



BULLYING AND THE PANDEMIC: a picture of how bullying has changed during COVID-19



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INTRODUCTION

In February 2021, the Anti-Bullying Alliance surveyed pupils, school staff and parents and carers about bullying and relationships with friends during this period of the lockdown when some children are in school but most taking part in learning at home. Over 400 people responded to the survey which took place from 1st – 7th February. It was not a scientific survey and was conducted online and promoted through our networks and on social media. More research is needed but we hope this round up helps to paint a picture of the way that bullying has changed and presents itself during this pandemic.

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KEY MESSAGES:

- 68% of young people said they feel less connected to their friendships than before the pandemic. The responses to the survey shows that this is having an impact on how they are feeling and there are feelings of isolation and loneliness.

"They don't socialise so can't bully" – School staff

- Some children are feeling very relieved to not be going to school due to the bullying they were experiencing in school prior to the pandemic.

"My child is happy she doesn't have to go to school she is terrified of school due to previous bullying since primary school 3 years ago" – Parent

- There is consensus that there is less bullying taking place face to face however there has been an increase in bullying taking place online particularly on social media sites, gaming and instant messaging apps.

"Well normally I get bullied by most of the people in my class but they can't do it online" – Young person

"You can easily get more cyber bullied because we interact with each other on our phone." – Young person

- 75% of young people learning from home are not being given opportunities to communicate with other pupils during online lessons. Where they are allowed to use the 'chat' functions in online lessons, these can often be used to say unkind and bullying things.

"Pupils insult each other through the chat function" – School staff

- Bullying is still taking place and is having a significant impact on the lives of those experiencing it.

"People are still kinda horrible" – Young person

- Parents and children are worried about returning to school due to bullying and concerns about not having any friendships.

"More distant - worries about returning to school" – Parent

- Children are experiencing bullying due to having had or family members having had COVID-19, particularly if their diagnosis led to school bubbles having to isolate.

"Some students are scared if they test positive that others will find out and they will be bullied as a result" – School staff

- Online lessons are providing a window into children's homes. We saw reports that children are experiencing bullying about their home, home life and the access they have to technology.

"People joke about your house or your family and screen grab lessons to change the picture and send it to friends." – Young person

"When people don't have enough money to buy better internet, or someone is talking and they say something wrong" – Young person

- There were a few comments relating to the impact on those with protected characteristics – more research is needed.
- There were some open-ended comments about children being kinder since the start of the pandemic.



METHODOLOGY

As stated, this wasn't a robust survey as we'd like to do. It was a Type Form survey link. We cannot guarantee that those filling it in were who they said they were but we hope that it provides an indication to the experiences of young people, schools and parents through this pandemic related to bullying. 406 people filled in the survey:

- 40% parents and carers
- 37% children and young people
- 23% school staff

The children and young people who responded were mainly secondary school age (75%).

84% of young people's responses were from young people who were taking part in school online, with 10% still going onto the school site and 6% saying they didn't know.

Almost 30% of the school staff respondents were teachers. 30% were support staff or teaching assistants and 20% were head teachers, deputy heads or heads of years. 13% were pastoral support staff and the rest fell into the 'other' category.

Of the school staff respondents 45% were from secondary schools, 39% primary or junior and 16% were from 'other' types of schools. All the quotes in this article are taken directly from the respondents to the survey and have not been edited. Throughout this document, if we refer to 'parents' we are talking about parents and carers alike.



FINDINGS:

Feeling connected to friends and loneliness

Of the young people that are being educated online, 68% said that they had no opportunity in their online lessons to communicate with other pupils. Only 5% said that they got 'a lot' of time to talk to their friends with 26% saying they had 'some' time to talk to their friends.

75% of young people that responded (whether learning online or in school) said that since the start of the pandemic, they felt less connected to their friendships. 18% of those that were learning online said that they felt the same connection with their friendships as before the pandemic and 3% said they felt more connected.

This was supported by the responses from parents with 72% of respondents saying that they thought their child was less connected to their friendships compared to before the pandemic. 20% said their child's friendships had stayed the same and 4% said they felt their child's connections had strengthened.

