all groups suggested platforms could do more to proactively encourage reporting – including by increasing the transparency of their processes and responding more quickly and consistently. Practitioners suggested that information on the possible outcomes of reports should be included in user guidance. Greater visibility of reporting mechanisms, and more immediate links to relevant emotional support, were also recommended.

---

# Introduction

---

## 1.1 Background and context to the research

The evidence base that explores cyberbullying is sizable, comprised predominately of large-scale quantitative surveys seeking to demonstrate both prevalence and impacts.<sup>2</sup> The evidence base is, however, also disparate, with inconsistent definitions and varying accounts of the nature and impacts of cyberbullying. In this context, in the leadup to the introduction of the Online Safety Act, Ofcom commissioned the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen), in partnership with City University and supported by the Anti-Bullying Alliance and The Diana Award, to undertake qualitative research to understand key attributes and experiences of cyberbullying among children in the UK.

## 1.2 Research aims

The aims of the research were to explore the following primary research questions:

- What does cyberbullying look like among children in the UK? This includes exploration of the content, activity and behaviour among children that is viewed as cyberbullying, and how different groups of children experience it.
- What are the pathways for children being exposed to cyberbullying? This includes exploration around platforms/services on which children are exposed to cyberbullying, and ways in which their different functionalities might contribute.
- What impact does cyberbullying have on children? This includes investigation of how different groups of children are impacted by cyberbullying, and what the unique risks are to children encountering cyberbullying as compared to bullying offline.

---

<sup>2</sup> Hudson et al. (2022) 'Content and activity that is harmful to children within scope of the Online Safety Bill', London: Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS). Available at: [Content and activity that is harmful to children within scope of the Online Safety Bill | National Centre for Social Research \(natcen.ac.uk\)](https://www.natcen.ac.uk/content-and-activity-that-is-harmful-to-children-within-scope-of-the-online-safety-bill/)

- 
- What works to address cyberbullying among children in the UK? This includes exploration of views on existing mitigation measures and their effectiveness, and around additional measures that could be put in place to address cyberbullying.

### 1.3 Methodology

This research comprised three stages of qualitative data collection:

- One-to-one remote interviews with 10 practitioners, including two social workers and eight youth practitioners. Eligibility to take part was based on self-reported experience supporting children who have experienced cyberbullying. Participants were purposively sampled for diversity across the children they supported in terms of age, gender, special educational needs, and disability (SEND), and experience of being in care. Participants were recruited via the research teams' and partners' existing networks of social work and anti-bullying practitioners.
- Qualitative research in six secondary schools across England, Wales, and Scotland, carried out in person.<sup>3</sup> Data collection comprised six paired or triad interviews with 14 members of staff (including teachers, school counsellors, pastoral support staff), and 12 focus groups with 50 children aged 12 to 16 (in school years 8 to 11 or Scottish equivalent S1 to S4). Schools were recruited by NatCen with support from The Diana Award and Anti-Bullying Alliance. They were purposively sampled to include diversity across key characteristics including geography (UK region and urban/rural locations), proportion of pupils entitled to Free School Meals (as a proxy for socioeconomic status), proportion from racially minoritised backgrounds, and proportion with SEND. Schools were also sampled to ensure a range of prior engagement with either The Diana Award and/or Anti-Bullying Alliance, to ensure diversity in staff and children's awareness and interaction with anti-bullying programmes.
- One-to-one remote interviews with 12 children with direct experience of cyberbullying. These participants were recruited with the support of a specialist recruitment agency, Criteria Qualitative Fieldwork. Participants were contacted via parents/guardians, who reported as part of initial eligibility screening that the child had experienced cyberbullying in the preceding six months. Children in the achieved sample were all 14 to 17 years old.

Children who took part in focus groups and interviews were purposively sampled for diversity on the basis of age, gender, and ethnicity.

Ethical approval for all stages of research was granted by NatCen's internal Research Ethics Committee.

Fieldwork took place between March and September 2023. Interviews and focus groups were structured using topic guides developed in collaboration with Ofcom. With permission, discussions were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Data was analysed using the Framework approach developed by NatCen.

A full description of the research methodology is provided in Appendix A.

---

<sup>3</sup> The invitation to participate was circulated to schools in all four UK countries, but it was not possible to recruit a school in Northern Ireland within the research timeframe.

---

## 1.4 Limitations of the research

The purpose of qualitative research is to map the range and diversity of views and experiences among relevant groups. The thematic findings set out in this report should not be interpreted as indicative of the prevalence of views or experiences of cyberbullying, including in relation to particular platforms or functionalities that are discussed.

As with all research, this study has limitations. It is a marker of high-quality research to acknowledge these, with careful consideration to their potential impact on how the research findings can be interpreted. Key limitations of this research are outlined below.

- Due to the broad remit of this research, data collection in interviews and focus groups often achieved breadth rather than depth in terms of topic coverage and the amount of detail that could be explored. This limitation is heightened by a segmented approach to data collection, whereby research questions were not all posed to all participant groups.
- Due to the sensitive nature of the study, parent / guardian consent was a prerequisite for all children taking part. This may have influenced who took part in focus groups and interviews, and the types of experiences they shared.
- Small sample sizes limited the extent to which sub-group analysis (based on particular demographic characteristics or experiences) was feasible. Where such analysis was possible, however, it has been completed, and relevant findings are highlighted throughout the report.

## 1.5 Note for interpretation

- In some practitioner interviews, the relationship between cyberbullying and wider online harms was discussed – particularly amongst those working with children who tended to be more vulnerable, such as those with experience of being in care. This included discussion of harms out of the scope of this research, such as the role of cyberbullying in child criminal exploitation (CCE) and child sexual exploitation (CSE), including nude image sharing, county lines and gang-related activity. In some instances, this made it challenging to disentangle data relating specifically to the nature and impacts of cyberbullying from views on the nature and impacts of other online harms. Data that related explicitly to harms out of the scope of this research have not been included in the analysis.
- Though experienced in supporting children with direct experience of cyberbullying, the practitioners and school staff who took part in the research frequently reported limited knowledge of particular platforms and their specific functionalities.
- This study took a participant-led approach to exploring people's understanding of cyberbullying: a definition of cyberbullying was not provided to participants at any stage of the research process, such that their individual understanding, views, and experiences could be openly explored. This introduces some risk around the extent to which experiences, impacts and mitigations identified by participants are comparable. The research findings, however, suggest a broadly consistent definition of cyberbullying among participants, as similar themes were evident across the data.



---

## 1.6 Report overview

The following chapters set out the thematic findings of this research:

- Chapter 2 outlines participants' understanding of cyberbullying. This includes views on the content, activity and behaviour that constitutes cyberbullying, as well who is involved.
- Chapter 3 explores participants' views on cyberbullying pathways, including where bullying takes place online, and particular functionalities that can contribute to it.
- Chapter 4 sets out participants' views on the impacts of cyberbullying on children.
- Chapter 5 explores views and experiences of measures that are in place to prevent and respond to cyberbullying. This includes participants' views on facilitators and barriers to the effectiveness of existing mitigation measures.
- Chapter 6 brings together participant recommendations on how to address cyberbullying.

Where relevant and possible, each chapter explores patterns, similarities and differences in the views and experiences of different groups of children.

---

# Understanding of cyberbullying

---

This chapter draws on data from youth practitioners, school staff, and children who took part in focus groups to outline views on definitions of cyberbullying and the content, activity and behaviour involved. It then explores participants' views on who is affected by cyberbullying. Finally, perceptions of motivations underlying bullying behaviours are explored.

## 2.1 Describing cyberbullying

Youth practitioners, school staff and children provided largely consistent definitions of cyberbullying, namely that it comprises negative behaviour that causes harm or upset to someone else, conducted through a screen or device anywhere online.

*“Somebody who has the intention, or a group has the intention to [...] harass you online, and they try and make your life a lot worse.”* (Child aged 12-14, focus group)

*“Cyberbullying would be any kind of targeted abusive, bullying behaviour that happens on any kind of platform, inclusive of games, social media, emails, mobile phones.”* (Youth practitioner)

Across all participant groups, repetition was a key component of cyberbullying. In particular, school staff described the importance of being able to distinguish between single incidents of unkindness between pupils and more repetitious behaviour, to ensure appropriate and proportionate responses to cyberbullying.

*“I would say it's persistent and repeated, and consistently carrying on [...] continuous targeting over a period of time. Anyone can be unkind to somebody [...] but if they're targeting somebody and continuous[ly...] being unkind, then [that constitutes bullying].”* (Youth practitioner)

Some participants specified that this repetition could be from the perspective of the child affected, rather than relating to repeated behaviour by a particular individual. For example, a child might be targeted by multiple (sometimes unconnected) people, with a cumulative effect.

*“There's no defined timescale, but when we talk about repetition, what we'd say is the repetition is for the person experiencing it.”* (Youth Practitioner)

---

Some participants specified that the behaviour would have to be continued over the longer term to be defined as cyberbullying.

*“I think that I do tend to think of it as being longer-term [...] continual targeted abuse or unkind things focused on someone.”* (Youth practitioner)

Participants across the different groups suggested that behaviour had to be intentional to be classed as cyberbullying. There was, however, recognition that it could be challenging to distinguish between cyberbullying and behaviour that some children might describe as ‘jokes or ‘banter’, which could be unintentionally harmful. Participants identified this as an issue among children’s friendship groups in particular.

Some school staff and practitioners described aggressive and/or offensive communication as increasingly normalised between children. As such, they suggested that children might not recognise themselves as victims or perpetrators of cyberbullying until they had received specific education or training.

*“Sometimes young people just see it as a normal way of communicating with one another, that people will be mean and say mean things online”.* (School staff)

To navigate this complexity, youth practitioners stressed the importance of having a definition of cyberbullying comprised of multiple parts.

*“One thing that we’re really keen to focus on [...] is the difference between banter and bullying. Some people can say that something’s a joke, and actually it can be really hurtful. It’s very much about how that young person experiences it and that’s why it’s important to go back to repetition.”* (Youth practitioner)

Youth practitioners also highlighted an imbalance of power between those displaying and experiencing bullying behaviours as a component of cyberbullying. Participants described such imbalances of power as relating to the positionality of the children involved (including imbalances in physicality and/or perceived social status, for example), as well as the mechanisms of cyberbullying, such as if undertaken in a public forum.

Across participant groups, cyberbullying was typically not perceived as separate or happening in isolation from face-to-face bullying. Rather, participants described online and offline bullying as frequently interlinked, often through an in-person connection between the children involved (such as school).

*“I think that cyberbullying or online bullying is not separate from bullying. It’s not something that happens in isolation from face-to-face bullying. It’s usually a continuation of bullying which begins in person, often in school.”* (Youth practitioner)

As part of this, youth practitioners and school staff said that children did not generally distinguish between online and offline bullying. Accounts of children who took part in this research corroborated this view, with many of the examples and experiences involving a combination of online and offline interactions. The only exception to this was children’s experiences of cyberbullying that was done through anonymous accounts. (These are discussed throughout the following chapters).

Some school staff and youth practitioners also referred to other, and sometimes illegal, forms of harmful online behaviour as related to cyberbullying. These included abusive behaviour towards children by adults; chat room

---

discussions and the sharing of content around topics such as suicide, self-harm, and eating disorders; identity-based harassment; child sexual exploitation (including nude image sharing amongst peers); and criminal exploitation, such as county lines and related gang activity. Across these accounts, cyberbullying was described as often a mechanism for coercive and controlling behaviour, particularly targeted towards vulnerable children.

