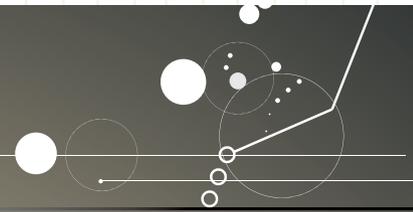




cyber chat



By Dr. Barbara Spears

Welcome to Cyberchat #4. A couple of weeks ago, I was invited to attend a meeting at the Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) offices in Sydney to discuss cyberbullying.

I thought wow! Bullying and its most recent iteration, cyberbullying, have been recognised as a human rights issue! This may have been a slightly premature assumption on my part, but not altogether far from the truth when you examine the mission, laws and instruments below. It is often the one who is different in some way – different by age, gender, race or ability – who is targeted by bullying and cyberbullying, especially when they are seen as having less power. Each of these laws below, highlights the rights of all individuals to be treated equally, regardless of ability, age, gender or race. What is of import, is that HREOC is paying attention to cyberbullying and looking to contribute in some way to the conversations about it.

As an organisation, its mission is to lead the promotion and protection of human rights in Australia by making human rights values part of everyday life; empowering all people to understand and exercise their human rights; working with individuals, community, business and government to inspire action; keeping government accountable to national and international human rights standards; and securing an Australian charter of rights. It has statutory responsibilities under numerous Federal laws and responsibilities under several human rights instruments. So where does technology sit with this, you ask?

Sitting around the table with representatives from government and non-government organisations, such as the Alannah & Madeline Foundation; Inspire Foundation; National Association

for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (NAPCAN); Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA); School Aid; Edith Cowan University; and the University of South Australia (me), I reflected on the excellent work being done by them all to support young people experiencing difficulties with life and with cyberbullying.

What was most significant in my reflection, was the way that technology has been engaged as part of the solution to these problems, which paradoxically in the case of cyberbullying, only exists because of technology. Reaching young people in the cyberspaces they operate in socially, is paramount if young people's attitudes to cyberbullying and other issues are going to change. NAPCAN's Smart Online, Safe Offline (SOSO) campaign is an excellent example of an interactive experience for young people aged 9-15. With simple messages such as 'Join in and you're a bully too' they have created an interactive Web Warriors game and a YouTube clip <http://www.youtube.com/watchvCBjiaYbt5Xwk>.

Inspire Foundation's Reach Out is a site where young people experiencing difficulties with their lives, can 'reach out' for information, to explore issues and to connect with people. It is a web-based initiative to help young people improve their understanding of mental health issues; develop resilience, and increase their coping skills and help-seeking behavior. It services young people who may be geographically or socially isolated. The Reach Out Teachers' Network (free!) connects secondary teachers with Reach Out, providing a tailored website and resources for teachers. Do you realise that 1 in 5 students in our classrooms will have a recognised mental health difficulty and that 1 in 3 will seek professional help?

School Aid is a national school-based philanthropy network empowering kids to help kids in a crisis – where kids help kids through commitment and action to build a lifelong sense of care and compassion, moral and social responsibility. Founded by a school principal, Australian kids have helped other kids by raising funds to support schools after the Banda Aceh Tsunami; the China Earthquakes and the Victorian bushfires in 2009, and now the Pakistan floods and the Indigenous Literacy campaign. The Teachers' Lounge offers free resources through the support of the Telstra Foundation.

The Australian Communication and Media Authority's (ACMA) cybersmart website has a wealth of support resources for everyone in the community on staying safe online and the Alannah & Madeline Foundation Cybersafety and Wellbeing initiative has some 'quick tips' for being smart, safe and responsible online.

So, is technology being engaged as part of the solution to life and cyberbullying problems? Is there a place for the Australian Human Rights Commission at the cyberbullying table? I would hope that like me, you say YES to both of these questions, for those around the table at the meeting are actively pursuing technology as a means of improving others' life situations, and upholding the rights of all individuals to be treated equally, regardless of ability, age, gender or race. 

Dr Barbara Spears is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Education, University of South Australia. She has led the Australian Government investigation into Covert Bullying: Insights into the Human Dimension of Covert Bullying, and is a member of the evaluation team for KidsMatter, a national mental health initiative in primary schools.