
**The abuse of social media and
internet sites**

A survey of teachers' experiences

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INTRODUCTION

The NASUWT recognises that developments in the technological landscape provide positive and productive channels of communication and significantly improve support for learning and the working practices of teachers and other school staff. However, the NASUWT has been concerned for some time about the routine abuse of social media, internet sites and mobile phones and continues to campaign against cyberbullying in schools. This may involve the abuse of e-mail, internet, social networking sites, virtual learning environments (VLEs), digital cameras and mobile phones and has emerged as a key challenge for schools, affecting both pupils and staff.

Research undertaken by Ofcom in 2011 showed that 91% of children aged 5 to 15 live in a household with internet access.

Seventy-five per cent of 12-15 year olds have a social networking site (SNS) – 34% of 8-12 year olds have an active profile on an SNS that requires users to be over 13.

Abuse of technology and cyberbullying is having a devastating effect on teachers' health, wellbeing, confidence, self-esteem and, in some cases, career progression as a result of employers trawling the sites for information to use against employees or prospective employees.

The NASUWT Survey

In March 2012, the NASUWT conducted an online survey over a four-day period. A total of 1,522 responses were received.

Information was sought on the type and extent of the abuse of social media sites and the level of support that the respondents had received from their school or college to protect them. The questionnaire also included a free field which allowed respondents to add any specific additional comments.

Over 65% of teachers responding were female and whilst all age ranges of teachers were represented, most respondents were aged between 31 and 40 years of age.

DATA FROM THE SURVEY

Abuse of social networking or internet sites by pupils

The survey showed that the vast majority of abuse of teachers on social media and internet sites had been carried out by pupils aged between 11 and 16 years of age. However, teachers had also been abused by pupils as young as five years of age.

Respondents were asked if they had had comments posted about them on a social networking or internet site by a pupil in the last two years. The results were as follows:

| | |
|----------------------------------------------------------|--------------|
| Insulting comment | 61.2% |
| Allegation of inappropriate behaviour with pupils | 9.1% |
| Comment about competence/performance as a teacher | 38.1% |
| Other | 28.7% |

Details of the nature of the abuse against teachers by pupils were quite shocking. Some teachers reported that they had received death threats, been accused of crimes including paedophilia and rape, had been subjected to sexist and racist abuse, and had had their pictures distributed across the internet.

Below is a selection of comments teachers stated were posted on social media and internet sites by pupils:

“A fake account was set up in my name with my image – I did not have a Facebook account – it was suspected this was done by a student.”

“A pupil called me a bitch for not allowing them to return to my tutor group.”

“A student said that he was going to cut my f***g throat when he saw me.”**

“One comment from a male pupil was about my breasts and how attractive they were and what he would want to do to them.”

“A student created an online hate group against me and students were invited to join, with comments saying she should f* off back to her own country.”**

“F***g fat tw*t, c**t, filthy f*****g paedophile, I hate [name of teacher].”**

“Comments are regularly posted by pupils referring to teachers’ sexuality – lesbians, insulting personal comments about appearance and one claiming that a retired colleague was a pervert.”

Abuse on social networking or internet sites by parents

Teachers were also asked whether they had had comments posted about them on a social networking or internet site by parents in the last two years.