## 2.2 Views on prevalence of cyberbullying

Cyberbullying was viewed by school staff participants as a common occurrence, with some school staff and youth practitioners suggesting that its prevalence was increasing. This was partly attributed to children's increased access to devices and the online world, which some participants highlighted was particularly the case for younger age groups (including primary school-aged children). This was a view echoed by children.

*"It's becoming more frequent because people have access to it more readily. Internet's more affordable for more people. Young people [...] become savvy, so they know how to use the technology."* (Youth practitioner)

*"It's a much bigger problem now because there's more online things [...] loads of online games, websites [...] that people can go on now. So quite a lot of people are probably being bullied online now."* (Child aged 12-14, focus group)

## 2.3 Content, activity and behaviour viewed as cyberbullying

Youth practitioners, school staff and children identified a wide range of content, activity, and behaviour as cyberbullying. These fell into three broad categories:

- Exclusionary behaviour, such as somebody being removed or excluded from group chats, not being selected to see specific content shared on social media or being excluded or kicked out of online games.
- Posting/sharing content about somebody, including images, videos, voice notes/audio, and written content. This could include jokes, negative comments, rumours, and/or sharing information or content they had previously shared with that individual/group. Some participants discussed unflattering photographs or video screengrabs being shared, or videos being edited to portray somebody negatively. The taking and/or circulation of videos and images without the child's consent was also raised across participant groups.

*"A secretive way of talking behind people's back [...] they don't know it's happening. It's sort of like talking behind their back but online [...] where [others] can see it but the person [they're talking about] can't."* (Child aged 12-14, focus group)

- Directly targeting somebody, including posting critical comments on their social media posts, trolling on a range of online platforms, threats, and verbal abuse on gaming platforms.

*"Predominantly, [cyberbullying in online gaming comprises] things said on the headsets: comments [...] discriminatory views [...] attacking someone's ability to play the games, and assumptions about who they are because of how they're playing."* (Youth practitioner)

---

## 2.4 Who cyberbullying involves and affects

Youth practitioners, school staff and children said that cyberbullying often involved people with pre-existing connections, usually within friendship groups and from the same school.

*“We’ve found there are [...] personal relationships, or attachments between targets and perpetrators, normally starting within real-life interactions and then transcending into the online world [...] nine out of ten cases that we were aware of, there was a relationship beforehand, before it moved into the online world, but obviously there are the occasions where it can just happen remotely.”* (Youth practitioner)

Youth practitioners and children noted that cyberbullying could involve strangers too. Some children suggested that this was a more likely scenario, especially on gaming platforms or when, for example, a stranger saw a video or post.

Some school staff also reported that cyberbullying could sometimes spread and escalate to wider groups of children, such as at other schools.

*“We do get a lot of that where people from other schools that are in the group chats [and] will attack our pupils.”* (School staff)

In terms of the number of individuals involved, participants reported that cyberbullying could involve an individual or group targeting another individual or group, or be instigated by a single person and spread to a group.

*“[It could be] a group of friends, and [...] one person posts something. There are probably people around who are, like, supporting them posting it, and then when the person posts it, then everyone goes and comments on it, and supports it and backs them up, and laughs at it. I don’t know if people share it. You can’t tell that at all, but probably a lot of people are supporting it and commenting on it and liking it, and making it look like everyone is against that one person.”* (Child aged 12-14, focus group)

Participants noted that there was not always a clear-cut distinction between those displaying and those affected by cyberbullying behaviours. Some school staff said that there might not be a straightforward victim/aggressor dynamic: in some instances, both parties might be perceived as aggressors at different points. In addition, some youth practitioners noted that children who experienced cyberbullying would often also display bullying behaviours as a defence mechanism.

Participants acknowledged that cyberbullying could happen for any reason. However, across participant groups, perceived difference was identified as a key reason why children were cyberbullied. Specific reasons for targeting included:

- Physical appearance, including size, shape, hair or eye colour, height, personal style, facial expressions and anything that was felt to make somebody stand out from the 'norm'. Youth practitioners and children described beauty standards as contributing to the prevalence of appearance-based bullying, including in some instances sexual harassment.

*“An attractive teenager [...] just thought it was the norm, basically, getting hundreds of these messages of abuse. She said, ‘It’s just what me and my friends deal with.’”* (Youth practitioner)

- 
- Personality; appearing shy or quieter; being perceived as ‘weaker’ or ‘less able’ than others, more sensitive.
  - Interests and hobbies, including likes and preferences perceived by others to be immature. This included hobbies directly related to online activities, such as gaming.

*“You see a lot of people target those groups of people who like those certain things just because they dislike [them]. [...] Minecraft YouTubers [...] ended up over 2020 and 2021 being [...] incredibly targeted by people harassing them, cyberbullying them.”* (Youth practitioner)

- Attributes, experiences, or items that other children envied. For example, children who presented as from wealthier backgrounds with both parents at home may be perceived as more fortunate than other children in different circumstances.

*“I think it might be [...], a lot of it, because of jealousy.”* (Child aged 14-17; 1:1 interview)

- Personal disagreements, dislikes, and relationship breakdowns. Examples included children falling out with peers over the way in which they were perceived to talk to someone else in the social group.
- The language they spoke or the way they spoke. One example discussed by children was that not using slang or broken English was perceived as boring, or not good enough to join a group who used it.

*“If you don’t speak broken English, you’re not part of the gang [...] You won’t have friends [...] so it might be really hard to fit in. [...] You’re supposed to swear like them [...] so they might bully you for [not doing] that as well.”* (Child aged 12-14, focus group)

The extent to which different participant groups suggested children were cyberbullied specifically due to their protected characteristics varied. Some youth practitioners and school staff said children were commonly targeted on the basis of their race, ethnicity, disability, gender identity, sexual orientation and/or special educational needs. Some also highlighted that children could be targeted in relation to specific experiences and vulnerabilities other than protected characteristics, such as having an eating disorder, experience of being in care, or coming from a single-parent household.

*“Children with disabilities, those children with SEND, [are] more likely to experience bullying. Young carers experience more bullying than others. There has been [...] an increase in racist bullying online [...] We’ve seen much more racist language online [...] the motivations could be that people feel more open to say things when they’re online.”* (Youth practitioner)

The extent to which children were targeted specifically because of identity-based prejudices was, however, questioned by some youth practitioners. Some, for example, felt that it was difference in general, rather than any particular characteristics, that led to children being targeted.

*“Anyone that has a slight difference, unfortunately, could become that target [...] people that fit in, that blend in with everyone else [...] will be less likely to be singled out [...] gender or sexuality, standing out from the group, that potentially could make that person a target. It could be someone coming from [...] an ethnic minority [...] In my experience [...] being different in any way could be the reason why that person has been targeted.”* (Youth practitioner)

---

An alternative view among school staff was that children were generally very accepting of diversity, and that a zero-tolerance approach to identity-based bullying in school resulted in very few cases of children being targeted online due to their protected characteristics. The only reported exception to this was sexism and misogyny, which school staff reported as commonplace resulting in the frequent targeting of girls online.

*“I don't think we deal a lot with online racial abuse or online homophobic abuse because we've got that zero tolerance on that in school. I think the sexism is very different.”* (School staff)

Despite some school staff suggesting there tended to be low levels of targeted, identity-based cyberbullying (except for sexist or misogynistic cyberbullying), some did acknowledge racist, homophobic, ableist and transphobic language as a common feature of online interactions between children. This was attributed to children's frequent exposure to offensive language online, which was often repeated without full understanding of its meaning and significance.

*“The unfortunate thing with TikTok and social media is that they're learning things that are going on out in the world [but] they have no idea what it's all about [...] we have had [cyberbullying incidents involving] comments that have been racist, but [that's] unbeknown to that individual [making the comments]: they don't know what that [terminology] means.”* (School staff)

## 2.5 Differing experiences across different groups

There was limited discussion of ways in which experiences of cyberbullying might differ across groups of children. Among the youth practitioners and school staff who suggested differences might be present, gender, age, and experience of being in care were highlighted:

- Gender: Some youth practitioners felt cyberbullying was more prevalent among girls than boys, and school staff commented that it could be focused on female friendships. However, school staff also questioned whether it might simply be more visible among girls, due to the nature of their friendship groups and willingness to report to the school. Pressure on girls to maintain a certain appearance and a perception that they were more likely to post photos and therefore become targets for scrutiny online, were also raised.

*“I have had young women say, ‘People will make fun of you if you are seen wearing the same outfit twice’, and [they are] picked over for their appearance if they're posting images online, or images were shared of them out.”* (School staff)

In contrast, other youth practitioners reported that most cases they had experienced involved boys. Having a low place in the hierarchical structure of their social group was reported as a common reason why boys were cyberbullied.

- Age: Cyberbullying was felt to affect a range of age groups. Some participants felt it was most common among children in secondary school. As part of this, some youth practitioners suggested that friendships amongst secondary school aged children tended to be quite intense, and that cyberbullying related to friendship breakdowns was therefore more common for this age group. Across groups, some participants suggested that cyberbullying increasingly affected younger children, for example those in primary school, due to increased access to devices and the internet, and limited understanding about how to behave online.

- 
- Children with experience of being in care: Some youth practitioners suggested that children with experience of being in care may be more susceptible to cyberbullying due to instability inherent to their lives.

*"It's in those situations where the internet can be often the only stability that they've had if they've had a variety of carers. Also, their friends know how to harm them by putting information online, sharing, so it's like a normalised experience. One example is a young person where they were getting 150 toxic messages a day on [a video sharing platform], and they just said, 'That's the norm'."* (Youth practitioner)

## 2.6 Motivations of cyberbullying

A range of motivations for cyberbullying were described across participant groups. These fell into the broad categories set out below.

- Negative personal circumstances and a desire for power and control: Participants across all groups noted that bullying could be triggered by individuals' circumstances and insecurities, and as a way of projecting negative emotions. School staff and youth practitioners suggested that a desire for control might relate to an individual's own personal difficulties, including issues around mental health and emotional wellbeing. Children and school staff noted that bullying could also be motivated by envy of others' attributes. Examples included appearance and socioeconomic status.

*"[A reason people bully others is to] feel higher, to push people down, make yourself feel more powerful and better than others."* (Child aged 12-14, focus group)

- Social pressure or desire for group acceptance: Children and school staff spoke about peer pressure to support friends by joining in with bullying among friendship groups, as well as 'showing off' motivated by a desire for popularity or perceived positive social status. Bullying behaviour exhibited by peers could also create an environment where this was viewed as more acceptable.

*"I think there's a culture [...] especially [in] high school where if someone's different and someone says something to them because they're different, then loads of people will start agreeing just for popularity, or just because everyone else is saying it, so then it becomes a thing where that person is singled out. Then it's just like, everyone goes against them in school."* (Child aged 14-17; 1:1 interview)

- A lack of repercussions or consequences for behaviour online: Children attributed this to a lack of adult presence or supervision, being 'behind a screen', and the potential to operate anonymously in the online space.

*"I feel like it would be easier online because they don't need to face the consequences [...] online it's so easy to get away with."* (Child aged 14-16, focus group)

Linked to this, school staff, youth practitioners and children said that limited parental / guardian supervision of online behaviour could be a facilitator of cyberbullying, as cyberbullying could be less visible than offline bullying and go undetected for extended periods of time. Some school staff also spoke about 'inconsistent parenting', and a lack of monitoring of children's phone use of platforms, for example.

Motivations for cyberbullying could differ depending on a range of factors, including the online platform being used and whether there were single or multiple aggressors. For example, in relation to gaming platforms,



---

children discussed annoyance at perceived substandard playing as a trigger for cyberbullying. Alternatively, cyberbullying on social media was often seen as relating to differences in opinion or targeting children who were considered different due to particular behaviour or appearance including, for example, due to visible protected characteristics.

