



**How do parents and peers negotiate troubling peer-based digital interactions?**

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## Abstract

Inter peer-group bullying and other troubling peer-group interaction impacts significantly upon some young people's experiences of new media use. It is an acknowledged issue in Australia and has been associated with a number of tragic suicides and countless incidents of self-harm (Department of Communications, 2014: 4). In 2010–11, young Australians were more likely than 9–16 year olds in 23 European countries (out of 25) to say that they had been bothered by bullies online within the previous 12 months (Green et al., 2011: 64). While Estonia and Romania reported a slightly higher or equal rate of online bullying to Australia, the percentage of online bullying as part of the overall experience of bullying was greater in Australia than in the two other high-reporting countries. In Estonia, 43% of children reported being bullied in any context, with 14% reporting being bullied online; while the Romanian figures were 41% overall with 13% online. The equivalent Australian figures were 29% and 13%. This indicates that, in proportional terms, online bullying may be a bigger issue for Australia than it is in a wide range of other nations. The European average across 25 studies was 19% of children reporting experiencing bullying in any context with 6% saying they had been bullied online. The experience of online bullying poses a serious risk for a significant number of Australian children, making them feel that the internet is not a safe place for them to be. It has consequently been the focus for a range of policy concerns and a recent Discussion Paper issued for public comment: 'Enhancing online safety for children' (Department of Communications, 2014). The Department of Communications' work builds upon the national *Bullying, Young People and the Law Symposium*, 2013, hosted by the National Centre Against Bullying under the auspices of the Alannah and Madeleine Foundation. The Symposium recommendations included the development of 'an appropriate legal framework to address bullying and cyber-bullying'. These high level policy issues, and the media coverage of suicides and other tragic responses, may appear somewhat disengaged from the everyday responses by young people, their parents, and their peers, to the dynamics of negative online experiences. This paper takes data from 18 in-depth interviews with parents and teenaged children to investigate everyday responses. The participants were not selected on the basis of having been bullied, more in terms of a child and a parent both being willing to be interviewed around the domestic parameters of the child's internet use, but bullying as an issue was raised more often than the headline proportion of 13% across Australia might have indicated. This paper addresses a range of responses tried and considered by people impacted by peer-driven negative online encounters within the context of the larger public policy discussions in Australia and the possible appointment of a Children's eSafety Commissioner.

Keywords: New media, parents, peers, bullying, comparative research

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### **Background and context**

Between October 2010 and February 2011, four hundred (400) randomly selected Australian children, aged between 9 and 16, and the parent most involved with their internet use, were interviewed as part of an international comparative study. Funded by the ARC Centre of Excellence for Creative Industries and Innovation (CCI), this research paralleled and duplicated work with 25,142 children (and a further 25,142 associated parents and caregivers) from 25 European nations. In essence, Australia was country 26 in this international comparative study, EU Kids Online (n.d.). The data collected meant that Australian children's online experiences could be benchmarked against that of their same-age European counterparts. The project was written up in 2011 (Green et al., 2011) and separate reports have since been issued including one which looked at the things that bother Australian children online (Green et al., 2013). Findings confirm that Australian children experience particular problems with online bullying and other troubling aspects of peer-to-peer interactions.

Australian children were more likely than children in 25 other nations to say they had felt troubled by something they encountered online in the previous 12 months. The word used was whether they had felt bothered by something, and 'bothered' was explained as '*made you feel uncomfortable, upset, or feel that you shouldn't have seen it*'. Thirty per cent (30%) of Australian children said they had been bothered by something, compared with 12% of children across the 25 other participating nations. Australian children were more than 2.5 times likely than the average European child to say they had experienced a troubling online encounter. The nearest equivalent results were: Denmark (28%) and Estonia (25%) (Green et al., 2011: 61). An inspection of what constitutes troubling interactions for Australian children indicates a range of possible causes.