School staff respondents also had similar feedback with 74% saying pupils in their school were less connected to their friendships than before the pandemic. 10% said that their connections to friendships had remained the same and 3% that they had improved.

It was clear from the open-ended responses that young people were feeling lonelier and more worried about their friendships and what will happen when they return to school.

- **"This isn't really bullying, but I am a quiet person at school. Covid-19 and quarantine has made me disconnect to the people I had in school, but we haven't spoken online so we have drifted. When we went back to school in September, I felt like I wasn't talking to people that I used to before lockdown. I find myself lonelier and less confident."** – Young person
- **"I think people have found it hard to not be around the people they care about whether it's a relationship or a friendship how much you can talk to each other if you don't have your own device is restricted so people have taken out their anger on others and it's affecting them mentally"** – Young person
- **"I think people are struggling and so pick in others in order to feel some sort of socialising"** – Young person
- **"COVID 19 is separating us as well as stopping our education"** – Young person

Parents were also clearly very concerned about the impact of the lack of connections with friendships on their children.

- **"All kids need more time to rebuilding relationship with their peers. Covid-19 has increased the distance among the people in general and the only online contact has hit more families with economically disadvantaged"** – Parent
- **"Unfortunately, she lost almost of them [friendships]"** – Parent

- **"My 12yr old is living life on video call. Her friendships were all new after transition to secondary school so she's missing out on those first independent trips into town with friends etc. Lots of her friends are home alone a lot this lockdown so i try not to get frustrated that she's always on a call as it must be a social lifeline for those children."** – Parent

And finally, school staff were also aware that this lack of connection was having an impact on the children they support.

- **"They don't socialise so can't bully"** – School staff
- **"The lack of social interaction and more time spent online-** with the lockdown affecting their mental health means positive communication friendships and relationships have **broken down. They find it hard now to interact as they were but want to interact"** – School staff
- **"Significant increase in loneliness and isolation."** – School staff
- **"Students have lost self-confidence and how to initiate conversations, turn take, use teenage banter. Inside jokes have gone, as has the intimacy of close friendships. Many students are more withdrawn"** – School staff

Relief for children who were being bullied in school

There were a lot of open-ended responses about how much of a relief it had been for children to not have to go to school and experience bullying face to face.

- **"Having to stay inside has allowed me to escape from people I'd otherwise see that i don't want to see, but the thought that covid could last forever is always on my mind and that it'll never go away."** – Young person
- **"It doesn't happen now I am not at school"** – Young person

This was supported by many parents:

- **"My daughter has been much happier as she isn't having to deal with the everyday bullying and has stayed connected to her friends"** – Parent
- **"For some, home schooling provides a respite from bullying in school"** – Parent
- **"To be fair my daughter has loved it as she doesn't have to go to school where she does get bullied. She hates school because of bullies. She has made friends online since and is much happier"** – Parent
- **"My child is happy she doesn't have to go to school she is terrified of school due to previous bullying since primary school 3 years ago"** – Parent

Bullying during online lessons

We asked pupils about bullying during online lessons. With fewer opportunities to communicate with other pupils during online lessons, it's not surprising that 18% said that they had seen bullying taking place, 20% said they weren't sure if bullying was taking place and 62% saying it wasn't taking place. Whilst this is lower than data relating to bullying we know taking place in school (30% of children in the previous year¹), we don't have data about how much bullying takes place specifically during lessons in school. Bullying tends to take place at times of transition, e.g. on the way to and from school, in between lessons and in playgrounds.

School staff respondents reported similar figures, with 57% saying that bullying wasn't taking place online, 38% saying there was the same level of bullying and 6% saying there was more bullying.

Parents on the whole didn't seem to know (51%) about whether or not bullying was taking place in online lessons, which is understandable considering parents are often not involved directly in the lessons, approximately the same number thought there was the same amount of bullying (18%) or less bullying (20%) and only 11% said there was more.

The open-ended responses provided us with more clarity about bullying during online lessons. There were lots of comments about not being able to bully due to not being able to communicate easily with other young people.

- **"You can't really bully anyone because teachers are watching the chat. it's like impossible pretty much. you'll just get removed."** – Young person
- **"Well normally I get bullied by most of the people in my class but they can't do it online"** – Young person
- **"There is probably less bullying but in different formats (e.g. private messages)"** – Young person

However, it was really clear that there is some bullying that is still taking place in online classes, especially using the chat function during online lessons. It was acknowledged often that using this method to bully often gives evidence as the chat can be seen by peers and teachers.