Alongside the motivations described above, participants suggested that wider media and public discourse that highlighted tensions between different communities and/or groups could encourage certain types of cyberbullying, such as abuse based on gender and gender identity, sexuality, or race. Children and youth practitioners also discussed the targeting of famous people, which some felt was something that could contribute to normalisation of negative behaviour online.

*“Unfortunately we live in a culture where that sort of thing is prevalent. They [children] are seeing it in the media [...] and trolling of celebrities [is] very accessible [on] [...]. They see celebrities experiencing [...] and suffering from it. It sort of brings it all into their daily world”. (Youth practitioner)*

---

# Cyberbullying pathways

---

This chapter sets out participants' views on where cyberbullying takes place online. It goes on to explore views on specific features and functionalities of online platforms perceived to contribute to cyberbullying. These thematic findings are drawn from data from all participant groups as relevant. However, given their higher levels of familiarity and experience with the online spaces, tools and experiences that are discussed (including direct experiences of cyberbullying among those who participated in 1:1 interviews), the views and experiences of children are a primary focus in this section.

## 3.1 Where cyberbullying takes place online

Children, school staff and practitioners reported that cyberbullying happened wherever children were interacting online:

*"It can happen on any platform [...] where you've got direct contact with people and the ability to post whatever you want."* (Child aged 14-17; 1:1 interview)

Platforms that participants mentioned spanned the range of social media, video sharing platforms, messaging platforms, online forums, and gaming platforms. Examples included WhatsApp, Snapchat, TikTok, Instagram, PS4 and X-box live (including specific games such as Roblox, Minecraft, Fortnite, Call of Duty), and Discord. Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, WebComics, Omegle, and email accounts were also mentioned.<sup>4</sup>

Considering prevalence on particular platforms, participants said that cyberbullying tended to concentrate on whichever platforms were popular at the time, where it was possible for users to interact.

*"The majority of young people today use Snapchat [...] everyone is on there. If you want to get at someone, and you want more people to see it, that [...] would be the place to do it."* (Child aged 14-17; 1:1 interview)

---

<sup>4</sup> At the time of reporting Omegle was no longer in operation.

---

Some participants suggested age would affect where children might experience cyberbullying, as their access to – and the popularity of – different platforms varied between different age groups.

*“For the younger [...] children who have just started to get phones, I think [cyberbullying happens on] WhatsApp groups [...] because] they're not really allowed to have stuff like Instagram and Snapchat. It depends on their parents, but I know [for] me personally, when I was in [...] Year 5, when everyone started to get phones, that's where stuff would happen.”* (Child aged 14-17; 1:1 interview)

Participants said that cyberbullying sometimes occurred on a single platform but could also happen across platforms. This included children being targeted in more than one place, as well as content from one platform being reshared to or discussed on another.

*“I was added to an Instagram group chat and a Snapchat one separately, where they said loads of horrible things. It was like, multiple people as well, not just one.”* (Child aged 14-17; 1:1 interview)

Some youth practitioners suggested the platform's nature and purpose might affect the type of cyberbullying that took place. For example, negative comments around people's appearance were considered more likely to be made on image-based social media, in contrast to gaming platforms where the focus was often on gameplay. Some children who had experienced cyberbullying on gaming platforms described criticism focused on their gaming skills; however, others had experienced other types of bullying in these spaces, including racist comments.

*“They re-evaluated why they lost [over the headset microphone], and [...] because I was out first, it kind of made me vulnerable. So, when it happened, they were, like, swearing, saying, 'Oh, we've lost,' and [...] swearing [at me].”* (Child aged 14-17; 1:1 interview)

### **3.2 How different functionalities contribute to cyberbullying**

Participants mentioned a range of platform functionalities as contributing to cyberbullying.

#### **Setting up accounts**

This ease with which accounts could be set up was something children said enabled cyberbullying. Children reported that it was easy to create accounts on most online platforms, often without verification of the user's identity being required.

*“They could [...] just make another account and add me back if they really wanted to [...] there's not big things in place to stop things like that. You can [...] make a new account, and [...] be able to add someone to a group chat [again] quite easily.”* (Child aged 14-17; 1:1 interview)

Children noted that on some platforms, multiple accounts could easily be created by a single user. This was seen as enabling people to create alias or fake accounts, from which they could bully someone without risking the repercussions they might face if their identity was known.

*“You can have as many Instagram accounts as you would like, which means you can just have so many fake accounts or accounts for different reasons. Whereas on TikTok you can have up to three accounts per device.”* (Child aged 14-17; 1:1 interview)

---

Participants across groups noted that communicating from 'behind a screen', sometimes anonymously, made it easier for people to make comments they would not say in circumstances where they were more likely to be held accountable.

*"They might just think they can get away with it [...] if they're anonymous online [...] they'll say something knowing that they can't get told off for it."* (Child aged 14-17; 1:1 interview)

Some children said it was easier for users to conceal or falsify their identities on some platforms than others. This was considered easiest on platforms where normal use did not involve posting anything identifiable or personal content where other users can obtain a sense of who the user is.

*"On Snapchat, if somebody adds you, they could be anybody: you don't know [...] they could lead you to believe that they're someone else. Snapchat makes that really easy to do. On Instagram you have posts [...] so people can see who you are, kind of. On Snapchat, you can be anyone you want. All they have is the Bitmoji feature, which you can make [...] whatever you want."* (Child aged 14-17; 1:1 interview)

Some children also said that the ability to set up multiple, unverified accounts allowed people to circumvent any restrictions imposed on an account they owned by switching to another one. This was perceived to reduce the deterrence effect of cyberbullying mitigation measures such as account suspensions and bans.

### **User Communications**

Participants reported that few details were needed to find and add contacts. Children said it was easy to find people, for example by searching for basic details such as names, or via 'suggested contact' features. Some platforms also allowed people to message each other immediately without recipient permission, reducing individuals' control over who could contact them and the kinds of messages to which they might be exposed.

*"On Instagram, one bad thing is that you can private message anyone, if they don't have you blocked."* (Child aged 14-17; 1:1 interview)

Participants said that interactive elements such as direct messaging and comment functionalities facilitated cyberbullying. Examples included children being sent written messages or voice notes or being verbally abused over voice chat via gaming headsets. Interactive elements also included communication in group chats or public posts, where others could see comments. Children said that on some platforms, they could be targeted in group chats to which they could be added without giving permission, and/or people could be invited to join existing groups where conflict or bullying was already taking place.

*"[Cyberbullying happens on] Snapchat, Instagram or [...] WhatsApp group chats that people add you to, and you can't choose not to be added."* (Child; 1:1 interview)

Practitioners suggested that group or public posts could encourage a 'piling on' effect, a normalisation of negativity, or audience-seeking behaviours.<sup>5</sup> Some youth practitioners' view was that cyberbullying being visible to others could be more harmful when compared to one-to-one cyberbullying.

---

<sup>5</sup> This includes enacting purposeful behaviour in visible spaces with the intention to elicit attention and audience.

---

*“That rumour can be screenshotted and shared on and [...] on onto multiple other social media platforms, something can escalate extremely quickly from nothing. [...] A group chat can suddenly be created with an entire classfull of people and that rumour spread from the privacy of everyone’s own homes.”* (Youth practitioner)

Knowing that other members of a group chat could be notified if they left it was seen by participants as something that could reduce children’s willingness to distance themselves from spaces in which they were targeted or witnessing negative behaviour.

### **Saving and sharing functionalities**

Participants mentioned a number of features that enabled collecting and sharing of content about a person. The ability to share original posts, take and share screenshots or recordings, and autosave content to phone galleries, meant people were able to share content from or about someone to other sites and users without them knowing. This could include content from private accounts to which they had access, being shared either on their own individual accounts or to group chats.

*“It could be, like, someone knew something embarrassing [...] and] posts something about it, and then somebody sees that, and then because it’s really funny [...] it’s like a continuous chain of people [sharing it] to make fun.”* (Child aged 12-14, focus group)

Participants also discussed content being edited negatively to influence how children were seen.

*“I would post things and that and people would just repost it and that and try and make memes out of it. [...] I would record a video and they would screenshot certain parts.”* (Child; aged 14-17; 1:1 interview)

Participants felt that some platforms encouraged response/sharing. Mentioned examples included reaction (‘duet’) videos on TikTok; the share button on Instagram; and the ability to tag other contacts in comment threads. Participants said this could contribute to the speed of spread of cyberbullying content.

*“On Snapchat, some people put [pictures being shared around] on their stories, and then other people screenshot the story, and it just keeps going and going.”* (Child aged 14-17; 1:1 interview)

### **Time limited content, save and share notifications**

Participants in all groups discussed two features that they felt limited children’s ability to collect evidence of cyberbullying and were felt to embolden people to cyberbully others. Disappearing messages was the first of these – examples included Snapchat messages, which children said delete in 24 hours or immediately after viewing; and Instagram Stories, which disappeared after a day. School staff commented that a lack of access to evidence made it much more difficult for them to intervene, hold perpetrators of bullying to account, and resolve issues between children.

*“If they’ve bullied someone and then the messages delete [...] if someone [...] says, ‘They’ve done this,’ they have no evidence of it, so it won’t lead back to them.”* (Child aged 14-17; 1:1 interview)

Screenshot notifications and save notifications also discouraged children from saving evidence, as the other person would know these steps had been taken, which might result in escalation of the bullying they were

---

experiencing. Some children described using separate devices to take a photograph of a screen as a way around this.

However, some benefits of these features were also discussed. Some participants suggested that notifications limited others' opportunity to save and use content against someone, as they would be aware that these actions had been taken. Other participants suggested that not having to see harmful messages repeatedly, because they would disappear, might reduce the impact that they had on the child experiencing cyberbullying.

### **Restricted access**

Participants also discussed exclusion as a form of cyberbullying. Restricted access to particular areas on online platforms could be exclusionary and/or used as spaces to be abusive behind someone's back. Participants' accounts described exclusion as occurring in various ways, including the use of private channels, the ability to conceal certain posts from specific users and separate group chats. Examples from children's direct experience included being kicked out of games and/or groups on PlayStation, and people talking about someone behind their back on group chats or other private channels to which they were not added.

*"He'd join the [gaming] party and say, "Oh, why's he here?", then just kick me [out...] He'd just do that every time. ... You can get promoted as a leader, and then you can just do whatever you want, like [...] remove people from the party and stuff." (Child aged 14-17; 1:1 interview)*

### **Location-based functionality**

School staff and children reported that some platforms had location sharing functionality that displayed individuals' geographic location to their contacts on the platform. Participants felt that, because people's physical location could be identified, this functionality could encourage escalation to offline bullying (or associated threats). Some school staff suggested that children might often forget their location would be visible on platforms.

*"[children have] gone to fights because they've been able to track that person on Snap Maps, and I think they forget that they're trackable on that sort of thing." (School staff)*

---

# Impacts of cyberbullying

---

This chapter outlines participants' views on the impacts of cyberbullying on children in UK. This includes views on impacts across different groups of children, as well as comparisons between cyberbullying and bullying experienced offline. As discussed in Appendix A, questions about the impacts of cyberbullying were not asked in focus groups with children. The findings contained in this chapter are therefore drawn from data collection with youth practitioners and school staff, as well as from one-to-one interviews with children with direct experiences of cyberbullying.

## 4.1 Impacts of cyberbullying

Youth practitioners, school staff and children reported a wide range of negative impacts resulting from cyberbullying. These included negative impacts on emotional wellbeing and mental and physical health, as well as on social participation and engagement (online and offline).