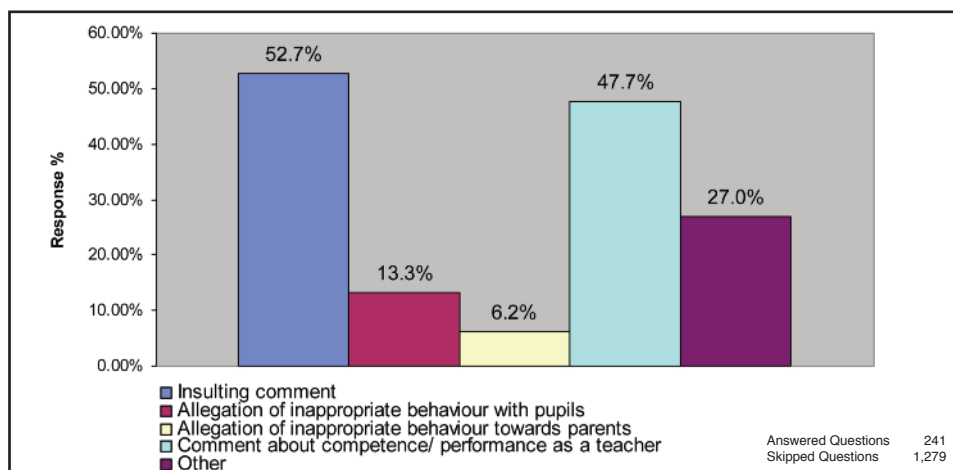
Over half of respondents (52.7%) had received offensive comments or harassment on social networking or internet sites by parents.

Comments included:

“Too old to be teaching, time they got rid of her.”

“Allegation of inappropriate behaviour with pupils.”

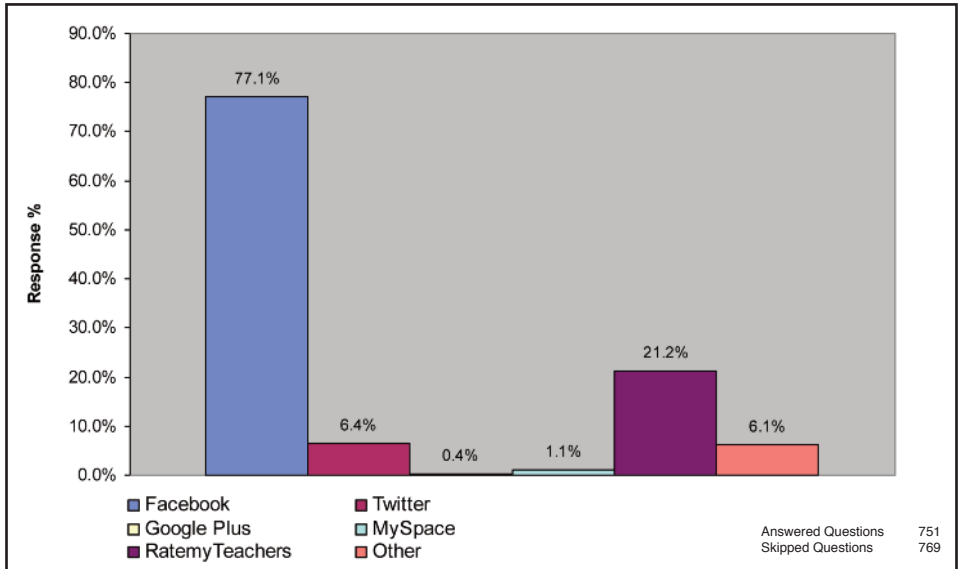
Comments by parents



Respondents were asked on which social networking or internet sites pupils or parents had posted the comments.

The majority (77.1%) were posted on Facebook, followed by RateMyTeachers and Twitter.

Whilst most social networking sites have a minimum age requirement of 13, this survey demonstrates a major under-age use of these services. The lack of regulation and monitoring of pupils accessing these sites is of major concern.



Comments from teachers included:

“A pupil falsely claimed on Facebook that I’d told him to die and f* off. No action was taken against the pupil and it was I who was investigated!”**

“False Facebook set up in my name used to contact other teachers.”

“Facebook was used to post a comment that I looked like a terrorist. Swearing, abuse, derogatory, racial/prejudiced, highly offensive comments were also posted about me.”

When teachers were asked if they had reported the incidents, over 64% stated that they had reported them to their headteacher/principal.

Of those teachers who did not report the incident, 30% stated that they were not confident that cyberbullying incidents would be treated seriously by headteachers/principals. Over half said that they believed no action would be taken against the perpetrator.

Some teachers were concerned about the negative impact on their future careers and fear of reprisals as a direct result of reporting these incidents.

