



# Research in Practice

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## Covert and cyber bullying

The Australian Covert Bullying Prevalence Study (Cross et al. 2009) was commissioned by the Australian Government and conducted by the Child Health Promotion Research Centre at Edith Cowan University. It has highlighted the growing problem of covert and cyber bullying affecting Australian schools and their students. Covert bullying can be understood as any form of aggressive behaviour that is repeated, intended to cause harm, characterised by an imbalance of power and is hidden from, or unacknowledged by, adults. It can include the spreading of rumours or attempts at socially excluding others. Cyber bullying is a form of covert bullying and is carried out through the use of technology; for example, on the internet through emails, blogs and social networking sites, as well as via mobile phones (Cross et al. 2009).

Results from this study identified age trends in the occurrence of covert and cyber bullying. For example, 65 percent of Year 4 students experienced covert bullying, with this number decreasing to 35 percent of Year 9 students. Up to 10 percent of students in Year 4 to Year 9 reported having been cyber bullied in the previous term, with older students in this age category reporting a higher rate of victimisation than younger students. The increase in cyber bullying and subsequent decrease in covert bullying as students get older could be attributed to students maturing and becoming more independent and competent in their use of new technologies. The hidden nature of covert and cyber bullying practices makes them difficult for teachers and school administrators to prevent or stop (Smith et al. 2008) and perhaps, as a consequence, students reported a reluctance to inform teachers of incidents. This is particularly concerning, given the potential ongoing social and psychological issues that can result for both students who have been bullied and those who engage in bullying behaviour (Farrington & Tofi 2009).

Recommendations from Cross et al. (2009) include a number of strategies for schools and parents to utilise to prevent covert and cyber bullying:

- Involve students, staff and parents in the development of a whole-school approach to understanding, preventing and dealing with bullying, including covert and cyber bullying.
- Ensure the roles of parents, staff and students in preventing and dealing with covert and cyber bullying are understood and followed. Provide continual support to staff and parents in their roles through facilitating ongoing access to training.
- As methods of bullying change with advances in technology, as is particularly the case with cyber bullying, prevention policies and procedures need to continually evolve. Regular communication with students will assist in understanding the prevalence of covert bullying, the forms it takes and the effect of changes to anti-bullying policies.
- Address the root causes of bullying and associated behavioural issues. Educate and empower students with knowledge of the causes and implications of bullying and the role of the peer group in encouraging or preventing bullying behaviours.
- Actions such as banning student use of personal technologies while at school have been found to reduce the chances students will report cyber bullying for fear of having their mobile phones or laptops confiscated.
- Ensure spaces where technology can be accessed are highly visible to staff.

## References

All URLs correct at 23 February 2010

Cross D et al. 2009. *Australian covert bullying prevalence study*. Perth: Edith Cowan University. [www.deewr.gov.au/Schooling/NationalSafeSchools/Pages/research.aspx](http://www.deewr.gov.au/Schooling/NationalSafeSchools/Pages/research.aspx)

Farrington D & Tofi M 2009. *School-based programs to reduce bullying and victimization*. Campbell systematic reviews no. 6. [http://www.campbellcollaboration.org/reviews\\_crime\\_justice/index.php](http://www.campbellcollaboration.org/reviews_crime_justice/index.php)

Smith P et al. 2008. Cyberbullying: Its nature and impact in secondary school pupils. *The Journal of Child Psychology* 49(4): 376–385