The children who took part in one-to-one interviews described experiencing a wide range of negative emotions as a direct result of their experiences of cyberbullying. These included feeling upset, sadness, annoyance, and anger, as well as feelings of fear. Feelings of fear were attributed to concern around bullying content spreading across platforms and wider groups, being simultaneously targeted by multiple people (such as in group chat scenarios), and offline consequences such as further bullying or physical assault.

*“For me, I'd say the group is more scary because it's more people, but I'd definitely say I've seen situations where it's one-to-one bullying and, like, four people versus one person kind of bullying.”* (Child aged 14-17; 1:1 interview)

Staff, practitioners, and children who took part in interviews reported cyberbullying negatively impacting children's mental health. Participants' accounts reported mental health impacts during finite periods of active cyberbullying, as well as over longer periods of time as after-effects.

*“Never underestimate the impact [of cyberbullying] on emotional well-being and mental health in terms of anxiety, [...] withdrawal, [...] even depression and some other more significant mental health conditions.”* (Youth practitioner)

---

Participants across groups referred to impacts of cyberbullying on children's mental health, including specific mental health conditions such as anxiety and depression.

*"My mental health wasn't doing very well. Now I have anxiety and things from it. So, it's – that's how it really affected me."* (Child aged 14-17; 1:1 interview)

Some youth practitioners and school staff also noted that the emotional and mental health impacts of cyberbullying could affect the physical health of children. Examples included children experiencing disrupted sleep, loss of appetite and poor hygiene. Another suggestion from youth practitioners was that increases in substance misuse could also be a consequence, particularly where cyberbullying resulted in children becoming more isolated.

*"Appetite, sleep, self-hygiene, [...] general wellbeing can all be impacted by cyberbullying [...] If they're becoming more withdrawn [...] indoors all the time [...] their sleep is really erratic, which obviously impacts on their mood [...]. Often then substance misuse increases – usually smoking more weed [...] So [there is...] a range of different things [...] I would connect [...] to emotional wellbeing that have physical impacts on them."* (Youth practitioner)

School staff and youth practitioners also said that, in their experience, a small number of children engaged in forms of self-harm and suicidal ideation as a result of more prolonged experiences of cyberbullying. This included specifically girls engaging in behaviours related to eating disorders when cyberbullying related to weight and/or physical appearance.

*"It has got to the extreme where, if that continuous cyberbullying has gone on, that all they want to do is just take their own life."* (Youth practitioner)

Youth practitioners also noted that children who experienced bullying (both online and off) sometimes cyberbullied others. Practitioners suggested these children used the anonymity afforded by online platforms in an attempt to assert power and control.

*"People experiencing bullying] will then turn to the online world as a way of pushing it on to someone else, so that becomes their driving force."* (Youth practitioner)

Participants in all groups described cyberbullying as detrimental to children's confidence and self-esteem. Some youth practitioners suggested that the impacts of cyberbullying on these could be particularly severe, due to the developing nature of children's identities and resilience.

*"If you think about where they are developmentally, they're not resilient, they don't have the tools and the skills to seek out help or to feel confident in their identity, or to let it wash over them. They are still developing, and their brains are still developing, so the impact can be huge."* (Youth practitioner)

Social withdrawal was a reported consequence of cyberbullying's impact on children's confidence and self-esteem. For some children, this included altered use of online platforms, including changing the type of content and activity they shared or engaged with online, as well as temporarily or permanently disengaging from online platforms. Those who temporarily or permanently disengaged from online platforms as a result of cyberbullying described subsequent experiences of social isolation, attributed to a loss of contact with friends and/or an inability to engage in their usual online activities.



---

*“I deleted all my social medias [...] I refused to go on any [...] My friends were telling me, “Oh, you should go on Snapchat” [and my response was] like, “No, I’m not getting anything back because I don’t want it.” [...] In some ways, I found it helpful; in some ways, I didn’t, because I was distancing myself so I couldn’t really speak to many of my friends online.” (Child aged 14-17; 1:1 interview)*

Participants across groups also described social withdrawal from physical spaces as a result of cyberbullying. This included a reluctance to leave their homes to socialise with friends, as well as non-attendance in education, employment, and training. Related to this, school staff and youth practitioners described children’s educational attainment being negatively impacted by cyberbullying, with potential effects on their levels of qualification and employment opportunities later in life.

*“I didn’t really want to go back to school for a bit. I was like, ‘Oh, loads of people are going to see it, they’re going to taunt me about it’, so I was like, ‘I just don’t want to go’. I tried to stay home. I just didn’t want to really go in.” (Child aged 14-17; 1:1 interview)*

School staff and youth practitioners also provided accounts of the impacts of cyberbullying extending into adulthood. This included long-term detrimental effects on mental health and wellbeing, as well as challenges developing trusting relationships, including ongoing risk of victimisation.

*“Over a period of time, [someone experiencing cyberbullying] is [...] impacted from that long after it’s been taking place, and that’s where you start to look at the long-term implications of bullying [...] That confidence has been shattered, that self-worth has been shattered. They’re finding themselves more isolated. So, the knock-on effect can be dramatic, and obviously, in lots of cases, that could even move into adulthood.” (Youth Practitioner)*

A few factors were thought to influence the impacts of cyberbullying. School staff and children suggested cyberbullying among friendship groups had more negative impact than cyberbullying perpetrated by strangers.

*“When it’s random people, I wouldn’t mind, but when it’s someone that I either have a relationship with or that I know [...] That’s worse.” (Child aged 14-17; 1:1 interview)*

School staff also suggested the impacts of cyberbullying could be more severe when it involved people who also had face-to-face contact, in part because online mitigation measures such as blocking had a more limited effect.

*“If it’s a random person, they can block them. It’s more difficult if they are someone [...] they are in a friendship group with, or that they see at school.” (School staff)*

Youth practitioners and school staff suggested that the extent to which the duration of bullying influenced the severity of its impacts varied. Some suggested that the longer cyberbullying continued, the higher the chance of it having a negative effect, including into adulthood. Others suggested that while some children might be able to brush off one-off incidents, others might be more significantly affected.

## **4.2 Impacts of cyberbullying on different groups of children**

The extent to which participants outlined similarities or differences in the impacts of cyberbullying across different groups of children was limited. Broadly, participants felt that the impacts of cyberbullying on children

---

varied on an individual basis rather than in relation to specific characteristics. Factors such as children's temperament and/or resilience were also perceived to influence their experiences.

*"[Impacts] depend on the resilience of a young person [...] a short-term [experience] can really significantly affect one person, whereas another might [...] feel the impact, but not as significantly."*  
(Youth practitioner)

Some school staff and youth practitioners expressed reluctance to suggest the impact of cyberbullying might vary for different groups, to avoid the implication of victim-blaming or minimising the significance of cyberbullying by suggesting that severe impacts were limited to smaller groups of children.

*"I would say that it's important to recognise the severity of [cyberbullying] for the most extreme cases because if we find ways of thinking about it being less impactful or [...] victims being more resilient [in] particular groups, then I think we could very easily minimise it as an issue."* (Youth practitioner)

Among youth practitioners and school staff who did suggest that the impacts of cyberbullying varied among different groups, gender was considered to be an influencing factor. Some suggested that cyberbullying was experienced most often by girls. For some school and youth practitioners this was attributed to a view that the cyberbullying girls experienced tended to relate to breakdown in friendships and/or focus on their physical appearance, which could be particularly impactful on their confidence and self-esteem. Some youth practitioners and school staff, however, suggested boys were affected by cyberbullying equally to girls, but were less likely to express the impacts this had on them. As a result, boys were considered less likely to garner the attention of supportive adults and peers around them.

*"We talk about this a lot [...] 'Boys don't cry'; 'Be a man'; 'Man up'; 'Don't be upset' – it's seen as being effeminate, it's not seen as being manly. I think boys superficially maybe don't express how hard things are for them, but it doesn't mean that [they are] not. I think we just have created a society where we socialise boys not to talk about feeling vulnerable, or hurt, or under attack."* (School staff)

*"I rarely hear about this with young men, and it's not because [...] they're [not] experiencing it. I think it's because it is harder for them to speak up, and boys are encouraged generally to laugh things off a lot more."* (Youth practitioner)

Some school staff and youth practitioners suggested pupils with special educational needs or disabilities (SEND) might experience challenges processing and understanding their experiences of cyberbullying. Some youth practitioners also described how the impacts of cyberbullying could compound the disproportionately negative outcomes already experienced by children with SEND, such as furthering school absence and associated impacts on educational attainment.

Related to this, some school staff and youth practitioners reported that the impacts of cyberbullying could be worse when they contributed to children's wider experiences of discrimination and marginalisation. Examples provided included racist and ableist bullying.

*"What you tend to find is that children just go, 'This is just what happens to me because of who I am. I'm a disabled person, so I'm going to be bullied. That's what happens in my life'. That's where [...] the damage [...] can be very severe."* (Youth practitioner)

---

Finally, some children with direct experience of cyberbullying described age as a protective factor against the impacts of cyberbullying. Children said that, as they got older, they and their peers developed greater resilience and engaged less in the spread and escalation of cyberbullying content, activity, and behaviour.

*“It’s more [...] the younger ones who [...] take more offence to stuff like this [...] it’s around the ages of, like, 11 to 13 where they always are getting into fights [...] and then they spread stuff [online].”* (Child aged 14-17; 1:1 interview)

### **4.3 Impacts of cyberbullying compared to offline bullying**

When asked to compare impacts of cyberbullying to bullying offline, participants across groups noted that the two were interrelated, and that children often experienced them simultaneously. However, participants said that the impacts of cyberbullying could be more severe than those of bullying that took place offline, though this would vary depending on the content, activity and behaviour involved.

A key influence on perceived impacts related to the pervasiveness of cyberbullying, related to children’s constant engagement with online platforms. Participants contrasted this to offline only bullying, where interactions were contained to particular locations in which children were together in person, and those being bullied might have more opportunity to distance themselves.

*“The always-on nature of technology and those platforms means that it becomes more pervasive across all areas of the young person’s life. It’s not like they go home and they’re away from those people and those interactions. There’s that constant pressure to need to respond.”* (Youth practitioner)

The permanence of cyberbullying content, and the risk of it being widely shared, were identified by youth practitioners and school staff as other reasons why cyberbullying could have more severe impacts than offline bullying. This was described by some as the continual re-victimisation of children, contributing to ongoing experiences of trauma.

*“[Cyberbullying content] is long-standing; it’s been disseminated more widely [...] and it] circulated and remains online for quite some time, which causes this additional trauma and impact to [the child] and others around them.”* (Youth practitioner)

Children with direct experiences of cyberbullying reinforced this view, expressing concerns around the speed of content being distributed, and the fear of not knowing who had seen or shared.

*“I think it’s worse because it goes around faster, and then when you go in the next day, and you don’t know about it, everyone will be looking at you.”* (Child aged 14-17; 1:1 interview)

Children with direct experience of cyberbullying also noted that people could be targeted in more varied ways online than in person. This included engaging not only in direct, targeted harassment, but also the creation and sharing of material. As part of this, practitioners said that bullying behaviour tended to be more aggressive online than in person.

*“I’d probably say [...] cyberbullying is worse, because there’s more things you can do to a person online... You can make [something up] and stuff like that, or just make them sad, or comment on what their appearance looks like.”* (Child aged 14-17; 1:1 interview)

---

Participants across groups also noted that anonymity could make the impacts of cyberbullying worse than those of offline bullying. This included concerns that mitigation measures might be less effective where the identity of online perpetrators was unknown. Not knowing who was involved could also exacerbate children's anxiety and unease, offline as well as online.

