The Bullying of Youth

Simon Burton-Jones reflects on how cyber-bullying affects us all.

What are we to make of the seemingly inexorable rise of cyber-bullying? The latest survey, from LSE's EU Kids Online project shows that online bullying is now more commonly experienced than face-to-face taunts. This has been a significant shift in just four years. Making a smart response to this challenge is vital to the health of a young generation.

The most commonly used definition of bullying was created by the Swedish psychologist Dan Olweus and suggests there should be aggression, repetition and a power imbalance. Therefore, random and isolated acts of cruelty should not be deemed bullying; neither should the reciprocal trading of insults or blows, however hurtful they feel. Adults tend to use 'bullying' as a term to describe a range of anti-social acts and they are more likely to perceive spiteful commentary on social media as bullying when their own children are targeted.

Cyber-bullying has been defined by danah boyd (sic) as, 'performative, interpersonal conflict that takes place in front of an active, engaged audience, often on social media' and the digital era has introduced peculiar risks.

Social media allows the verbal aggression of one on another to remain in print;

it has also introduced a wider audience to its deployment which has the power to make a potentially limitless number of people aware. This is radically different to the hurtfulness of playground name calling.

These may be the inherent risks of exposure on social media, but cyber-bullying itself emerges from a wider social context, one it is not divorced from. The digital world becomes an extension of material bullying in or around school. It has also given it greater visibility. What, then, might be done to address it?

The unpalatable truth is that both the bully and the bullied are needy and worthy of adult attention. A bully is often driven by personal need; say, a teenager who may be struggling with acute issues of their own and who finds in an unfortunate other the outlet for their aggression, confusion and attention seeking. This may be of little comfort to the child who is picked on but any authorities who become involved in should give attention to the bully too.

Greater awareness of bullying in this traceable digital era should lead to smarter interventions.

As local places of association for young people and adults together are reduced in scope and more of life becomes mediated through a screen, means by which teenage resilience and empathy can be strengthened and social media navigated are projects calling for attention.

The author, the Venerable Simon Burton-Jones is the Archdeacon of Rochester.