Six separate areas of concern were investigated in the AU (and EU) Kids Online research. These comprise: (i) the misuse of children's personal data; (ii) children being bullied online; (iii) seeing sexual images; (iv) seeing potentially harmful user-generated content (for example: anorexia sites, suicide sites, self-harm sites); (v) sending/receiving

sexual messages ('sexting'); and (vi) going to meet in person someone who has only become known through online communication. It transpires that the overall result of 30% of Australian children identifying themselves as having been troubled by one or more online interactions in the previous 12 months has more to do with higher scores against peer-based activities than with sexual images or user-generated content. The relative figures are shown in the following table:

<i>Risky troubling experience encountered</i>	<i>% AU kids</i>	<i>% EU kids</i>	<i>Relative ranking in 26 countries</i>
Misuse of personal data	17	9	2/26
Experience of being bullied online	13	6	3/26
Seeing sexual images	28	14	4/26
Potentially harmful user-generated information	34	21	6/26
Sending/receiving sexual images	15	15	16/26
Meeting in person someone previously only met online	5	9	21/26
Incidentally, Australian children are much less likely than their average EU counterpart to have a public social network site profile	9	26	

(based on Green et al., 2013: 4)

Given that children's concerns around the misuse of their personal data is more likely to be as a result of peer-to-peer interaction than as a result of commercial activities or corporate data protection, it may be that both 'Misuse of personal data' and 'Experience of being bullied online' represent the impact of troubling peer-based activities.

Some aspects of these concerns were also investigated in an open-ended question asked of the children prior to offering them the examples of experiences that they might have found troubling. Seventy-one per cent (71%) of Australian children offered a response to the open-ended question 'What things on the internet bother people about your age?' (The only nation where a larger proportion of children responded to this prompt was Denmark 73% [Green et al., 2013: 3], with Norway following with 67%, and the average EU response being 39%.) Thirty per cent (30%) of the 285 (/400) Australian children who identified one or more risks online indicated that other people's conduct was an

issue for them, compared with 19% of the 9,636 (/25,142) European children who volunteered a response to this question (Green et al., 2013: 5). Australian children were slightly more likely to identify (other people's) 'conduct issues' as more likely to be problematic for them (30%) than their exposure to online sexual content (27%). Examples from relevant responses to the open-ended question include:

*I think that some people write bad things on the internet about other people and that makes them feel uncomfortable. (Girl, 13, Australia)*

*On club penguin/ a guy came and said / get out of here you f..ing person/ I was very terrified. (Boy, 9, Australia)*

*People can say harmful things. People can hear or see something that is inappropriate. People can log into your account if they have your password. If they have your email address they could make you an account and say harmful things. (Girl, 9, Australia)*

*On facebook people can write offensive things about other people also there are sites were you can write things about someone and it can be written without the person knowing. (Boy, 14, Australia)*

*Posting giving people bad images about people which are not true and meant to be nasty so they lose friends. (Girl, 15, Australia)*

*Rumours. Girls who steal peoples boyfriends and just silly things like calling someone fat or talking badly about their parents/family etc. (Girl, 11, Australia)*

*Cyber bullying and gossiping on the internet where everyone can see it. (Girl, 15, Australia)*

(Cited in Green et al., 2013: 6)

Partly to investigate this issue further, the EU Kids Online survey-based research was followed up with in-depth qualitative interviews with a number of teens and parents in Western Australia (metropolitan and non-metropolitan) who had not previously been connected with the AU Kids Online research. These ‘parents and peers’ interviews provide a range of indicative case studies concerning the kind of behaviours that young people find troubling.

### **The ‘parents and peers’ research: methodology**

The initial research design was to investigate peer-group interactions around online fanfiction (often girls) and gaming (often boys), with additional study of an active social network community (mixed gender), interviewing a range of peer participants and relevant parents. Since these are activities that are not generally sanctioned by schools, the original idea was to recruit through media publicity, self-referral and snowball referral networks. However, at various stages, when several parents were considering participation, one or more would ask whether the children’s school supported the study. Again and again the research recruitment floundered because the school had not been consulted and warned parents against participating.

Eventually, after about eight months of failing to secure interviews with groups of teens, the researchers changed their approach and sought permission via the relevant schools’ organisations (WA Department of Education, Catholic Education Office WA, Association of Independent Schools of WA, etc.) to approach families via the schools. This strategy was successful in introducing researchers to a number of families where parents and teens were both willing to be interviewed, but not in delivering coherent groups of young people who were used to collaborating online in gaming or fanfiction writing contexts. The decision was reluctantly taken to interview volunteers even where it was not possible to interview several members of a group that frequently interacts online. Somewhat unexpectedly, the young people interviewed were more likely to raise issues around ‘bitchiness and bullying’ than might have been expected by the 13% of responses in this area from the randomly selected 400 participants in the AU Kids Online survey. Three case studies are investigated here, taken from the first 18 interviews.