*“Some people don't realise. They think, ‘Oh, bullying in real life is a lot harder than online [...] being bullied [offline] is harder because you have to see the person’ – the thing is, if they're online, you don't know who the person is, and they could carry on saying it [...] there [might] not [be] places for you to block them.”* (Child aged 14-17; 1:1 interview)

In contrast, some participants suggested cyberbullying was less impactful than bullying that took place in person. Some children, for example, suggested that online activity (such as comments and posts) had a relatively limited impact on children, in contrast to experiences of physical assault, which offline bullying could involve.

*“Obviously you're not face to face and [they're] just typing things or posting things, so it might have less of an impact on you.”* (Child aged 14-17; 1:1 interview)

*“One of the main differences offline would be the potential physical element of bullying, as in physical force, essentially [...] that [...] physical element doesn't happen online.”* (Youth practitioner)

---

# Existing measures to mitigate cyberbullying

---

This chapter sets out thematic findings on measures in place to prevent and respond to cyberbullying. This includes participants' views on facilitators and barriers to the effectiveness of mitigations, where available. Data is drawn from all participant groups. The extent to which adult participants had knowledge of and could comment on mitigation measures used by children, or platform-specific features and their effectiveness in protecting children, however, was more limited. This chapter therefore foregrounds children's views, given their greater experience of specific online platforms and tools available when this research was conducted.

Participants reported a range of existing measures that could mitigate cyberbullying. These included proactive moderation by platforms; parental controls; privacy settings and user controls; disappearing messages and user action notifications; and tools to restrict, remove, block or report contacts.

## 5.1 Proactive moderation by platforms

Children reported that some platforms proactively moderated content that was being posted by users. Examples included platforms monitoring video uploads and flagging and/or removing those that were considered inappropriate. Participants also described, for example, TikTok's comments review/approval system, which could be triggered by potentially offensive language and require the recipient's approval before comments were publicly posted.

"Sometimes if they suspect a comment is bad, then you can choose whether you want to delete it or have it. I think they should do that with every comment." (Child aged 14-17; 1:1 interview)

Practitioners also mentioned platform's sorting comments to deprioritise or hide negative comments, which was felt to discourage negative commenting motivated by 'clout' or desire for an audience.

*"When it's right down at the bottom of the list of 100 comments, then [...] they're not even going to see it to be able to comment on it. If [...] every time you comment [...] your comment is deleted, it's just not worth saying it anymore."* (Youth practitioner)

---

Participants' accounts suggested that effective moderation relied on platforms' awareness of and attention to cyberbullying, which participants suggested could vary. Participants noted that the sheer volume of content uploaded presented a significant challenge to moderation, and that more effective monitoring processes would likely require investment in additional staff or other resource to manage.

*"I think [cyberbullying] it's less [present] on TikTok [...] As soon as TikTok notices it, it deletes it straightaway. I feel like other things, like Roblox and things, you can still get it and it's not really something they currently handle that well."* (Child aged 14-17; 1:1 interview)

## 5.2 Parental controls

Practitioners and children discussed tools and controls for parents to limit access to platforms and functionalities or supervise children online. Examples included TikTok's family pairing mode, which enabled parental supervision by linking child and parent accounts, and an under-13s version of Roblox, which had parental controls and limited platform features (for example, excluding a chat function). Children also mentioned external applications parents could use to limit children's access to specific platforms or content:

*"My mum can look at my screen time and [...] for apps [...] I want to download; I have to ask permission [...] from her. She can block me from getting some apps or [...] viewing some content [...] I need to request it."* (Child aged 12-14, focus group)

Three key barriers to the use of parental controls were identified. These included a lack of awareness among parents; some children's unwillingness to make use of parental controls; and inconsistent applicability of parental controls across some platforms – some children, for example, reported content blocking features not applying to Snapchat. Some children took for granted that parents would have oversight – particularly for younger children – of access to platforms and particular content. However, children also mentioned teasing about the extent to which parents restricted their online activity by others in school who perceived this as 'babyish'. Echoing this, practitioners noted that children of secondary school age were less likely than those in younger age groups to welcome parental supervision and said some children would deliberately turn off or even circumvent safety controls because they wanted to use the full functionality of platforms.

## 5.3 Privacy settings and user controls

All groups mentioned privacy settings limiting who could see and interact with them online as an important mitigation to cyberbullying. Some school staff and youth practitioners said that some platforms defaulted to highest settings at set-up, meaning that enabling lower levels of privacy had to be an active choice for user.

Examples mentioned by children included WhatsApp being limited to people who had their number; private accounts on social media platforms such as TikTok and Instagram; Snapchat requiring users to review and accept friend requests before they could message one another; and the option to set PlayStation accounts to 'closed' so that their name and profile picture were visible only to those added as friends. These features limited access to known contacts or gave children choice about who could 'add' them.

Participants also discussed features to determine how others could interact with them and their posts. These included switching comments off, disabling sharing for specific posts, and using options to limit access and/or interactivity to narrower groups (for example, 'Close Friends' in Instagram or private stories in Snapchat) or to shorter timeframes (such as 'view once' photo sharing on WhatsApp).

---

*“[On] TikTok [...] you can turn off comments and [...] I think you can turn off sharing as well [...] so no one can share your post.”* (Child aged 14-16, focus group)

Children also noted that on some platforms such as TikTok, comment restriction features could be used to filter out selected terms (so that comments including these words/phrases would immediately be deleted):

*“If you have specific things that people comment on a lot, you can ban that. [...For example,] you can go into your settings and you can block out the word ‘hair’ [...] then if someone tries to comment and they use that word [...] the comment immediately gets deleted, and you don’t see it.”* (Child aged 14-16, focus group)

Views on how straightforward this was were mixed, however. Some suggested that it would be easy for people to circumvent restrictions.

*“I don’t think it’s really effective, because it doesn’t really filter comments. You have to be really specific [in setting filter terms...] and [...] they could [...] just change the wording slightly.”* (Child aged 14-17; 1:1 interview)

## **5.4 Screenshots and notifications**

Functionality such as notifications when another user took a screenshot of their content (a default feature of Snapchat) was identified as a potential mitigation measure to cyberbullying. Some participants suggested that it would discourage people from taking and sharing content, as well as making it difficult to do so without the person knowing.

*“If someone was to screenshot a picture or a video, it [Snapchat] does give you a notification telling you that they’ve screenshotted it. Say you were to send a picture and they save it in the chat, it will notify you that that’s all happened. Then you’re not completely oblivious if someone has a picture of you. You’re aware it’s happening.”* (Child aged 14-16, focus group)

A contrasting view, however, was that the ability to take screenshots, screen recordings, and/or save other people’s content enabled those experiencing cyberbullying to gather evidence to prove what had happened. Knowing that notifications would be sent to the person bullying them could deter children from doing this and undermine their ability to prove what they had been subjected to.

## **5.5 Restricting or removing contacts**

### **Muting, unfollowing, and removing followers**

Participants discussed several ways in which contacts could be restricted or removed. As well as blocking (see below), these options included muting, unfollowing/unfriending, and removing contacts from their followers. Participants reported these as ways in which people could reduce their exposure to others’ content or comments.

Key facilitators for restricting and removing contacts included the ease with which this could be done, and the perception that people were unlikely to be able to tell the action had been taken. Some suggested that, because users were unlikely to know if they were muted, unfollowed, or removed, this approach was less likely to result in escalation. This contrasted with blocking, which participants said would be more noticeable and therefore more

---

likely to result in escalation of bullying behaviours. For some participants, it was also important that the action did not inhibit their own use of the platform. For example, ‘unadding’ somebody as a friend on a PlayStation might be preferable to blocking them, because the person would no longer be able to message them directly, but they would still be able to play in the same games, for example, with mutual friends.

## 5.6 Blocking

Being able to block other users was seen by some as an important aspect of user control. Children talked about blocking giving them power to ‘cut off’ somebody who was cyberbullying them, restricting that person’s ability to make contact or access their content. This included removing the ability for the other user to message them or send a friend request to reinitiate contact.

*“If you block someone, then there’s literally no communication and there’s nothing they can do to message you or get to you or anything.”* (Child aged 14-17; 1:1 interview)

Some children described making use of blocking to remove themselves from a situation to avoid escalation. Some had also used it as a temporary measure, unblocking the account when they felt tensions had cooled or issues been resolved.

Participants reported that blocking functionality differed across platforms, and it was perceived to be more effective in some instances than others. One key difference related to whether blocking restricted all the accounts held by someone on that platform, or solely the individual account that had been directly involved. Another was whether blocking affected either party’s ability to participate in any groups in which they might both be involved on the platform.

Children reported that on Instagram, for example, blocking somebody could include any new accounts they might go on to create. This contrasted with other platforms, where only their existing account could be blocked. Instagram’s more comprehensive option was welcomed by children, who felt it reduced the likelihood of a blocked user regaining access to them.

*“Instagram [can] block all accounts that they’re going to make [...] so they won’t have any access to you even if you make a new account. On Snapchat [...] if [...] they make [and add you from] a new account and you’re adding back everyone on your ‘Add back’ list, and you add them back [...] then the whole problem happens again.”* (Child aged 12-14, focus group)

Children described a number of factors that influenced decisions about blocking somebody. Three key barriers to use of blocking were evident (discussed in the following paragraphs): ease of discovery, loss of access to information, and impacts on their own experiences.

The perception that somebody could tell if they had been blocked was a key barrier to using blocking functions for some. School staff and children said that it was relatively easy for people to tell they had been blocked, and could lead to escalation of bullying elsewhere, including offline.

*“Unlike reporting, blocking isn’t as confidential. It’s hard to know someone reported you, but it’s very easy to know if someone blocked you [...] and then there would be backlash for that. [...] it’s not hard to know if someone blocked you or not.”* (Child aged 14-16, focus group)



---

School staff and children suggested that blocking could be more effective when cyberbullying was perpetrated by an online contact with whom they had no other connection, but more difficult to manage if those involved were connected offline, for example as peers in school.

Children noted that blocking somebody would not prevent that person from posting content about them. Some children described a desire to retain access to the posts of somebody bullying them, so that they would be aware if threats were enacted, for example.

*“I couldn't really block [him], because [...] I really needed to know if he was going to post [damaging content he had threatened to share about me], so I could tell him not to.”* (Child aged 14-17; 1:1 interview)

*“If you know the person in real life, I don't think blocking is a good idea because if they end up having something to say to [...] or [...] about you and it's very valuable, or they're threatening you, I think it's good to see it, so you're aware. [...] if you know the person in real life, [blocking] it's not worth it.”* (Child aged 14-17; 1:1 interview)

Children also discussed potential negative impacts on their own experiences within the platform as something they considered when deciding whether or not to block somebody. On gaming platforms, for example, it could reduce their own access to multiplayer games with mutual friends, as participants reported that they would not be able to join a game alongside a user they had blocked:

*“On most games you won't be able to go back into a game with them [...] If you try to join their game, you'd [...] get kicked out [...] by the platform.”* (Child aged 14-17; 1:1 interview)

On other platforms, however, the possibility of ongoing contact within group chats was a perceived limitation to the effectiveness of blocking. Children noted that on some social media platforms, they could be added to groups with users they had previously blocked, and/or join a group that the blocked user was also part of – though participants said some platforms would notify them to check they were aware before doing so.

*“Let's say I have a lot of other people blocked, but I have one [...] friend added [...] that friend can make a group chat [including me] with all the people I have blocked and it's fine.”* (Child aged 14-17; 1:1 interview)

*“If you block someone on Snapchat, it will give you a notification before you join a group with that person in it. It will say, 'Are you sure you want to join this group? It has a blocked user,' and then you can either say 'Yes' or 'No'.”* (Child aged 14-16, focus group)

The ability for blocked users to make contact across platforms was another barrier to effectiveness that participants highlighted. Some children described additional action they took to prevent further contact with blocked users, including creating new accounts for themselves, or proactively blocking people across multiple platforms.