One woman teacher said:

“I was too embarrassed.”

Other responses included:

“I have reported this kind of thing before and was not supported.”

“I didn’t think anything could be done.”

“I didn’t know to whom should I report the incident.”

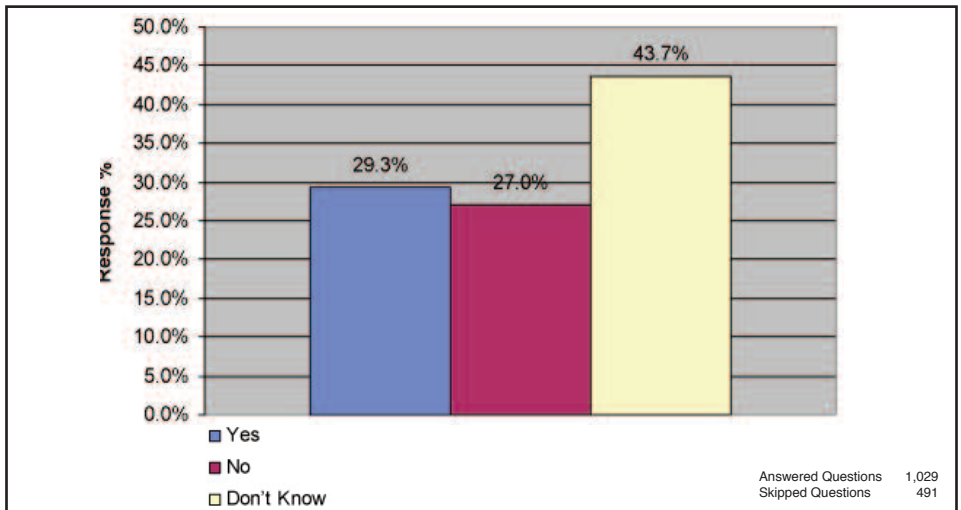
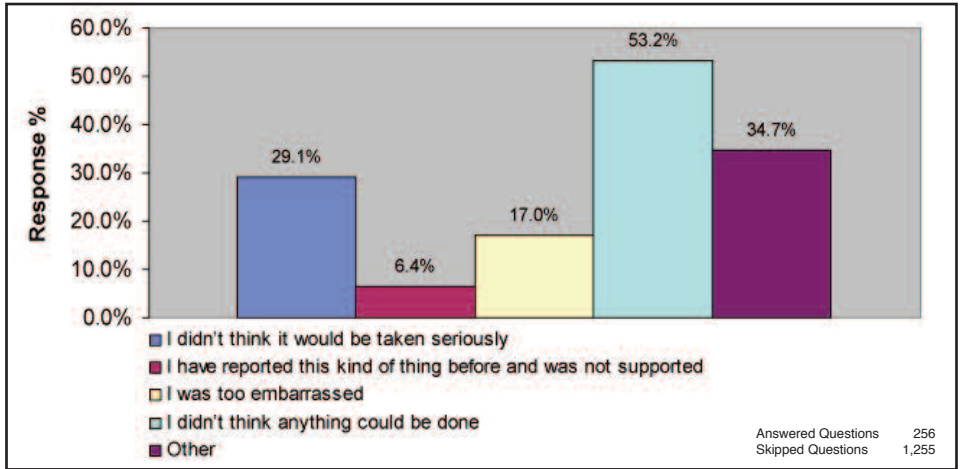
“Making a big deal out of it would have made it worse. Laughing it off was the best idea, but if it increases then I will have to take it further.”

“I felt very vulnerable and violated by this incident.”

“I wish I’d reported it. It came up on many pupils’ walls because one pupil decided I was ‘gay’ because I’d banned football.”

“Anyone with a grudge can say what they like about teachers with no evidence and no consequences.”

Nearly half of respondents (43.7%) reported that their school/college had no policy or procedures to protect staff against such incidents, 29.3% were aware of the policies but over a quarter (27%) were not aware.