- **"Online chat in lessons can be cruel"** – Parent
- **"Trying to shut people out/ chuck out of the room"** – School staff
- **"Through chat on live lessons"** – School staff
- **"Some comments in the chat"** – School staff
- **"Pupils insult each other through the chat function"** – School staff

¹ Longitudinal study of young people in England: cohort 2, wave 2 – Department for Education 2016



- **“Mainly through smirks if someone acts differently to others”** – School staff
- **“Laughing and criticising people.”** – School staff

Bullying and children still going to the school site

For children still going to school, we heard that on the whole, children reported seeing less bullying taking place (58%). 25% had said they were seeing the same levels of bullying and 17% reported seeing more bullying.

The open-ended comments did paint a mixed picture. There were comments about the positive impact of having smaller ‘bubbles’ in school and that helping to reduce bullying particularly due to not coming into contact with as many children in other year groups and parts of the school as children normally would.

- **“Since they have been in class bubbles they do don’t come into contact with as many children, especially his bullies.”** Parent
- **“Due to bubbles, students in each class have become much closer and more friendly to each other”** – School staff
- **“Less movement of children within the school less chances to bully”** – Parent

However, there were an equal amount of comments about increased bullying often due to fewer of your friends now attending school and smaller groups putting a ‘spotlight’ on you.

- **“With less children at school and only key workers children my child has received more direct bullying”** – Parent

- **"As his 3 best friends are not in school with him he has become the victim of a bully, therefore my son has become socially isolated in school and is feeling sad he is being picked on. He is also missing his friends."** – Parent

Bullying is still taking place

Whilst there was a general consensus from respondents that it was becoming harder for young people to be able to bully, it was also clear that bullying is still taking place and that it was having a significant impact on those it's happening to.

- **"People are still kinda horrible"** – Young person
- **"The lockdown had forced both children and adults onto online everything, so our current dependency with the virtual environment can lead children especially to getting caught up in online bullying because of the amount of time spent on technology."** – Parent
- **"Our experience has been horrific over the last 18 months as the bullying started a few months before the pandemic so was not addressed quickly enough to stop and just escalated throughout the lockdowns."** – Parent
- **"Online trolling bullying** has increased because of boredom. Less teachers to deal with problems and parents unable to get quick responses or see in person teachers to discuss/resolve issues. Less time and focus from schools on this area with limited **resources."** – Parent
- **"My 15yr** old son was bullied/trolled online and through social media through the first lockdown by a couple of individuals bored and made his life hell, he suffers from anxiety. When he returned to school he was physically attacked by two 6ft boys in the playground stamping on his face, head and body and ended up in A&E. We involved the police as the school were lame in dealing with the violence and the boys have both been prosecuted as minors as a result. The 3rd lockdown has given our son much needed timeout from school to home learn but he is terrified of returning. He is now alienated from everyone at school as forced to close all social media change to stop **harassment."** – Parent
- **"Online students make comments they would not do in school. There is a cloak of confidence for some and others use social media to build an image which is not the reality"** – School staff

Worries about returning to school

Parents in particular reported either feeling worried themselves about their children returning to school or their children being worried about the return to school for two reasons:

- 1) The bullying they were experiencing reoccurring

- **"My son says that he feels** happier at home, away from others. However, he now has enormous anxiety about going back to school and having to deal with **pressure, intimidating and mocking behaviour from peers."** – Parent
- **"More distant - worries about returning to school"** – Parent

2) Concerns about reintegration into school and friendships

- **"I am worried about the social reintegration with friends, especially at school as half my child's class are attending and I think this will cause a shift in friendship groups."** – Parent
- **"The return to school will be the next challenge. Addressing expectations as we reset and return to classrooms."** – School staff

More online bullying

Young people talked about the type of bullying they experienced changing. A large number said that they had seen more online bullying taking place. This seemed to be the case mainly outside of online lessons on messaging apps, social media sites and online gaming.