*“I blocked them on Snapchat first, and then I just decided to block them on Instagram as well. They weren't saying anything to me on Instagram, but I didn't want to give them the chance to.”* (Child aged 14-17; 1:1 interview)

---

Children also described the ease with which blocked users could make accounts on some platforms. Making multiple accounts was seen to be easier to do on some platforms than others – for example, children said that restrictions were tied to the individual or their contact information by some platforms so that new accounts could also be blocked.

*“On Fortnite I don't think you can tell when someone blocks you or not, which is good [...] Because if [they...] knew, they might try to bully you on other platforms, or just create another account. It is very easy to create another account.”* (Child aged 14-17; 1:1 interview)

## 5.7 Reporting

Participants across groups noted that reporting mechanisms, whereby users could flag comments, posts, or accounts for investigation by platforms, were a key mitigation measure for cyberbullying.

Participants indicated that ease of reporting varied across platforms – both in terms of how easy these tools were to access, and how straightforward children found it to complete reports. When it came to submitting reports, children described a range of reporting processes, which varied in terms of the information required and ways in which it was recorded. Some asked for a description of the issue in open text, others offered multiple choice response options, and others automatically included recent interactions between the relevant users as part of the report.

*“[On PS4,] you press their message and then you press report, and then it'll bring you through this thing of [options to choose from to report] what they did and how they did it [... The] options [...] will be like, 'What did this person type?' [... with responses like] 'Abusive', 'Sexually suggestive', [...] 'Bullying’”.* (Child aged 14-17; 1:1 interview)

Children shared mixed views on these different reporting mechanisms. Some children reported that multiple choice options could feel overly restrictive. Others, however, suggested that having to answer numerous questions or provide lengthier explanations was burdensome (though some appreciated the opportunity to ‘offload’ details of their experience).

Some children liked forms that offered a combination of answer options and additional space they could write in anything they felt did not fit. Automatic inclusion of recent activity between the accounts involved was also considered a helpful approach.

*“I really like the WhatsApp report where they send the last, like, five or six messages that you had with someone [...] As part of the report, which is good because it means that you don't have to actively write yourself a nice little essay to WhatsApp to tell them what the person has done, because that always makes it a bit harder.”* (Child aged 12-14, focus group)

Practitioners described some platforms’ reporting processes asking users to consider alternative approaches to deal with issues. This was interpreted by some participants as platforms seeking to deter submission of reports and/or causing children to question the validity of their concerns.

*“Some of these platforms [...] encourage you not to report, so most of the questions that they ask are like, 'Could you sort this out yourself?', 'Have you thought about...?' [which can give the impression*

---

*they're asking] 'Do you know this isn't the biggest deal in the world?' [...] they just want to field everything [away], so they're like [...] 'Is this really abusive?'" (Youth practitioner)*

Participants reported limited knowledge of how reports were assessed and processed. Children – including those who had gone through the reporting process – were not always clear what happened when a report was submitted. Some knew the report went to the platform for consideration, but not what the reviewing process looked like. Some believed it was automated A.I. assessment, which they felt might reduce the likelihood of meaningful responses. Others speculated that reports went to other agencies such as the police.

*"It's not like you're talking to a real person, you're just filing a complaint to a bot or something [...] it might just not get taken seriously." (Child aged 14-17; 1:1 interview)*

Some children questioned whether platforms would take cyberbullying seriously and felt there was little point submitting reports if not. Some children suggested that reports would only be prioritised if they came from multiple users, multiple times, or related to more severe forms of online harm.

*"If I reported someone that sent me a message I didn't like, the chances of them getting taken off that platform are very low. I think [reporting]'s useful if [...] people send stuff like child pornography or videos like that. If you report that, then obviously their account will get looked at [...] but in terms of messages, I don't know." (Child aged 14-17; 1:1 interview)*

*"One report [on Instagram/a gaming platform] isn't going to [...] make any difference, really. [...] nothing really happens when you report an account [...] me and my friends [previously tried] reporting each other [...] to see what would actually happen if you do get reported, and nothing happened." (Child aged 14-17; 1:1 interview)*

Participants suggested there was variation in platforms' response to reports. Some platforms were thought to be quick to review and act upon them; others took a relatively long time; and sometimes action did not appear to be taken. Some participants said that there was often no response to reports.

*"If it's on social media, they will take action. They would investigate [reports...] if I was to comment something on someone's picture, they would remove it straight away and they would investigate my account, whereas if I'd done that on the game, I could go for days before they would investigate it." (Child aged 14-17; 1:1 interview)*

Views on particular platforms' responsiveness were mixed. Some children said it was common for TikTok accounts to be temporarily suspended, for example, others felt this did not happen. School staff and practitioners also suggested that responses were inconsistent on individual platforms. The same issue being dealt with in different ways across platforms was perceived to reduce confidence in the effectiveness of platforms' mitigation of cyberbullying.

A key barrier to confidence in reporting processes was a lack of transparency, including a lack of communication of outcomes. Children said that when reports were submitted, platforms sent automated confirmations of receipt, but that they had not received notifications of actions or outcomes thereafter. Some participants with direct experience of cyberbullying did not know what, if anything, had resulted from them reporting it to the platform.

---

*“I don't know what happens after [you've reported them]. I don't know if the account ever got taken down or if there were any repercussions.”* (Child aged 14-17; 1:1 interview)

*“It goes into the hands of someone [...] far away, and you never get feedback on what happened [...] to know that something has been done. It kind of feels like you're powerless [...] you don't know what happened after [reporting ...] platforms generally [...] never tell you. You have to go and specifically look out for that person's account to see if it's been deleted or not.”* (Child aged 12-14, focus group)

Where restrictions were imposed in response to reports, some children reported that the reason would not be communicated to the affected account holder (which potentially reduced deterrence):

*“It will say 'connection error' or something when you try to click on the game [...] it [...] won't tell you the time that you're banned for.”* (Child aged 14-17; 1:1 interview)

Participants had mixed views on what effective repercussions for cyberbullying would comprise. Some participants, for example, thought it was good that comments would be removed in response to reports. Others suggested this had little impact and that greater consequences, such as account suspensions, were needed.

*“I don't think that's that helpful [...] nothing will really happen. The comment will get taken down, but that hasn't affected [...] whoever typed it. [...] They could give the account a suspension for maybe like, one to three or five days.”* (Child; 1:1 interview)

Views on the effectiveness of account suspensions were also mixed. Some participants said that they were a useful response because they directly affected the person who had been reported, and because children would not want to lose account access, they could serve as an effective warning against continuation of bullying behaviour.

*“You can get banned really, really easily [on Roblox ...] even if you say the smallest thing that could be counted as an insult. You can get banned for, like, two days, three days, and I think that's really good because it's [...] a warning.”* (Child aged 14-16, focus group)

Some, however, felt that the effectiveness of this response was limited by the ease with which new accounts could be created on some platforms. Accordingly, some participants suggested that account suspensions linked to users' devices or IP addresses were the most effective.

*“If it isn't an IP ban [...] they can log in from the same location, open a new account, and it cycles.”*  
(Child aged 14-16, focus group)

*“If you've been caught cyberbullying, you're not allowed in the app [Snapchat] for 30 days [...] You can't even start a new account because they obviously know it's your phone. They block you for 30 days so you can't do anything.”* (Child aged 14-17; 1:1 interview)

Key barriers to reporting as a mitigation measure included a perception that no action would be taken, and/or that any repercussions that were implemented would be insufficiently effective. These were linked to a lack of transparency around the platforms' processes and decision-making.

---

*"[On Instagram] I could've reported the account [...] but I just didn't... because [...] it don't really affect it, really, unless it's more than one people [sic] reporting it."* (Child aged 14-17; 1:1 interview)

A key facilitator of children's use of reporting mechanisms was privacy and anonymity. Participants across groups emphasised the importance for children of knowing that reports and any resulting restrictions would not be traced back to them, which was linked to the concern that acting against a cyberbully could make things worse. Some participants suggested reporting was preferable to blocking for this reason: children felt it was relatively easy for others to find out that they had been blocked, but reporting would not be so evident.

*"It's anonymous so people don't know it's you [who] said anything and they don't know who sent [the report]."* (Child aged 14-17; 1:1 interview)

---

# Participant recommendations

---

Key recommendations discussed by participants fall into seven main categories, which are explored in turn in this chapter. As highlighted earlier in the report, knowledge and experience of existing tools and processes to mitigate cyberbullying varied between and within participant groups. As such, these participant recommendations likely cover not only new measures, but also some tools and processes already in place across various platforms. It is also important to note that while some participants felt that additional measures needed to be put in place or that platforms needed to pay greater attention and respond to cyberbullying more consistently and effectively, others felt existing measures worked well and helped address and mitigate future experiences of cyberbullying.

## 6.1 Participant recommendations for online platforms

### Accountability and oversight

School staff suggested that increased monitoring, standards, and accountability of online platforms should be implemented and enforced by the Government. Some youth practitioners suggested platforms should be required to consider child safety from the outset, and institute preventative measures as their default. Some practitioners also said that children should be involved in policy development.

### Account set-up

Participants across all groups suggested there should be additional identity and age verifications and checks to set up new accounts. This could reduce the use of fake accounts, circumvention of restrictions imposed due to bullying behaviour, and underage access to platforms (which could put a wider range of children at risk of cyberbullying). Staff suggested parental approval could be required. A related suggestion from children was that accounts could be linked to parents, who should be notified of any problematic use or bullying behaviours.

Other suggestions from children were that users could be able to register email/phone numbers linked to accounts only once, with any restrictions being linked to those details rather than usernames; and that the number of accounts a single user could create could be limited – including, for example, with a set time limit on how quickly accounts could be deleted and replaced.

---

Age verification and enforcement of age restrictions was also recommended as a preventative measure by all groups. One suggestion that accounts should be tied to other forms of ID (such as National Insurance numbers). Some children believed this already to be the case on certain platforms such as YouTube.

*“A good feature on YouTube [is that ...] if there's an age rating on a [...] video, if you're under the age, you can't watch it. To actually put the correct age in, you need to send a picture of your ID to prove that you are over 18 or 16 or whatever the age rating is. You have to fully prove it; you can't just put your name in and your age in [...] you have to show the identification.”* (Child aged 14-16, focus group)

A suggestion from children's focus groups was that this might be stored centrally on users' phones, such that they could not falsify information when setting up accounts.

*“As soon as you get a phone, if it could just have an ID that actually proves your age to make sure that you're over the age restriction for this app, to make sure you can actually use it.”* (Child; focus group aged 14-16)

*“Your birth date [should be set on your device] by [...] the manufacturer [...] then when a website asks for your age, it can look at this data and go, ‘Hold on, you're not this age’ or ‘You are over this age’. I feel like that should be interconnected.”* (Child aged 14-16, focus group)

## **Access restrictions**

### **Privacy and access**

Staff and practitioners suggested accounts should default to the highest possible privacy/security settings at setup. Related to this, some children recommended that it should be harder for contacts to be added on some platforms: requiring verification would prevent unwanted contact by strangers.

*“I think they could have [...] tighter [restrictions on] who can contact who[m], because then it could avoid [...] people getting added to things like group chats and having private messages from people they don't know.”* (Child aged 14-17; 1:1 interview)

Additionally, some suggested that access should be aligned to age groups, so that individuals could only access specific areas and/or contacts of a similar age.

