

Royal Society for Public Health (RSPH) submission to inquiry on the impact of cyberbullying on social media on children and young people's mental health

The Royal Society for Public Health (RSPH) is an independent, multidisciplinary charity dedicated to the improvement of the public's health and wellbeing. We have a membership of over 6000 members working in public health.

Our vision is that everyone has the opportunity to optimise their health and wellbeing, and we seek to achieve this through our qualifications, conference and training programmes and policy and campaign work.

We are pleased to provide written evidence to The Children's Society, Young Minds and Alex Chalk MP given our recent work looking at the impact of social media on young people's mental health and wellbeing.

1. Based on your knowledge, experience or practice, please give an overview of the impact that cyberbullying can have on children and young people's mental health and emotional wellbeing.

The evidence is clear that bullying in any form can have a seriously detrimental impact on children and young people in the short and long term. Bullying during childhood is a major risk factor for a number of issues including mental health, education and social relationships, with long-lasting effects often carried right through to adulthood. In the past, bullies were limited to face-to-face interactions. However, the rise of social media platforms has created an environment where children and young people that are experiencing bullying may never be able to get away from their tormentors. They are constantly contactable and if bullies wish to continue their abuse they can do so in public or private online. Social media companies have measures in place for reporting cyberbullying and online abuse – however, a national survey conducted by Bullying UK found that 91% of young people who reported cyberbullying said that no action was taken.

Adolescence is a particularly vulnerable age when social and emotional development is taking place. Ensuring that children and young people are protected from cyberbullying and online abuse is paramount to help them develop as people, free

from mental health issues and other problems associated with bullying. The responsibility for making this happen lies with parents, schools and social media companies.

Parents should be letting their children know that what they post online can have serious real world consequences. What may seem like a throw away comment on someone's picture may have a seriously detrimental impact on their mental wellbeing. It is also important to make children and young people aware that anything they post online is in the public domain and could be seen by anyone, including potential future employers in years to come. Abusive comments, no matter how minor, can potentially be seen by anyone.

Schools have to be doing more to impart relevant knowledge and information to young people regarding social media and cyberbullying. In our recent #StatusOfMind report on social media and young people's mental health, RSPH called for safe social media usage to be taught during PSHE education in schools. We would like to see a component of this education teach children and young people about the potential dangers of social media, including cyberbullying, and where to seek help or advice should they experience abuse online. The education system must evolve with the society in which it operates and equip our children and young people with the tools necessary to navigate the digital age in a way which protects their mental health and emotional wellbeing.

What social media companies can be doing better will be addressed in questions below.

2. *Based on your knowledge, experience or practice, do you think that there are any groups of children and young people who are particularly vulnerable to cyberbullying and its effects on mental health and emotional wellbeing?*

Any child or young person may fall victim to cyberbullying with the stats on how many experience it making for quite worrying reading. Seven in 10 young people have experienced cyberbullying, with 37% of young people saying they experience cyberbullying on a high-frequency basis. During the research for our #StatusOfMind report we conducted a national survey of almost 1,500 young people aged 14-24. Comments on this survey gave us a wealth of anecdotal evidence relating to cyberbullying. Many of the young people we surveyed had experienced extremely distressing abuse online that had created new or exacerbated existing mental health

issues. The impact cyberbullying has on the confidence and mental wellbeing of young people cannot be understated.

Our research also suggests that girls are more likely to experience greater negative effects on mental health and emotional wellbeing as a result of cyberbullying than boys. They ranked social media platforms, particularly Instagram and Snapchat, worse than their male counterparts for cyberbullying which either suggests they experience it more frequently, or the impact of cyberbullying is felt more by girls. We believe this may be due to the nature of these two platforms being very image-focused. As we know, there are vast pressures on girls in their teens and early twenties to look a certain way. Posting images online leaves people very vulnerable to abuse that can be from people they know or anonymous sources.