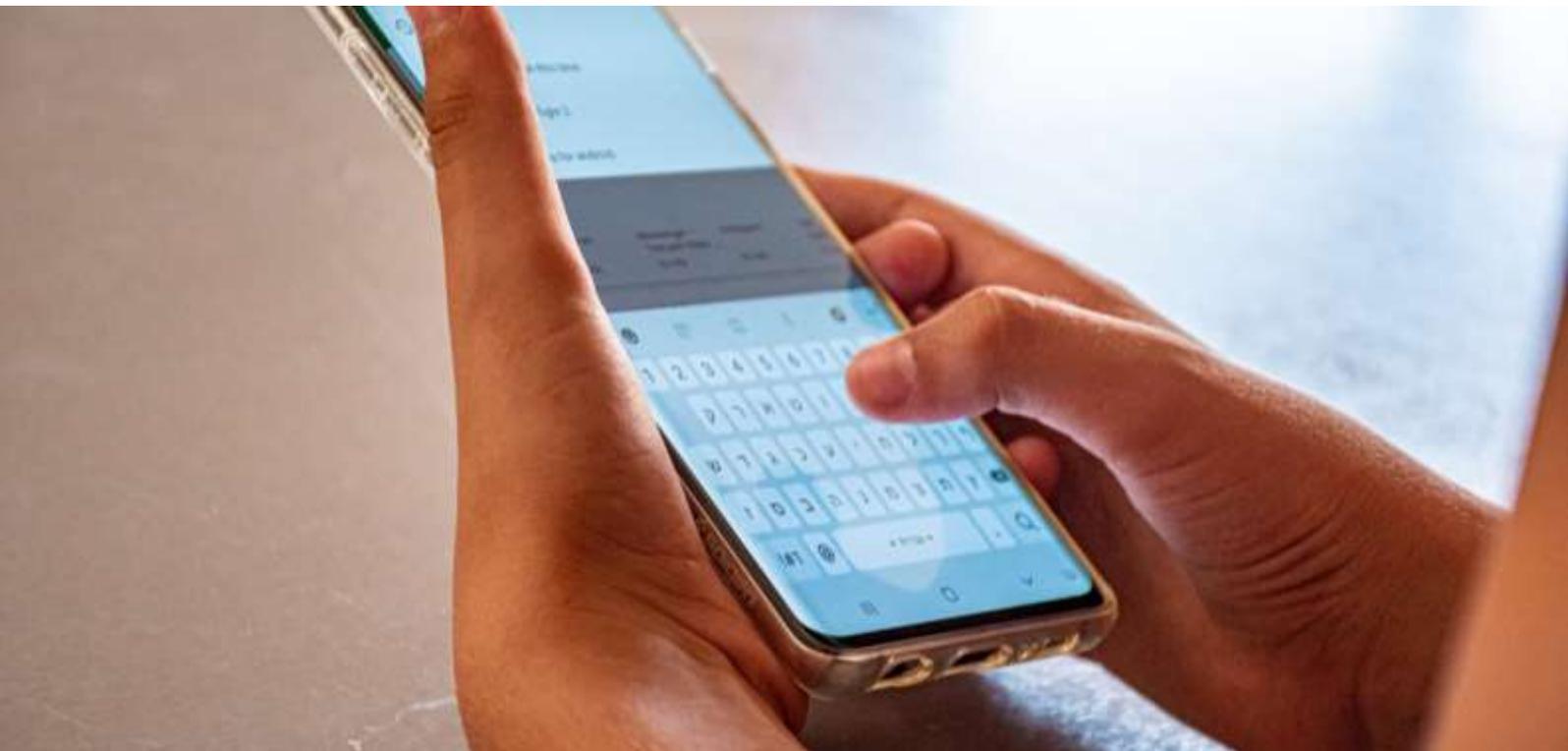
- **"It's not really physical anymore, it's more mental, and I feel like that's going to cause more issues for the victim in the long run."** – Young person
- **"You can easily get more cyber bullied because we interact with each other on our phone."** – Young person
- **"It's a lot easier to bully in the form of causing anxiety e.g. jokes about having your mic on / not paying attention"** – Young person
- **"I think it prevents physical harm but online bullying is more present"** – Young person
- **"I think online bullying has increased generally"** – Parent
- **"Online bullying has increased more and it's difficult to know if that's still in the remit of school to help deal with jt"** – Parent
- **"Children have been cruel by leaving my child out of group chats and games online and made him feel isolated as the rest of the group play together"** – Parent
- **"My daughter is more connected via social media but is obviously less connected in person. The hard part is striking a healthy balance with phone/social media use and maintaining/enjoying friendships."** – Parent
- **"Bullying went from in the classroom to online. Conversations are rare."** – Parent
- **"My child now gets trolled on Snap Chat and Instagram"** – Parent
- **"Online bullying increased"** – School staff