### **User choice and control**

Children's suggestions included increasing user control over who could access, copy, and share their content. Suggestions included replicating the functionality already available on some platforms (such as Instagram's 'Close Friends') to limit access to some content to specific contacts. Giving users options to disallow screenshots or downloads and sharing by certain other users was also suggested.

An additional idea discussed by children was that approval mechanisms be introduced to offer greater control over their appearance in others' content as well. Some suggested facial recognition technology could be used to screen content and seek permission from individuals appearing in it before it could be posted.

Some children also recommended that blocking options should be available on all platforms:

---

*“There should always be a blocking feature on any platform. If cyberbullying is taking place, someone has the power to stop it.”* (Child aged 14-17; 1:1 interview)

### **Content moderation and restrictions**

Participants across groups suggested there could be more proactive moderation across platforms, reducing reliance on user reports to identify cyberbullying. Children suggested this might include proactive monitoring of users whose accounts had previously been reported, and/or that uploads could be moderated prior to being posted. Children acknowledged that this could require investment in additional staff.

*“Watch over the chats, just to make sure this isn't going on. It won't always be reported.”* (Child aged 14-16, focus group)

Related, some felt that all platforms should restrict certain content/terminology, either preventing it from being posted altogether or flagging it with a warning. Some children suggested this could be an automated process, a view echoed by a suggestion from youth practitioners that A.I. detection of bullying behaviours might be a possibility.

*“Social media platforms [...] could programme certain bad words or certain harmful phrases or words, so that when people send them, the message doesn't send, or it reports a problem. I feel like that's the easiest way to remove [...] cyberbullying.”* (Child aged 14-17; 1:1 interview)

One suggestion was that content filtering might also apply in real time to voice communication in, for example, gaming chats:

*“There could be some things [put] in place [...] in chat, or maybe through the microphone [...] blockers on words [...] So maybe if they swear or something harmful was said, the PlayStation people will recognise that, and block it out, and issue the person a warning so that it doesn't happen again.”* (Child aged 14-17; 1:1 interview)

### **Reporting**

Participants suggested platforms could do more to proactively encourage reporting – including by increasing the transparency of their processes and responding more quickly and consistently. This was reinforced by evident variation in child participants' knowledge of existing reporting mechanisms, which might also suggest that options could be better promoted or made more visible.

*“The platforms themselves [should...] be a bit more aware of it and tighten up on the rules [...]. Something [...] like a bad message, should get looked at [...] in response to reports. I don't think there's enough action on reporting a message.”* (Child aged 14-17; 1:1 interview)

Practitioners suggested that information on the possible outcomes of reports should be included in user guidance, to help build understanding and trust in formalised response processes. This echoed suggestions from children that guidelines (including, for example, a zero-tolerance anti-bullying policy) should be more actively promoted. Greater visibility of reporting mechanisms, and more immediate links to relevant emotional support, were also recommended:



---

*“I think they should focus more on helping people deal with it and talk up about it, because I think a lot of people don’t speak up. If they encouraged that and ha[d] like a space on the actual app where you can speak about stuff like that, then it would help.” (Child aged 14-17; 1:1 interview)*

Some suggested that reporting could be simplified, requiring less information from children up front:

*“I don’t think there should be a whole line of question [s... leading] up to, ‘Do you want to report this guy?’, then you press ‘OK’. I don’t think there should be a line of questions before you report someone. I think you should just press report and then it just should happen.” (Child aged 14-17; 1:1 interview)*

Children also suggested that users submitting a report could be immediately signposted to relevant emotional and practical support provided by the platform.

A number of recommendations related to the processing of reports. Participants across groups suggested that review and responses should be quicker and more consistent from submission to outcomes. Some children suggested that responses should be in real time, to help prevent continuation or escalation of cyberbullying:

*“[It would be good] if you just tapped on the icon and it said, ‘Cyberbullying’, and then you just told them what happened, and [...] report their account [...] as soon as someone does it, it flashes up on their system and says there’s cyberbullying going on [...] and it needs to be stopped.” (Child aged 14-17; 1:1 interview)*

Some children felt that accounts that had been reported could be restricted during investigations – for example, blocking their access to the user who had submitted a report. Temporary account suspensions were recommended by some as a preferred response to removal of harmful comments. This was attributed to a view that account suspensions were more impactful than comment removal, and therefore a greater deterrent. Finally, children recommended that both the person who submitted a report and the reported account holder should be notified of actions and outcomes.

*“Messaging back to say, ‘Yes, thanks for that, that is cyberbullying’, or ‘That is harassment, and we’ve done something about that’ [...] would be really helpful, to know that something has been done. It kind of feels like you’re powerless [...] because you don’t know what happened after [reporting ...] platforms generally [...] never tell you. You have to go and specifically look [...] for that person’s account to see if it’s been deleted or not.” (Child aged 14-17; 1:1 interview)*

### **Other features**

Some participants (across groups) felt that functionalities such as disappearing messages and notifications about screenshots should be removed, such that evidence could be collated more easily by people being cyberbullied. However, others considered these functionalities beneficial, as discussed in chapter 5.

## **6.2 Participants’ wider recommendations: education and information-sharing**

Participants suggested that education and information-sharing was important for children, parents, and schools as well – including platform-specific information and education on online safety and bullying more broadly.

Youth practitioner participants cautioned against focusing solely on specific technologies or what individual platforms could do, emphasising the need to engender awareness and behaviour change among children,

---

particularly given links between on- and offline bullying, as well as the fast pace of trends and developments in the tech space and online. Schools, parents, and the wider community were seen as playing crucial roles in educating children, as well as platforms. This included a focus on addressing offline bullying.

*“Whilst it’s really important that the tech companies really sort out how they deal with online bullying, [...] you can’t miss the fact that [...] there’s such a strong link with face-to-face [experiences], and how much influence schools, adults in our community have on reducing that too.”* (Youth practitioner)

### **Information for children**

Children said that educating children about safe internet use was a better approach than limiting their access:

*“People need to understand everyone uses social media and you can’t just take it away [...] Teach them about online safety but [...] let them have apps [...] you’re just making your child feel more left out if they don’t [...] because they can’t communicate with their friends.”* (Child aged 14-17; 1:1 interview)

Participants across groups suggested that education for children could include platform-specific information provided directly to users within apps/platforms, including user guidance; promotion of pro-social behaviour; and warnings about conduct that would not be tolerated. Some children recommended all platforms needed to promote their anti-cyberbullying measures more, and practitioners felt that providing more information could help to build understanding and trust in these features.

Participants also recommended improving the quality and consistency of online safety support and information provided elsewhere – through schools, experts, relevant media, and influencers/celebrities. While some children felt that a greater amount of school-based information-sharing (via lessons, assemblies and/or emails) could be beneficial in discouraging bullying, others felt that anti-bullying information was already frequently repeated in schools and was not necessarily being absorbed and therefore effective. Some children felt information provided in schools should be more engaging and fun. A similar view among practitioners who provided anti-bullying training was that online safety messaging delivered by specialist providers was often more effective than teacher-led presentations, which tended to have a narrower focus.

*“You need that outside perspective to capture other things that perhaps the schools or carers of the young people haven’t thought about. That works far better.”* (Youth practitioner)

Some participants across groups suggested that more widespread, regular sharing of information and advice would better ensure awareness of issues and responses among children. Participants recommended that information shared with children should include signposting and support and guidance on how to seek advice – for those being cyberbullied, but also those cyberbullying others.

*“I think we need targeted, focused, consistent educational programmes, resources and campaigns.”*  
(Youth practitioner)

Children also said information should be provided to children at a younger age, as people were accessing platforms before receiving information on what cyberbullying is and how to respond (especially if using platforms underage). Some practitioners recommended that external training providers could help ensure information was comprehensive, engaging, and appropriate for younger audiences.

---

## Education of other audiences

Provision of clear guidance for parents was also important. Some school staff and practitioners suggested some parents were likely to feel overwhelmed or struggle to navigate the number of available products and tools. Practitioners also highlighted risks around particular groups of parents being missed, and the need for more bespoke approaches to education and information dissemination.

*“I think it's hard for parents to navigate sometimes because there [are] so many different products [...] many of the companies have produced their own thing, so it's hard to know what to get [...] there is stuff out there, it's just making sure that all of those parents who might struggle to understand or [...] to access it are able to get it.”* (Youth practitioner)

Participants suggested that provision of clear guidance for parents could come direct from platforms and be supported by providers and schools – for example, through parent forums. Youth practitioners suggested information could be provided and updated centrally to ensure consistency across different local areas.

Participants suggested that information for parents could include guidance on healthy and unhealthy online behaviours and signposting to other support. Some children and practitioners also highlighted the importance of emphasising parental supervision of children's online activities and behaviour.

*“If they're young then they should watch them, isn't it, and just check on them more often and just probably go through their phones and that, go through social media and the games to see what they're experiencing.”* (Child 14-17; 1:1 interview)

Participants also noted that school professionals also need advice and guidance to keep up to date with fast-moving space. School staff suggested advice and guidance should be provided by platforms directly – including practical training and guidance/resources; involvement from other bodies such as the police; and support lines or direct links with platform providers to support schools with specific information.

*“The resources out there that we tend to use are good to an extent, but [...] they're not particularly practical. Often, the resources [...] are just like, ‘This is how you should talk to each other online’, or ‘This is how [...] you spot a fake thing and a real thing’, whereas I think it needs to be [...] practical [...] could people come in and talk about their stories of cyberbullying or online safety? Could people come in and talk about the law on it? I think the police could be more involved in their procedures and talking about online safety to our children.”* (School staff)

Two additional recommendations from youth practitioners were that there might be room for better communication within schools, for example between safeguarding leads and other staff; and that additional training on bullying more generally, including group dynamics and responding effectively, could also be helpful for educators.

# Appendix A: Methodology

## Sampling

Participants were purposively sampled to achieve range and diversity across the research population. A range of participant groups were included, as outlined in Table A.1.

**Table A.1 – Overview of achieved data collection encounters and sample characteristics.**

Participant group	Data collection mode	Characteristics sampled/monitored for diversity	Number of participants
Children aged 14-17 with direct experience of cyberbullying	12 1:1 depth interviews	<p>Age, gender, and ethnicity were monitored sample characteristics.</p> <p>Six participants self-reported as male, and six female.</p> <p>Six participants self-reported as White, two as Black Caribbean, one as Pakistani and three as Mixed or Multiple ethnic groups (including Asian and White, and Black and White).</p> <p>Four participants self-reported as aged 14, four as aged 15, three as aged 16 and one as aged 17.</p>	12
Children aged 12-16 (school years 8 to 11)	12 focus groups	<p>Children took part from a range of secondary schools in England, Wales, and Scotland.<sup>6</sup> Schools were purposively sampled for diversity across region and urban/rural geography, as well as the proportions of pupils entitled to Free School Meals, from racially minoritised backgrounds, and with SEND. Schools were also sampled to ensure a range of prior engagement with either The Diana Award and/or Anti-Bullying Alliance, to ensure diversity in staff and children's' awareness and interaction with anti-bullying programmes.</p> <p>Participants were sampled for diversity across age, gender, and ethnicity.</p>	50

<sup>6</sup> The invitation to participate was circulated to schools in all four UK nations, but it was not possible to recruit a school in Northern Ireland within the research timeframe.