3. *How effective do you think social media companies are at preventing and responding to cyberbullying? Please give specific examples of current interventions which you think are effective, or other examples of good practice you have identified.*

As mentioned in a previous question, 91% of young people who reported cyberbullying said that no action was taken as a result. When we talk about action, social media companies are good at allowing children and young people to block other users who may be abusing them. It's also a fairly easy procedure to report another user for being abusive towards you. However, there are very few 'real world' consequences for those who are reported for cyberbullying – unless the victim prints off private messages and takes them to the appropriate authority. Having an account blocked or being blocked from contacting a certain individual is often incentive for bullies to torment their victims further. What we need to see is the translation of online actions having real world consequences. Currently, this response from social media companies is very poor. There is no link between social media companies and schools, for example. This is one area where there may be scope for more joint-working. Even though social media companies are private enterprises, such is the interconnectedness between social media and the lives of our young people that it seems strange there would be no real link between them and our educational institutions to try and combat cyberbullying.

4. *Do you think that social media companies could improve their ability to prevent and respond to cyberbullying on their platforms, and if so, how? Are there any measures that particular social media companies need to take?*

It is becoming increasingly well documented that social media companies have products that can seriously affect the wellbeing of their users. Like other businesses for whom this is true, they therefore bear a responsibility to the wellbeing of those who choose to use the platform. As described in the previous question, there is a worrying number of young people suffering from cyberbullying, yet very few cases are leading to action being taken by the social media companies that provide the setting for this.

In our #StatusOfMind report, we made several recommendations which we believe would make the social media environment a safer place for vulnerable individuals, including those who suffer from cyberbullying. One of our calls to action was for social media platforms to identify users who could be suffering from mental health problems by their posts and other data, and discreetly signpost to support. The existing stigma around mental health issues, particularly in young people, may make it difficult for those suffering to come forward or even know where to look for help. We would like to see technology used to identify those young people who could be suffering from mental health conditions on social media, and provide them with discreet information about where they can find help and advice should they wish to receive it. Social media users are already bombarded with targeted adverts and more, based on their personal activity on social media – we believe that if this data is going to be used in this way, it should be done with the purpose of promoting better wellbeing. If vulnerable users, who may be suffering from cyberbullying, feel more empowered or better equipped to reach out for help, this would certainly be a positive step.

RSPH has also called for social media platforms to highlight when photos of people have been digitally manipulated. This may be in the form of a small icon or watermark at the bottom of someone's photo that indicates an airbrush or filter has been used that may have significantly altered their appearance. Young people, and in particular young women, are bombarded with images that attempt to pass off the edited off as the norm. This practice is contributing to a generation of young people with poor body image and confidence, and an over-specific conception of what the ideal body ought to entail. Asking social media platforms to address these concerns is important for their own sake, but also because in practice they will form the basis for some of the harm caused by cyberbullying. In the research for our report, we found that more than two thirds (68%) of young people supported this recommendation.

5. *From your knowledge, experience or practice what do you think are the core principles that should guide the approach of social media companies in preventing, identifying and responding to cyberbullying on their platforms?*

Our position is that, if the evidence is that social media sites can harm their user's wellbeing in certain ways, then they have a responsibility to take steps to address

this. We believe this is an uncontroversial proposition when considering other typical businesses whose products have the potential to harm their companies (e.g. food manufacturers/restaurants, betting shops, tanning salons), and therefore should be extended to social media companies. Given that emerging evidence suggests that there may well be significant risks posed by social media use to young people's mental wellbeing, and that 91% of young people are accessing these sites, this generates a significant responsibility for social media companies towards their users.

There is a lot more that could be done to promote more joint-working between social media companies and schools and other communities where young people engage. There is a disconnect between the online environments that young people inhabit and their physical environments – the more one is divorced from the other, the harder it is to identify when individuals are suffering, whether it is from cyberbullying or something else. Better joint working is especially important – and especially relevant to schools – given the downwards pressure that cyberbullying is known to have on academic performance. Overall, there needs to be a lot more genuine engagement with the young people who actually use the platforms, in order to determine how to best protect people who use them.

6. *If you have any further comments about how social media companies can better respond to cyberbullying or promote positive interactions online, please detail these below.*

N/A

7. *Based on your knowledge, experience or practice, do you have any other views on the risks that social media can present to children and young people's mental health and emotional wellbeing, including to specific groups of young people who are particularly vulnerable?*

As mentioned in previous questions, at the start of 2017, RSPH undertook research and published a report looking at all aspects of social media and young people's mental health and wellbeing – both the positive and negative aspects. The report highlighted some major concerns regarding the impact social media is having on the mental health and emotional wellbeing of our young people.