The parents and children cited in this research paper were generally recruited via the child’s school. Typically, the child took home a package of literature about the research,

gave it to the parent, and the parent and child together decided whether they were willing to participate. Children needed to give their own consent and also to get parental consent to take part. Parents needed to consent separately to their own involvement. Data collection was via one-on-one in-depth interview, and the child and parent were interviewed separately. Interviewing was by an experienced interviewer who had satisfied a full Western Australian Government 'Working with Children check' (in this case Donell Holloway conducted all the interviews). A token honorarium was paid to participants after the interview, and all parties were permitted to withdraw all or any aspect of their interview up to 28 days after it had been recorded. Material was transcribed, then coded for relevant data using a constant comparative approach (Fram, 2013) and the principles of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Names and details of participants have been changed to protect privacy and comply with ethics approvals, and transcript quotations have been further de-identified to preserve anonymity. All transcripts are verbatim and this means that they may not necessarily be grammatical.

**Case study one: Mirralee (mother of four) and Sauri (14, oldest daughter).**

Mirralee is a Facebook 'friend' of her daughter, Sauri. She says, of Sauri's Facebook account:

I worry about that once something is out there you can't take it back, so if you are having a bad day, or an argument with someone – be careful what you write. It can turn into bitchiness and bullying. Girls are very much like that, they are hard work. Boys might just throw a punch at their mate but girls drag it out. [...]. I see what [Sauri and her friends] put on there, and I think – settle down girls. I say to [Sauri] – if you are getting into an argument, just put your device down and walk away, but [girls] find that hard – everyone likes to have the last word. You can tell when they have had a bit of a tiff with their friends, and I need to look at what [Sauri has] written or said. Most of the time it is ok, but I do worry about bullying.

Mirralee thinks that Sauri would know what to do if she were the victim of bullying, but doesn't believe that Sauri would necessarily come directly to her:

[Sauri] is very private, but if I didn't find out from her I would find out from someone else. She has a lot of friends that would stand up for her. There was a

recent issue that someone else told me about – she [Sauri] wanted to keep it to herself and not make the conflict bigger – so I guess it depends on the child. Once it came out in the open it was ok, but she probably would try not to tell me straight away because she knew that I'd get involved and she'd be worried that I'd make things worse.

Sauri sees a few differences between her online and offline friend cohorts noting that 'most of the friends that I have online I know in the real world and I don't usually add them as a friend if I don't know them, but some people I don't really talk to that much in school but sometimes when they are online we will talk, so it [the friendship group] is a bit different.' Asked about how she would handle being bullied online, Sauri says 'I think if it happened to me – it has kind of happened to me – I would probably just try and get out of the conversation or not try to contact that person, and just wait to see if they kept saying stuff or doing stuff.' She sees parental involvement as something of a last resort: 'If it was really bad then I would tell my mum and she might be able to contact the police if it was really bad.' Sauri also constructs the school's role as being at arm's length: 'I don't think they would do anything because it is online at home, but I think there is a school site where you are allowed to chat – I don't know how many people are on there, but if it was on that site I think the person would get in quite a bit of trouble.' These two perspectives – parents are a last resort and schools are not involved because online bullying occurs in the home – have the dual effect of throwing Sauri back on her personal and peer-group resources.

Sauri explains some of the misunderstandings that can arise and lead to perceptions of bullying and inappropriate behavior as reflecting key differences between online and offline communication: 'when you are talking to someone you can't exactly see how they are feeling – their emotions through their facials, so you can't ... some of the things that are said can be taken the wrong way. I think there would be a few things said, or maybe a joke or something, but they didn't really take it as a joke when people are saying something.' She indicates that the persistent digital record of online communication introduces problems of context and memory since friends might 'tease each other in a friendly way, but if someone is reading it afterwards they might forget how it was said.' Although this statement stands alone, it is possibly the case that Sauri speaks from



experience here in that she may have had a statement misinterpreted or responded to in a way in which she had not intended or against which she wished to protect herself. These complexities of peer-group relationships serve as a reminder that it is rarely the case that any teen is solely a victim or perpetrator of inappropriate peer-group communication, but sometimes finds themselves accused of, or inhabiting, either or both roles.