		<p>The total sample included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 24 boys and 26 girls.</li> <li>• 29 were in Key Stage 2 or equivalent (aged between 11 and 14), and 21 were in Key Stage 3 or equivalent (aged between 14 and 16).</li> </ul>	
School staff with experience supporting children in relation to cyberbullying	6 paired/triad interviews	Staff (including senior staff, teachers, pastoral, and support staff) participated from the same secondary schools in England, Wales, and Scotland.	14
Youth practitioners with experience in relation to cyberbullying (including social workers and anti-bullying practitioners)	10 1:1 depth interviews	Monitored sample characteristics related to the range of children participants supported, in terms of age range, gender, ethnicity, SEND and experiences of being in care.	10

### Recruitment

As outlined in Chapter One, all gatekeepers were given a detailed briefing about recruitment and fieldwork processes by a member of the NatCen research team prior to contacting any potential participants. Gatekeepers sought parental consent before inviting children to take part in the research. The aims of the research and what taking part would involve were explained to all potential participants (and parents, as applicable). This included an overview of:

- why they had been contacted
- topics to be covered
- duration of the research encounter
- how their information would be used; and
- the level of anonymity offered.

Participant information sheets and the study privacy notice were provided to each participant in advance of their interview/focus group. To ensure participants understood what taking part would involve, key information about the study was reiterated verbally by a researcher before the start of interviews and focus groups, and participants were all given the opportunity to ask any questions about their involvement prior to consenting to take part. Permission to audio record the discussion was also sought, and children (and parents where necessary) were asked for explicit consent to collect special category data (namely ethnicity and health data, and sexual orientation / religious beliefs, if raised during the discussion). Details of relevant support organisations were provided to all children who took part in the research.

Children with direct experiences of cyberbullying were screened before taking part in interviews. This was to confirm that they had experienced cyberbullying in the last 6 months and obtain information from parents on the nature of their experiences to frame data collection. Screening was also used to exclude any children who had experienced wider online harms not directly related to cyberbullying.

### Data collection and analysis

The research team scheduled interviews and focus groups to ensure that participants would be able to access appropriate support if needed after the discussion. To ensure accessibility and convenience, practitioner interviews were carried out remotely, with participants offered telephone or online interviews according to preference. Children with direct experience of cyberbullying could take part online, by telephone or in person.

School staff were also offered the option of remote interviews if more convenient; however, all school fieldwork was carried out in person.

### Topic coverage

As discussed in Chapter 5, questions about the impacts of cyberbullying were not asked in focus groups with children. With consideration to the sensitive nature of the research, interviews and focus groups coverage was tailored to draw on the expertise and insight of different participant groups to address the research questions within the research timeframe. Coverage across these groups is outlined in Figure A.1.

**Figure A.1: Coverage of research questions across proposed approaches**

Research Questions	Practitioner interviews (inc. school staff)	Focus group research with children	Interviews with children
What does cyberbullying look like among children in the UK?	x	x	Personal experience only
What are the pathways for children being exposed to cyberbullying?	x	x	x
What impacts does cyberbullying have on children?	x		x
What works to address cyberbullying among children in the UK?	x	x	x

Children taking part in focus groups were asked to discuss cyberbullying in general terms, rather than focus on direct experiences they or anyone they knew might have had. This was both to ensure sufficient coverage of the key themes within a limited timeframe, and to minimise the risk of disclosure of harm in the group setting. In this context, disclosure might have involved detailed discussions of personal experiences or things that may be upsetting to others in the group. (Further considerations taken throughout the research process in relation to disclosure and safeguarding are discussed in the following sections).

### Data management and analysis

Interview and focus group data were managed and analysed using the Framework approach, developed by NatCen, and embedded in the QSR NVivo qualitative data management software. Data are systematically summarised into a thematic framework, linked to the verbatim text, to ensure they are comprehensively ordered and accessible for qualitative analysis. The final analytic stage involved working through the managed data to map the range and diversity of experiences and views, including exploration of any patterns, similarities, and differences between and within participant groups.

### Ethical approval

All stages of the research were reviewed in detail and approved NatCen’s internal Research Ethics Committee. The committee considered all aspects of the research design in detail, and approval was given prior to recruitment and fieldwork. Key issues that were considered in designing the study and conducting the research fieldwork are detailed below.

- **Participation based on informed consent**

- 
- Participants were made aware of what the research involved and that they could consent or refuse to participate on a voluntary basis. We prepared and provided tailored, accessible materials and informed participants across the groups that taking part was voluntary, confidential, and anonymous (except for disclosure of harm, discussed below).
  - Researchers facilitated an informed consent process for all participants (and parents where appropriate), ensuring that they understood prior to taking part what confidentiality and anonymity meant and being clear about the limits of confidentiality. The ongoing nature of consent was explained, including that withdrawal was possible until data analysis and reporting had taken place.

- **Participants' wellbeing**

- Careful consideration was given to protecting the welfare of research participants, which is particularly important when exploring sensitive topics or engaging people who may be in vulnerable circumstances. To ensure an appropriate adult was aware and available to offer support as needed, children participating in 1:1 interviews were recruited with consent from their parents and invited to attend the interview with their parent (or another trusted adult) present if preferred. Children were supported to answer questions about their direct experiences of cyberbullying only to the extent to which they felt comfortable and invited to speak more generally if they preferred. Interviews were structured to ease participants into the discussion and ensure that they had time to 'cool down' and end on a lighter note wherever possible. Participants were also provided with contact information for relevant support organisations, should these be of interest.
- While questions about direct experiences and impacts of cyberbullying were not asked in the focus groups with children, there was a possibility that participants would spontaneously share information about upsetting experiences. In the instance of any disclosure, we would have followed NatCen's disclosure policy (see below).
- Throughout all stages of the research – from recruitment to participation in interviews/focus groups – we provided participants with clear information about the topics being covered and agreed clear ground rules for participants ahead of each interview or group discussion.

- **Confidentiality, anonymity, and disclosure**

- NatCen's disclosure policy was put in place to deal with any instances where a participant disclosed past, current, or potential significant harm to themselves or identifiable other. This would involve raising the issue with the NatCen disclosure board to ensure swift safeguarding action could be taken if necessary.
- The circumstances in which participant confidentiality might have to be breached were carefully explained to participants in the information sheets, consent forms, and by researchers at the time of the interview/group discussions. No incidents of disclosure took place during fieldwork.
- Rigorous data security and protection against direct or indirect disclosure of identity was built into all stages of the research, in line with the Data Protection Act and GDPR obligations.

---

# Appendix B: Topic Guides

A tailored topic guide was used with each participant group to ensure a consistent approach across data collection encounters and between members of the research team. The guides were used flexibly to allow researchers to respond to the nature and content of each discussion. Researchers used open, non-leading questions, and answers were fully probed to elicit greater depth and detail where necessary.

The main headings and subheadings from the topic guides used for this study are provided below. The themes covered in school staff and youth practitioner interviews were similar, so these are presented together.

## **Interviews with school staff and youth practitioners: summary topic guide**

### **1. Introduction**

- Introduce self and NatCen
- Introduce research, aims of study and interview (including length; voluntary nature of participation; anonymity, confidentiality, and caveats; data storage and security; and brief overview of topics to be covered)
- Permission to audio record interview
- Questions
- Start recorder; ask participant to confirm consent

### **2. Participant background and context**

- Participants' current roles and responsibilities
- Overview of their experience dealing with cyberbullying cases

### **3. What is cyberbullying?**

- Participants' understanding of cyberbullying (how they would describe what it includes)
- Types of content, activity, and online behaviours of the cyberbullying cases they've been involved with

### **4. Victimisation and motivations of cyberbullying**

- Views on motivations for cyberbullying: why children are cyberbullied
- Relationships between perpetrator(s) and victim(s) of cyberbullying
- Any changes over time

### **5. Cyberbullying pathways**

- Views on where cyberbullying takes place



- 
- Prevalence on different platform types
  - Whether perpetrated on single platforms / across multiple platforms
  - Specific areas of these platforms where cyberbullying happen, including any features that enable it
  - Any changes they've observed over time in terms of where cyberbullying takes place
  - Views and experiences on range of ways in which cyberbullying begins
  - Duration of cyberbullying
  - Range of ways in which cyberbullying continues / escalates

## **6. Impacts of cyberbullying**

- Views on the impacts of cyberbullying
- Views on how impacts vary in relation to duration of cyberbullying
- Extent to which any particular groups of children are impacted differently
- Views on impacts of cyberbullying compared to offline bullying.

## **7. Mitigating / resolving cyberbullying events: current practice**

- Views on ways in which cyberbullying can be resolved online
- Which measures work well to resolve cyberbullying events
- Impacts on offline bullying
- Online safety guidance and advice given by youth practitioners/schools when a child is experiencing cyberbullying

## **8. Recommendations for improvement/ future practice**

- Views on ways in which cyberbullying could better be addressed
- Suggested improvements to support education/youth practitioners

**Thanks, and close**

## **Children's focus groups: summary topic guide**

### **Introduction**

- Introduce self and NatCen
- Introduce research, aims of study and discussion (including length; voluntary nature of participation; anonymity, confidentiality, and caveats; data storage and security; and brief overview of topics to be covered)
- Permission to audio record
- Questions
- Ground rules for group discussion
- Start recorder; ask participants to confirm consent

---

## **1. Participant introductions**

- First name, age, and household
- What they do online

## **2. What is cyberbullying**

- How they would describe cyberbullying
- Where participants have heard about cyberbullying previously
- What, if anything, is unique about cyberbullying

## **3. Victimisation and motivations of cyberbullying**

- Reasons why people cyberbully others
- Views on who is cyberbullying others
- Whether bullies tend to act alone/with others

## **4. Cyberbullying pathways**

- Views on where cyberbullying takes place most
- Prevalence on different platform types
- Specific areas/ functionalities of platforms where cyberbullying happens
- Views on how cyberbullying spreads: how others join in/ are involved

## **5. Addressing cyberbullying and recommendations**

- Views on what online platforms already do to prevent cyberbullying
- Views on what online platforms already do to address cyberbullying.
- What else platforms could do
- Key lessons for platforms about keeping children safe from cyberbullying
- Key lessons for other children to keep safe online from cyberbullying
- Key lessons for schools
- Key lessons for parents / guardians
- Final thoughts

**Thanks, and close** (including support leaflet and any questions)

---

## 1:1 interviews with children: summary topic guide

### Introduction

- Introduce self and NatCen
- Introduce research, aims of study and discussion (including length; voluntary nature of participation; anonymity, confidentiality, and caveats; data storage and security; and brief overview of topics to be covered)
- Permission to audio record
- Questions
- Start recorder; confirm consent

### 1. Participant introductions

- First name, age, and household
- What they do online

### 2. What is cyberbullying

- How they would describe cyberbullying generally
- Who is involved
- Where cyberbullying takes place

### 3. Direct experiences of cyberbullying

- Brief overview of their experiences of cyberbullying over the last six months
- About the cyberbullying they experienced
  - How it began – including where and what was involved initially
  - How long it continued
  - Who was involved
  - What content was involved
  - Where cyberbullying took place
  - Responses to cyberbullying (including action online, action offline, options considered and not used, and actions by others)
- Comparison with any other experiences of cyberbullying

### 4. Impacts of cyberbullying

- Ways in which cyberbullying affected them (immediately and afterwards)
- Extent to which experiences of cyberbullying have changed anything about how they behave
- Comparison of similarities/differences in impacts of different cyberbullying experiences they have been through
- Views on impacts of cyberbullying compared to offline bullying.

---

## **5. Addressing cyberbullying and recommendations**

- Anything that helped to address their experiences of cyberbullying.
- Anything they would have liked to happen to help
- Views on what online platforms already do to address cyberbullying.
- What else platforms could do

## **6. Recommendations for improvement**

- Key lessons for platforms about keeping children safe from cyberbullying
- Key lessons for other children to keep safe online from cyberbullying
- Key lessons for schools
- Key lessons for parents / guardians
- Final thoughts

**Thanks, and close** (including support leaflet and any questions)



