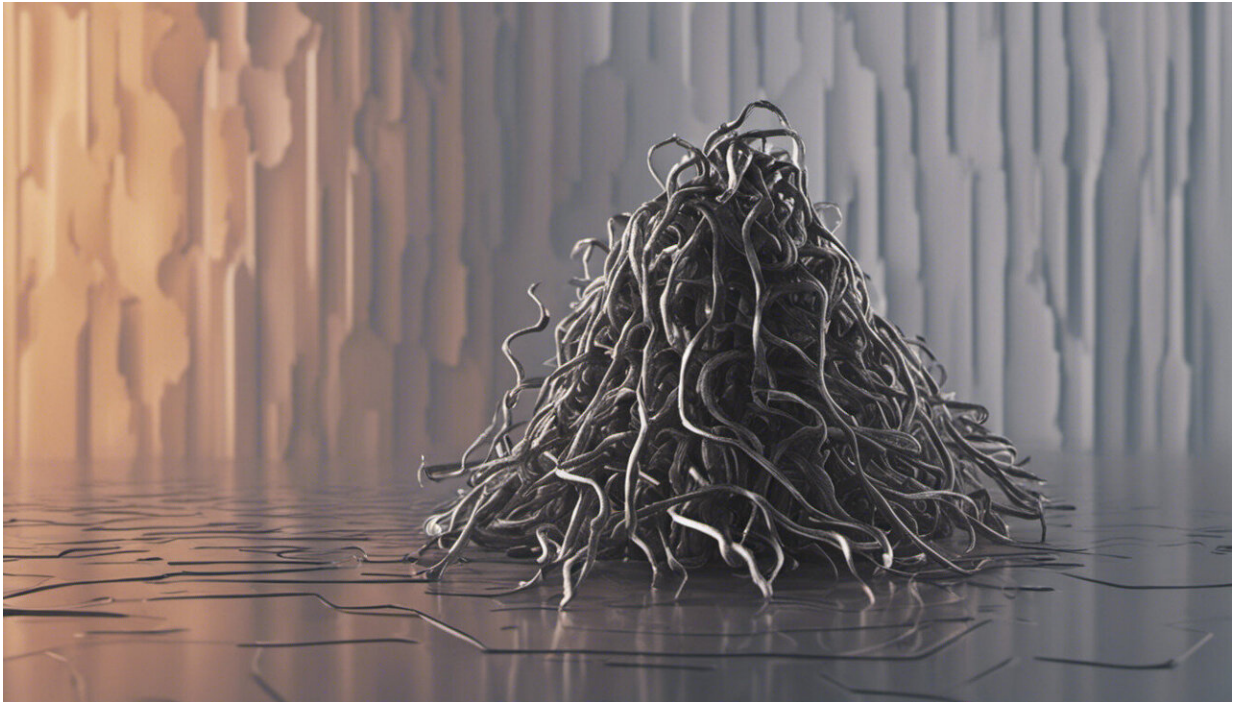# Combating bullies in the online playground

April 12 2016, by Kerry Faulkner, Sciencenetwork Wa

Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Bystanders who see school-yard bullying can intervene and stop it in about 10 seconds but when aggression moves online, young cyber peer groups become unsure of what to do.

An estimated one in 10 Australian teenagers experiences cyberbullying.

Research shows while it is less common than face-to-face bullying, it

effects can be much more severe, resulting in suicide and self-harm.

Onlookers are less likely to involve themselves with online bullying because they have difficulty working out the context of comments without [body language](#) and tone to help, Edith Cowan University PhD student Lisa Patterson says.

In addition there are no authority figures in the online world for support.

Ms Patterson interviewed 24 Perth school students aged 13 to 16 about the role of bystanders in physical school bullying and cyberbullying.

As part of the study they were asked what they'd do in a hypothetical scenario where a school colleague (Sam) has posted nasty comments about another colleague on social media, saying he is 'ugly, weird and annoying.'

They were asked if their response would be different if it happened at school.

"They [the colleagues] could ignore it more online because if they don't really like Sam they could just 'miss' his post – but at [school](#) it would be out in the playground," one participant said at the time.

Part of the solution, Ms Patterson says, is to increase bystander intervention in online bullying.

She says peers should speak-out and say what's said or shared is wrong.

If they fear being targeted, they should support the victim in private.

If they feel someone is at risk, they should seek the advice of a trusted adult and never forward negative comments or content, she says.

"The bystander behaviours should be prosocial or positive in nature rather than negative behaviours such as being abusive or retaliating, which often only inflames the situation and may make matters worse," Ms Patterson says.

The research shows that when young people ask adults for advice with online bullying, their solution is often to take away the media or denigrate its use.

Ms Patterson says it is more helpful for adults to help children formulate rules about what is acceptable online behaviour and good responses to unacceptable behaviour.

Victims of face-to-face bullying have an escape, by moving to a safe place but cyberbullying infiltrates even those safe places, Ms Patterson says.

More information: Lisa J. Patterson et al. Adolescent bystanders' perspectives of aggression in the online versus school environments, *Journal of Adolescence* (2016). DOI: 10.1016/j.adolescence.2016.02.003

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