

# Cyberbullying and Prevention

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Original Article

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## Abstract:

**Introduction:** Internet addiction increased unnaturally after the Covid-19 pandemic due to the development of the global situation where online teaching became the preference. This was not only true in Slovakia, but around the world. Bullying happens in every school, and it goes hand in hand with cyberbullying. Therefore, it is necessary to eliminate them with prevention.

**Research aim and objectives:** In our research, we approached 158 second grade pupils from two primary schools. The aim of the research was to identify whether girls or boys spend more time on the Internet, how often they are online, whether they have encountered cyberbullying, and what kind of cyberbullying prevention has been implemented in elementary schools.

**Methods:** In our research, we gathered information in the form of a self-constructed questionnaire.

**Results:** Through our analysis we came to the conclusion that girls spend more time in the online space (53.16%) compared

to boys. The occurrence of cyberbullying has increased in the recent period, which was also confirmed by 56.96% of respondents. The specific situations that we had the opportunity to encounter were solved by the primary school itself with the help of experts. Cyberbullying prevention alone is insufficient in primary schools, but it would be advisable to repeat it more often in order to eliminate bullying.

**Conclusion:** Cyberbullying in primary schools is increasing with the development of information and communication technology. It is advisable to begin addressing the issue of the increased occurrence of cyberbullying at an earlier age and increase prevention. It is also advisable to increase media literacy in Slovakia.

### Biography of the first author

I completed my 2nd degree university studies at the University of Health and Social Work at St. Elizabeth in Bratislava in 2018. I later took a rigorous exam in the social work field of study in 2021. I have been a doctoral student since last year. I participate in the organization of scholarly events. I actively participate in multidisciplinary meetings and multidisciplinary training, which are also part of my work as the Coordinator of the Protection of Children from Violence within the framework of the national project “Support for the Protection of Children from Violence”, which is carried out by the Central Office of Labour, Social Affairs and Family.

### Introduction

*“The Internet reflects and amplifies the best and worst of human nature. The Internet was built for adults, but it is increasingly being used by children, with digital technologies increasingly influencing their lives and futures. Our job is to reduce the damage and expand the opportunities brought about by digital technologies.”*

Anthony Lake, former Executive Director of UNICEF

According to a report from the World Health Organization (WHO), information and communication technologies have an impact on how children feel, think, behave and learn. It is already generally known that the perception of some kinds of digital content can have a negative impact on emotional, physical, mental, social, or moral development. The younger an individual is, the less responsible they are. In addition, their cognitive structure is not yet sufficiently formed,

they have immature emotions and they do not think about the consequences of their own actions at all. Nowadays, children participate in the digital space regardless of age, health, gender, culture, ethnicity or social criteria. Cyberspace contains many opportunities with many risks, which we can group into the categories of illegal content, illegal behavior, age-inappropriate content and inappropriate contacts. Digital technologies not only force children to be educated, but parents and tutors as well, among others, creating pressure to use the acquired information in order to utilize it responsibly and within the scope of morality, age appropriateness and human rights. The progress of changes in the online space is quite unpredictable, making the process of education and prevention more difficult. In Slovakia, among other things, we have created the so-called National Concept for the Protection of Children in the Digital Space, which will be developed until 2025 (1).

### Cyberbullying and its prevention

Cyberbullying in the school environment is also an effect of the modernization of bullying. According to “Directive no. 36/2018 on the prevention and solution of children and pupils bullying in schools and school facilities” issued by the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic, cyberbullying is characterized as a direct form of bullying that involves the misuse of information and communication technologies (phone, tablet, Internet, social networks) with the intention to threaten, harm or intimidate in connection with another form of bullying. The most frequent signs of cyberbullying are:

- social or psychological superiority (without the need for physical advantage),
- the activity of the aggressor is often anonymous,
- during the attack itself, the aggressor does not have to be in physical contact with the victim,
- with information and communication technologies, the attacker does not have the opportunity to see the emotional reaction of the victim during the attack (given the anonymity and withdrawal),
- the spread of attacks is faster via the Internet,
- the attack is accessible to a large number of people,
- the aggressor can carry out the attack from anywhere,
- the attack may happen over a longer period,
- the victim may not immediately learn about the attack,
- identification of the aggressor by the victim may not occur,
- the publication of information, photographs, video recordings and their removal may not be successful.

Bullying itself can fulfill the factual essence of a criminal act or misdemeanor (so-called criminal liability) (2, 3).

Nowadays, a child's life is hard to imagine without the use of information and communication technologies, whether it is for education or leisure activities. The help and protection of a child's rights mainly depends on the caregivers. It is only by realizing the threat conveyed by the Internet and cyberspace that we can possibly prevent the occurrence of this moral crime (4).