Conclusions

These results are deeply disturbing. They highlight that:

- the vast majority of abuse of teachers on social media and internet sites is carried out by pupils aged between 11 and 16 years of age;
- parents are also using the internet and social media sites to abuse, harass and make false accusations against teachers;

- teachers are not widely reporting incidents of cyberbullying for fear of reprisals or the matter not being taken seriously by the headteacher or principal;
- schools are not responding positively to cyberbullying incidents reported by staff;
- some schools are regularly failing in their duty of care by not having anti-bullying policies in place;
- many teachers are not aware of their rights at work that protect them from cyberbullying incidents;
- some teachers are concerned that reporting cyberbullying incidents would have a negative impact on their future careers.

What needs to be done?

The NASUWT believes that the following actions are required:

- a review of regulatory and legislative provisions to prevent allegations being made about named teachers on internet sites and to secure more accessible avenues of redress for those who are exposed to public ridicule and false allegations;
- a statutory requirement on schools to have policies which promote zero tolerance of cyberbullying and intervention by government to ensure schools take issues seriously;
- staff awareness of the need to be cautious when using social networking sites;
- the inclusion of reference to the use and abuse of technology in the Health and Safety Executive's (HSE's) health and safety good practice guidance and in all workplace health and safety audits, including risk assessments.

THE NASUWT's CONTINUING CAMPAIGN

The NASUWT's long-standing campaign against cyberbullying has emanated from increased casework and reports from teachers and headteachers that they had fallen victim to bullying and harassment incidents, particularly but not exclusively from pupils. Of particular concern initially was the use of websites such as Bebo, YouTube and RateMyTeachers by pupils to abuse staff and make malicious and false allegations against them.

The NASUWT collated evidence from teachers and headteachers in order to identify the extent of the problem of cyberbullying. In an online survey during May 2007, the Union received reports of over 200 cases of cyberbullying within

48 hours which were presented to the Minister for School Standards. The evidence demonstrated that the abuse of these websites and mobile phones by pupils has caused physical and mental distress to many teachers and headteachers and has had a damaging effect on their health, wellbeing and career prospects.

The survey has informed the Union's ongoing programme of work and campaign against cyberbullying in schools. Further information on the NASUWT 'Stop Cyberbullying' campaign can be obtained from the NASUWT website at www.nasuwt.org.uk/Cyberbullying.

The NASUWT also has a long-standing programme of work to tackle prejudice-related bullying in schools. This has resulted in guidance materials on tackling issues such as homophobic, racist, faith-based, ageist, disability-related, sexist and transphobic bullying, and bullying on the grounds of body image/size. The NASUWT guidance on prejudice-related bullying can be obtained from the NASUWT website at www.nasuwt.org.uk/PrejudiceRelatedBullying.

The NASUWT's work and campaigns on tackling cyberbullying extend to the European and international arena through its international solidarity partnerships with Education International (EI), the European Trade Union Confederation for Education (ETUCE) and Amnesty International. The NASUWT is represented on a number of European/international projects on tackling cyber-harassment in the workplace.

The Union is represented on the advisory board for the UK Council for Child Internet Safety (UKCCIS) and UK Safer Internet Day which promotes safe and responsible use of online technology and mobile phones.

The NASUWT is affiliated to the Anti-Bullying Alliance (ABA) and is an active member of the ABA Advisory Board.

The NASUWT has a programme of ongoing research to raise awareness of the nature and effects of violence, harassment and bullying in schools. Research reports can be obtained from the NASUWT website using the following links www.nasuwt.org.uk/PrejudiceRelatedBullying.

The Union's long-standing and highly successful newly qualified teacher programme provides free seminars throughout the year for newly qualified teachers who are about to start in their first teaching posts, followed by regular follow-up sessions. The popular NASUWT guide *Starting Out* provides specific advice to newly qualified teachers on 'Staying Safe' and the 'Use and Abuse of Technology'. This guide is free to NASUWT members.