When asked who has taught her the most about how to handle problems that might arise on the internet, Sauri points to formal instruction as being especially helpful: ‘our health teacher taught us the most because they had to cover social bullying so we saw a lot of videos about people and how they could have avoided being talked to on the internet or how they could have avoided getting a virus. I think it was helpful and showed us that it does happen a lot and that we should be careful what we do.’

Although both Sauri and Mirralee indicate that Sauri had experience of being bullied online, this is something that neither were prepared to share in much detail. Instead, they indicated subtly that Sauri had moved on. Mirralee did this by acknowledging that she knew that Sauri had been involved in ‘a recent incident’, while noting that she (Mirralee) had learned about the exchange from someone other than Sauri. Sauri, meanwhile, implies that telling her parents about online bullying would be one step short of involving the police. She would only ask for their help when things were ‘really bad’.

Given that Sauri volunteers her concern that the lack of complex cues involved in online communication compared with face-to-face exchanges increases the potential for misinterpretation, it is possible that Sauri believes that this kind of misunderstanding underlies the ‘recent incident’. Thus Sauri may prefer to construct her recent troubling exchange as something that was unintentionally taken amiss, rather than bullying behavior as such. In all, this vignette indicates the complexity and nuance of such online interplay and the possible value of parents communicating that they see themselves as an early point of contact for such matters, rather than a last resort. Nonetheless, parents are among the first to acknowledge that they are still exploring how to negotiate the challenges of supporting their children through challenging online activities. As Mirralee told Donell, the interviewer, ‘I am just learning as I go so have nothing to add.’

**Case study two: Susanna (a nurse) has three boys. At 13, Patrick is her youngest son.**

Asked about any experience of bullying or harassment, Patrick says that he doesn't use Facebook and only connects with friends via his Skype account:

I haven't been bullied or harassed. I've had arguments with people on Skype and we've fallen out. One day I did get a threat from someone on Skype – I don't know why, he is still my friend. He threatened to hit me and then he came up to me at school and tripped me over and punched me in the stomach and then he ran away and I thought it was over, then he came back and tripped me over again. Then he acted like he was the victim.

[Donell: *Did that get sorted out at school or did you just ignore it?*]

We kind of both got in trouble but we've got over it now.

[Donell: *Are you still in contact on Skype with that person?*]

Yes but I'm not as good a friend with him anymore. Every time I see him, I think about what he did to me. That was the year before last.

[Donell: *What do you think you would do if someone was hacking your pages or misusing some of your information?*]

I would change my password. The ironic thing – the person that threatened me and hurt me – his account got hacked. I think someone hacked it and changed the password so he couldn't get back in. It was someone he knew. It was a friend of someone he knew that didn't like him. They just changed his password but he got it back. I think he might have talked to the person he was friends with that knew the person that hated him and the person he was friends with convinced the person to give him back his account.

This little exchange indicates the complexity around what constitutes bullying and whether or not a teen respondent might see themselves as having been bullied and under what circumstances. In this story, Patrick constructs himself as not having been bullied but then goes on to describe a situation which clearly fulfills a number of key definitions of bullying behavior, with consequent ramifications for his relationship with his school and with the other party. The narrative segues through to discuss a possible incident which might have precipitated bad feeling: a description of this school friend's internet account being hacked with Patrick's careful use of third person speech throughout, and with the timeframe of the incident uncertain, and with a plausible explanation of a kind of

resolution of the problem. Susanna's comment on this incident indicates that Patrick and she might have spoken about what he'd said in his interview prior to her being interviewed for the research:

I think [Patrick] told you about his experience with Skype where there was a bit of hassle going on. He just blocked them. There was a bit of a spill over at school, and the school wasn't aware that any of these issues were happening with Skype. It sort of blew up out of nowhere – these two boys were good mates and suddenly there was biffing and bullying and [Patrick] rang me and I went to the school. The Principal sorted it out and made them shake hands. It was a bit on both sides, because [Patrick] had said some rude things as well. The Principal hadn't known that they had been on Skype and it had been brewing. It had happened over the holidays. The boy had been away and come back to school one week later so it wasn't the first day back, but when the other boy was back at school.