The process of bullying prevention in the educational process and addressing the bullying of children and pupils in schools and school facilities takes place during teaching, content-focused activities, didactics of subjects and cross-curricular topics, which are: personal and social development; media and multicultural education; protection of life and health; education and training on human rights, citizenship, marriage and parenthood; fighting against extremism; and various competitions, games, lectures and discussions organized by the school or other relevant entity (5). A significant role is played by school management and its ability to share knowledge and best practices in the entire educational process (6).

## Research goal

The research group consisted of primary school students, and we specifically focused on the second grade for the reasons of prevention in those schools. We tackled sexting and cyberbullying prevention. 158 second grade respondents from two primary schools took part in our research. The aim of the research was to identify differences in the ways of Internet use from the points of view of gender, the frequency of online space usage and experience with cyberbullying. We also paid attention to the prevention of cyberbullying in primary schools.

## Collection and methodology

Our research was carried out with a sample of students from two different primary schools. Out of the total number of pupils, female pupils predominated in the group (84) at 53.16%, compared to male pupils (68) at 46.84%. All of the interviewees had already encountered information and communication technologies. Through the analysis we discovered that girls spend time on a mobile phone more often than on any other device, with the total number of 76 (63.84%) compared to boys where the total number was 56 (38.08%). Data collection took place in the months of May and June 2023. We compared our results with other findings while investigating if there has been a failure in prevention.

## Results

We assumed that not all students from the respondents had encountered cyberbullying. In our research, we did not confirm the given findings of the hypothesis. The reason for using the Internet is education at primary schools, which in our case is of significant importance with the assumption of Internet addiction advancement. The age category of the respondents was from 10 to 15 years. All students answered that they spend their free time on the Internet every day. One hour of participation in the online space per day occurred with 37.97% of respondents, which accounted for 60 pupils. Pupils who go online to spend their free time as well as to study spend more than two hours per day online, and in our study this amounted to 98 students or 62.03%. In addition, 76.58% of respondents, a total number of 121, confirmed experience with social networks, watching videos, playing games or

surfing the Internet on a daily basis. From these findings, we assume Internet addiction is already emerging. Our respondents, who came from two different primary schools, have encountered cyberbullying. Cyberbullying was confirmed by 98 students (56.96%) in the age range of 10-15 years. 60 students (37.97%) in the age group of 13-15 years had come across sexting. We chose these schools for our research because it was necessary to take preventive measures there in the given situation.

## Discussion

During their most intensive growth period, children spend most of their time in primary schools, secondary schools, vocational schools and many of them also in universities preparing for their future profession. This is the period when we can most influence the next generations when it comes to taking care of their health. Of course, children's health is one of the highest priorities, not only for the parents themselves, but also for the state and the entire social and health-care system. Therefore, the topic of cyberspace is becoming more and more relevant (7). According to the research report EU Kids Online IV Slovakia (8), compared to our "smaller" number of respondents, we can confirm that all children use the Internet. 72% of children or teenagers are on the Internet every day, and in our research we had 100% daily online participation. The report results also confirm our findings that there is a higher amount of Internet use via mobile phone among girls (75%) compared to boys (69%); in our research there was a higher number of girls (53.16%) than boys (46.84%). At the same time, boys use a computer to connect to the Internet more frequently (51%) than girls (39%).

According to the research report EU Kids Online IV Slovakia, every fifth child or adolescent aged 9-17 spends more than 4 hours on the Internet during a school day (8).

According to the findings based on the concept of better protection of children in the digital space, it was discovered that up to 30% of respondents in the age range of 11 to 18 years in Slovakia have, for example, already received a request to send a nude photo of themselves. Self-sexting in the form of sending messages (full or partial nudity) was used by 16% of children or adolescents aged 11 to 18 (1).

Based on our research, it would be appropriate to enlighten students, teachers, parents and other professional multidisciplinary teams more about preventive and educational activities they can take part in and complete to help prevent negative consequences.

## Conclusion

The growth in information and communication technologies is progressively related to both digital education and the negative impacts of cyberbullying. Among other things, the lack of information can, in the worst case, cause children to be prone to self-harm or other psychological destruction. Therefore, it is very important to pay more attention to protecting and helping children at an early school age, thus preventing potential interventions.

Prevention should be the priority in both the formal and informal education of children and students. A safer, more controllable cyberspace should be created, one where, in case of imminent danger, one can react efficiently. In Slovakia, we already have several options, experts, institutions and authorities that can be helpful in removing web content that spreads child pornography or other dangerous content.

Last but not least, it is important to focus on increasing the efficiency and success of dealing with cases of threats to children in the online space by considering the legislative, executive and jurisdictional frameworks.

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