The NASUWT will continue to issue advice highlighting the support available to teachers on what to do if they are victims of cyberbullying. This is supplemented by the high-quality training provided for NASUWT members and Workplace Representatives on tackling cyberbullying.

The NASUWT has provided a checklist for school staff on the safe use of mobile phones and social networking sites. (See attached Appendix on page 15.)

FURTHER INFORMATION

NASUWT website:
www.nasuwt.org.uk

Cyberbullying guidance – supporting school staff:
www.digizen.org/resources/school-staff.aspx

Young people and social networking sites – a guide for parents and teachers:
www.childnet.com/downloads/blog_safety.pdf

Anti-Bullying Alliance (ABA):
www.anti-bullyingalliance.org.uk

APPENDIX – NASUWT ADVICE

KEEPING SAFE – A CHECKLIST FOR SCHOOL STAFF

Mobile Phones

- Take good care of your personal mobile phones. Whilst at school, you should secure your phone when not in use, using the phone's security code. If a phone goes missing or is suspected as being stolen, it should be reported to the police and the mobile operator as soon as possible, using the phone's unique International Mobile Equipment Identity (IMEI) number. This can be found printed on the phone underneath the battery or by typing *#06# on a handset.
- Do not use your personal mobile phone to contact pupils or parents. You should have access to a school-owned mobile wherever possible to contact pupils – for example, when on a school trip.
- Check your school's e-safety and/or acceptable use policy (AUP) to ensure you are aware of the school's policy on the use of personal mobile phones and other ICT equipment. These policies should be reviewed annually to cover new technology.
- Never retaliate to, i.e. personally engage with, cyberbullying incidents. You should report incidents appropriately and seek support from the designated member of senior management and your NASUWT Representative as soon as possible.
- Keep any records of the abuse – text, emails, voicemail, website or instant message. Do not delete texts or e-mails. Take screen prints of messages or web pages and be careful to record the time, date and address of the site.
- Although the technology seemingly allows anonymity, there are ways to find out information about where bullying originated. However, it is important to be aware that this may not necessarily lead to an identifiable individual. For instance, if another person's phone or school network account has been used, locating where the information was originally sent from will not, by itself, determine who the bully is. There have been cases of people using another individual's phone or hacking into their Instant Messenger (IM) or school e-mail account to send harmful messages.
- Report any problems to a senior member of staff. They should support you in contacting the appropriate service provider or host to make a report to get the offensive online content taken down and for ensuring that the person who has posted it is asked to remove it.

- In cases of actual/suspected illegal content, the school's designated representative should contact the police. The police will be able to determine what content is needed for evidential purposes.
- Immediately make contact with the NASUWT Representative for advice and support.

Facebook and other Social Networking Sites

- Under no circumstances should you accept 'friend' requests on your personal accounts or accept requests to follow you from current pupils or parents or former pupils. Accepting such requests will make you vulnerable by sharing personal information or by having access to personal information about your pupils or their families. You will also be leaving yourself open to allegations of inappropriate conduct or contact or find yourself exposed to unwanted contact.
- Check who can see your account details and content, including photos and albums, posts and updates, as well as personal information. On Twitter, you can set your account to private by selecting 'Protect my Tweets' in your account settings so that you can accept (or decline) requests to follow you.
- If you are unsure whether you have the correct setting, treat all information that you post as public until you are sure.
- Think carefully about who you 'friend' and which friends have access to your information. Remember, posting information on friends' walls may also be a risk if their profile is not set to private as your posts will also be visible.
- Think carefully about making any posts or status updates or having discussions about the school in which you are employed. The Union has a large number of cases where teachers have been disciplined or sacked for bringing the school into disrepute when they have inadvertently posted derogatory comments about pupils, colleagues or parents, believing these are private thoughts.
- Be mindful of your profile image – anything that is put online is potentially public and permanent.
- Regularly search your name on public search engines to monitor your timeline content or 'digital identity'.
- If you are unhappy with photos in which you are tagged, untag yourself or, alternatively, contact the friend and ask them to remove this content.

NOTES

NOTES

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HTR12/09024