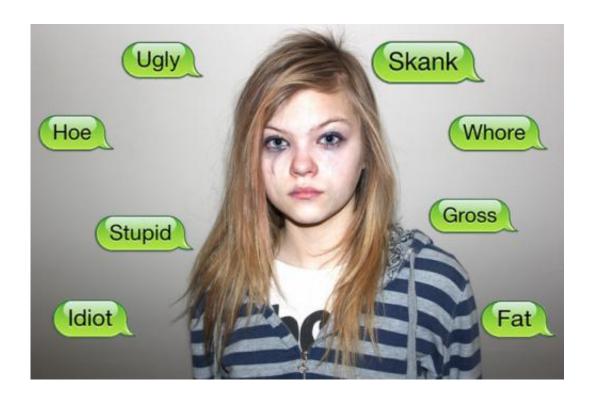# How can we protect young people from cyberbullying?

August 16 2013, by Debra Rickwood

Young people are uniquely vulnerable to bullying – as both victims and perpetrators. Credit: kid-josh/Flickr

The recent arrest by Canadian police of two young people who allegedly shared a photo of a young woman being sexually assaulted has once again highlighted the danger that social media can pose for teenagers.

The 17-year-old girl was bullied after the photo, which was taken in

2011, went viral. She died a few days after a [suicide attempt](#) in April.

Canadian police initially failed to lay any charges despite a year-long investigation. But the case has caused such outrage that Nova Scotia, the province where it took place, has introduced a law allowing people being bullied online or their parents to sue the [perpetrator](#).

This kind of case is becoming more common with the [proliferation](#) of [social media](#) and Australia is in the enviable position of not having had a case of [cyberbullying](#) leading to death.

And there are things we can do to ensure we don't have to.

A new landscape

A regulatory response would show that the law applies equally to behaviour online, but cyberbullying and suicide are complex individual and [social issues](#) that require a complex multi-faceted response.

We know that [young people](#) are uniquely vulnerable to bullying – as both victims and perpetrators, both online and off. They're acutely sensitive to peer appraisal and rejection, and are also more prone to do thoughtless and cruel things when spurred on by their [peers](#).

Bullying has always had [negative consequences](#), but the all-pervasive reach of the online world magnifies its impact. Social media is accessible to everyone all the time.

And a smart phone is the permanent accessory of the teen—constantly available to record, receive and respond to text messages and images.

Privacy has changed forever and there's little respite for today's teenagers. They face a relentless need to manage their online [social](#)

[identity](#) and reputation, and the ever-present possibility of public humiliation.

How to help kids

Our first response should be to support teenagers to be informed and empowered users of social media, as well as responsible online social citizens.

Useful resources are increasingly available, but this education is too important to be ad hoc. We need to build it into routine learning at school.

Knowing how and where to seek appropriate help when they are distressed and feeling vulnerable is also critical for young people.

We know that teenagers don't think through the consequences of their actions in the same way that adults do. This means we can't expect young people to always monitor and moderate their own behaviour without help.

Adults have a duty to protect young people when they are vulnerable, and this duty increases in inverse proportion to the child's age.

How to help the grown ups

We also need to ensure that parents (and other adults responsible for young people) are well-informed about online safety, and know how to deal with bullying and where to seek help.

Parents must realise that effective monitoring of online behaviour is now part of their role, and they need to be vigilant about both bullying and

victimisation.

The responsibilities of social media companies comprise another part of an effective response.

Facebook has rules regarding inappropriate content and processes for removing it. But these rely on the content being highlighted as such and judged to violate community standards.

And Twitter is initiating easier abuse notification. But as new social media products appear on the internet, there is no guarantee that they will have a sense of social responsibility.

Some new ways to share images and other content claim to increase user control (such as Snapchat where the amount of time an image is available can be limited), but this doesn't preclude them from being used as avenues of bullying and abuse.

We could possibly do more with automated trawling to monitor content for keywords that indicate risk, and raise the alarm – potentially even to parents.

It will take time to find effective ways to monitor and moderate online environments—through the technology of the platforms themselves, and the engagement of parents and others in the community, including the police when necessary.

Social media is now a part of our social fabric and we all have a role to play to help keep young people safe from its darker side. Social media companies need to renew their efforts and it may well be time to start talking about the kind of regulatory measures we can take as a nation to help reinforce positive social norms.

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