In general terms, however, Susanna is happy with the ways in which her children use the internet. She says; 'I trust their judgment in what areas they go to. I'm a little bit worried that when [Patrick] gets a bit older he might get into ones that I don't agree with.' In this, Susanna aligns herself with the experience of many Australian parents and families:

Most parents trust their child's judgement about the internet and, at least some of the time, leave it up to him/her to choose what is done on the internet (83 per cent). This includes two-thirds who trust their child's judgement all/most of the time (66 per cent). Nonetheless, most households (75 per cent) have rules, understandings or arrangements. (ACMA, 2007: 28)

As Susanna thinks about issues concerning Patrick's online activities which unsettle her, she adds, 'It's more the length of time. I feel really guilty that they are on it so much.' She adds: 'We turn [the internet router] off late at the moment but I think that is going to come back to an earlier time. But we don't set a good example – I watch a lot of TV and [my husband, Luke] is on the internet a lot. It is almost like you have to turn it off and make everybody do the same thing.' Although parents do worry about bullying, research generally indicates that their primary concerns centre on pedophile contact ('stranger danger'), pornography/sexual content and access to online content about suicide, anorexia

and self-harm (Livingstone and Haddon, 2009: 27). As with Susanna's case, our research also indicates parental concerns around whether they, the parents, should be doing more to limit their children's online activities. Yet it is misuse of personal data and bullying, as indicated in the list of issues that bother Australian children, which impact most significantly upon their ranking as being more likely than children in 25 other countries to have experienced troubling interactions on the internet.

**Case study three: Michelle (library assistant) and Poppy (16), fanfiction writer.**

This family has been deeply affected by bullying, and its impact is still felt some years after the initial events. Michelle was saying how some of Poppy's friends had moved to Derby, in the far northwest of the state:

She was mourning the fact that she wouldn't have contact with them. She had a Facebook account and was sort of using it with a few people, but I encouraged her to start using Facebook [to connect with her absent friend] but she wouldn't put a friend request up for a while. She didn't have the confidence but we had a chat about it and after that Facebook seemed to take off. I'm not sure if it is a good or a bad thing that I encouraged her. She didn't get into it until she was 15. I think she was a bit hesitant about getting on Facebook because she had been bullied at primary school and I think she didn't want to have any of that. She is very careful about who she is friends with, and who they are friends with. I think she checks out their friendships first.

Poppy's hesitancy extends beyond a reluctance to engage with others to an active monitoring of the children who had made her life difficult some years earlier. 'Some of the kids that had bullied her, we went and looked at their Facebook accounts to find out what they were doing now. That was in years 5, 6 & 7. It was very bad psychological bullying. I think that is one of the reasons why she is very careful with the internet. She is a very private person as well so she is going on it on her terms.' Sometimes, the impacts of having been bullied are generalised to an awareness of vulnerability across a range of social situations, which may lead to a reluctance to engage in everyday activities. This has the potential to doubly victimise the bullied person; once, at the time, and repeatedly, as a reverberating impact across the years.

It may be because of Poppy's experiences in primary school that she is attracted to edgier aspects of the internet. For example, she revealed in her interview that she is a regular

user of the ‘Anonymous’ home site, 4chan, associated with online hacktivism and other subversive activities:

I have Facebook but it mainly sits in the background – I don’t do much on it. I just have it there in case someone sends me a message but no one ever does really. I sometimes watch YouTube videos, I go on *4chan*. It is an image board which is where people post images with text. It is not a very nice place. It is basically the people on 4chan – because when they post without putting a name in which most people do – they show as ‘Anonymous’, so Anonymous has this thing about it being ... it calls itself the internet hate machine, but that’s only because Fox News called it that. So they took that up. They are normally just smart comments about anything.