- **"More bullying on social media"** – School staff
- **"Increased online incidents, less connected to school, less time for focus on PSHE related material and guidance from teachers"** – School staff
- **"We have had many social media incidents"** – School staff

Bullying due to COVID-19

Some of the open-ended responses related to bullying due to having had COVID-19. People talked about children not wanting to 'catch' it or being annoyed that it had meant bubbles had to go into isolation.

- **"When I got Covid I told my whole class on this group chat and they were really annoyed, angry and sad. A lot of them made me cry and one of my best friends said I ruined there Christmas but I told my mum and that got sorted out and I left the group chat after."** – Young person
- **"I think that some children probably think it's funny to do prank regarding catching covid on the more aware and anxious children. Which has caused a lot of distress!"** – Parent
- **"Some students are scared if they test positive that others will find out and they will be bullied as a result"** – School staff
- **"Child came into class admitted he had positive COVID the term before, children hesitant to play with the child."** – School staff



Bullying about your home life and access to technology

Young people talked about experiencing bullying about your home, family and circumstances that weren't always apparent before online learning.

- **"People joke about your house or your family and screen grab lessons to change the picture and send it to friends. You can't really tell who the person is that's trolling you** sometimes as well or who's doing it to you. People are meaner about your clothes than school uniform and it's obvious whose struggling because you can see that they are unhappy when they speak or **talk to you.**" – Young person
- **"When people don't have enough money to buy better internet, or someone is talking and they say something wrong"** – Young person
- **"The teachers have more to pick on cuz** they can see your house and clothes and so can the other **students"** – Young person
- **"Others bully because a boy's house had a pink wall in it which was seen on a zoom class call."** – Parent
- **"Some increase** [in bullying], especially online. Some body shaming has taken place - students noticing who put on lockdown **weight and commenting unkindly"** – School staff

Bullying and unkind comments due to the technology children did or didn't have was clearly an issue and not having access to tech to enable children to maintain their friendships was also apparent:

- **"Children are disconnected. Their is an inequality in the ways children are able to stay connected** due to lack of devices. For example lots of our children use FaceTime and WhatsApp to connect but there are some children who are excluded from this due to living in poverty and not having the resources to stay connected. This could lead to **bullying and broken friendships"** – School staff
- **"The children are able to pick up friendships after being away from school easily;** however I'm aware that home situations & lack of devices means that some children are **far less connected to their friends and online class activities during lockdown"** – School staff
- **"The money difference in different households that some people may have really expensive computers and stuff to do their work on while some may have to share a tablet between siblings."** – Young person

Protected characteristics

We weren't able in this survey to ascertain who was experiencing bullying more than others, although research shows that some groups are more likely to be bullied than other. The open-

ended responses did highlight some concerns about the impact of bullying and the pandemic on children with protected characteristics.

- **"Racism has increased"** – Young person
- **"Not sure amongst disabled students [about levels of bullying]"** – School staff
- **"It's a lot easier to just text someone and say anything and know there is gonna be no repercussions as you are online and not in school, this also increases the number of hate crimes and bullying to lgbtq children, poc [people of colour] and other minorities that already may be at a disadvantage as there is no one stopping it"** – Young person

Kindness

On a positive note, we saw some open-ended comments that the pandemic had made children be kinder to each other and therefore less likely to bully.

- **"I think in this time many are considering the most important things in life and are taking significant action to be kind and spread joy. I believe that this has trained many people's moral conscious and has resulted in them becoming wiser."** – Young person
- **"They are more considerate to each other"** – School staff

Martha Evans – Director, Anti-Bullying Alliance
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