Anxiety and depression are a growing problem for young people. This problem is partly to do with the breaking down of stigma – so more people report symptoms – and also to do with better diagnosing practices. However, there is no doubt in our mind that social media is playing a significant role in the rise of poor mental health that we are seeing in young people. The young people we surveyed in our research said that four out of the five most popular social media platforms (Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook, Twitter) made their feelings of anxiety and depression worse. There is also a growing body of evidence to suggest that there may be a link between social media and poor mental health. Users who reported spending more than two hours per day on platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram are

more likely to report poor mental health, including psychological distress (symptoms of anxiety and depression). However, with social media being such a new phenomenon, the long term effects are still relatively unknown and we would recommend caution when talking about these until much more substantial research has been undertaken into the issue.

One of the major findings of our research was the impact young people said social media was having on their sleep – both the quality and quantity. All five of the social media platforms we asked young people about scored very poorly for their impact on sleep. We know that mental health and sleep are tightly linked. Poor mental health can lead to poor sleep and poor sleep can lead to states of poor mental health. Sleep is particularly important for teens and young adults due to this being a key time for physical and emotional development.

Another recurring issue that young people are facing through social media is body image. There are currently 10 million new photographs uploaded to Facebook alone every hour and this is an issue that is only going to get more prevalent over time as social media continues its growth. It affects both males and females, however, our research showed a clear gender split with body image issues having a much greater impact on teenage and early twenties females. Young people told us that Instagram was the worst platform for fuelling body image issues – likely because it's an image-focused platform that allows users to present the best version of themselves. People view heavily curated and photo-shopped images of beautiful people having a great time resulting in a 'compare and despair' attitude that is driving poor mental health.

8. *Based on your knowledge, experience or practice, do you have any other views about how social media can be a tool for promoting positive mental health and wellbeing in young people. Are there any groups of children and young people who you think particularly benefit from access to social media?*

Social media has prompted a revolution in peer-to-peer interaction and sharing. Social networking offers young people who may be suffering from mental health issues an opportunity to read, watch or listen to, and understand, the health experiences of others – relating them back to their own reality. Research into this phenomenon suggests the act of learning about others' health experiences may be hugely beneficial to those experiencing health issues themselves. Reading blogs or watching vlogs on the personal health issues of others their own age may improve young people's health literacy, prompt individuals to access relevant health services and enable individuals to better explain their own health circumstances or make better health choices. Health campaigns can gain credibility through community promotion on social media, and the very personal nature of someone sharing their experiences can provide others with practical strategies and coping mechanisms.

Social media may also offer an invaluable opportunity to engage young people with more conventional health messaging. Those in their teens and early twenties are

traditionally difficult to engage with health issues, particularly mental health, and are low healthcare utilisers. However, taking health messages to the interactive spaces young people frequent on social media may be one way to ensure they are receiving expert health information that other demographics may receive through more conventional channels. This information may come in the form of signposting to health services or even physicians making themselves available online for young people to communicate with. Studies suggest that young people with mental health issues are heavier users of social media, presenting a golden opportunity to enhance the presence of health care services online to offer help and support to those young people who need it. However, this must be tempered by an awareness that information shared on social media is not always reliable.

Also, there is evidence to suggest that strong adolescent friendships can be enhanced by social media interaction, allowing young people to create stronger bonds with people they already know – supporting the idea that, in social terms, the ‘rich-get-richer’. The enhancement of real world interaction is key to the success of social media.

Finally, the community building aspect of social media is also a distinct positive aspect for many young people. By joining ‘groups’ or ‘pages’ young people can surround themselves with like-minded people and share their thoughts or concerns. These groups may be minorities in the real world, but can build online communities that provide a safe network for young people, such as those from the LGBTQ+ community or ethnic minorities that are at higher risk for compromised mental health. Social media allows these young people to connect with each other and build a sense of community, despite geographical separation.