In 2012 Anonymous became involved in an international scandal around a teen suicide which followed years of online bullying. Prior to killing herself Amanda Todd, a 15 year old Canadian girl, had posted a video composed of a series of flashcards telling of her experience of being bullied and victimised. After Todd’s death, the video went viral. The primary tormentor was a man who had persuaded Todd over many months to flash her breasts for him on webcam, and who captured the image, subsequently making it his homepage and communicating directly with Todd’s classmates as she moved from school to school trying to make a new start. 4chan believed that they had found and outed the man responsible for persecuting Todd, but their conclusions were discredited by a police investigation (CBC News, 2012). Todd is used as a case study and exemplar by a number of schools as a warning for young people about the dangers of online interactions, and also to demonstrate the possible impact of secondary bullying by peers as a result of a young person’s past actions.

For Poppy, with her early experiences of having been badly bullied, association with a hacktivism group such as 4chan, which has a reputation for taking direct action on behalf of victims, might seem particularly attractive. Even so, Poppy’s engagement with 4chan is far from straightforward: ‘I mostly just read it. I don’t go on there for very long. It is one of those places where I will be on there for 10 minutes and that’s enough to lose faith in humanity so I think ‘I’ll go’. I post occasionally.’

Active engagement with such potentially subversive sites has brought Poppy into contact with a range of skills and competencies which might otherwise be unusual in a Western Australian schoolgirl: 'I have a 30 character password on many of my blogs, I have a fingerprint scan on my Facebook. If I'm doing something like posting an essay about something that is a bit political and quite current, then I'll use an ID hider. It basically makes it look like Uzbekistan or something, it hides who I am.' She goes on to say that 'You can generally spot people that are going to be creepy on the internet. It is best to just assume that people on the internet are going to be creepy, because chances are, they are.' Asked if she is concerned that things she posts now will haunt her in ten years' time, Poppy responds: 'That's why I have a strong point of keeping myself very separate and all my blogs very separate from each other, and myself very separate from my blogs, so that my reputation won't follow me.'

Michelle's strategy for handling the times when she is concerned about Poppy is to open 'the communication lines [...] one thing that we do often – especially when [Poppy] was getting bullied – [...] we will go for a drive and that is a time to talk without anyone else listening. We go for a special drive.' The value of this strategy is that parent and child can both feel connected, in shared space, without feeling adversarially engaged across a table or in a potentially confrontational interrogation. Indeed, while driving, the parent's eyes are on the road, allowing the child to 'talk if there are things worrying them but sometimes they just want to listen to the music'.

## **Conclusion**

Troubling peer-based interactions can have significant repercussions across the years and impact upon young people's future uses of the internet. These impacts include both the nature and frequency of peer-group interactions and wider engagement with online content and activities. In this research, and in other projects this team is involved with, we have become aware of extensive publicity around online bullying associated with particular tragedies such as the suicide of Amanda Todd. Todd's story has been extensively used as a teaching point in health education and bullying awareness, and in terms of exploring the different ways in which classmates might have made a contribution to helping her handle these challenges, or in exacerbating their effects. For

the child experiencing troubling peer-based interactions, however, it can be very difficult to maintain a sense of perspective.

While parents have a role in helping their children negotiate these issues, even a brief discussion can reveal the complex sets of motivations and prompts impacting upon troubling peer-based interactions. The context is rarely one of simple ‘right and wrong’ behaviours; instead the difficult interchanges are likely to be nuanced and constructed in subjective ways. What is clear, however, is the potential for the impact of such events to have lasting effects and to colour subsequent online activity. Given the prevalence of troubling peer-based interactions, and given that these underpin many of the reasons that young Australians give for feeling bothered by aspects of their online activities, it remains an issue of significant importance for society, beyond the confines of both school and family. Arguably, bullying and associated socially aggressive behaviours are everybody’s business, and this is one reason why over 3,000 responses to the recent consultation around the value of inaugurating a Children’s eSafety Commissioner argued that this role should not be restricted to supporting children but should be available to people of all ages.

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In September 2010, the ARC Centre of Excellence for Creative Industries and Innovation (CCI) funded research in Australia using the same methodology and questionnaire, and the same global market research company to conduct the study. This research is as near as possible equivalent to the EU research. It overlaps with the EU research in

commencing in October, but was delayed by the Queensland floods, being completed in February 2011. On average, Australian data was collected six months after European data.

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