

# Seeking answers on Ask.fm breeds bullying online for Australian teenagers

By Cosima Marriner



Against the grain: Schoolgirl Katia van Hilten is taking a stand against "extreme meanness" by cyberbullies. *Photo: Wolter Peeters*

It is a website renowned for vicious and offensive postings with guaranteed anonymity, and yet teenagers are flocking to Ask.fm. Welcome to the new ground zero of cyberbullying for high school students.

"Nothing surpasses Ask.fm at the moment for nastiness among students. Nothing," cyber safety expert Susan McLean said.

Based in Latvia, Ask.fm encourages its more than 50 million worldwide users to post questions and receive anonymous responses. Content ranges from the philosophical ("Would you rather be a lonely genius or a sociable idiot?") and innocuous ("iPhone or Android?") to the crude ("Topless pic?") and nasty ("Do you actually have any friends?").

Jeremy Blackman, cyber safety specialist at the Alannah and Madeline Foundation children's charity, said Ask.fm was "one of the apps of the moment" for Australian teenagers connecting online.

"A lot of it is about approval and fishing for compliments. It's got a bit of a reputation for hate exchanges," he said.

Ask.fm is the only app that Ms McLean specifically tells students to stay away from.

"I never hear about anything other than bullying [on Ask.fm]," she said. "It's set up for the perception of anonymity. It becomes a tool of nastiness and they try and outdo each other in the nastiness stakes [but] you can't report nasty stuff." Ask.fm has been linked to the suicide of at least 15 teenagers overseas, prompting a Change.org petition calling on British Prime Minister David Cameron to shut the site down, which has received 142,000 signatures. Concerns about Ask.fm are also reflected in Facebook pages like Ask.fm Should Be Deleted and The Best Ask.fm Answers, which showcases good ripostes to nasty posts.

However, cybersafety experts say children are better off simply staying away from Ask.fm, or turning off the anonymity feature. "They go on knowing it's a place where people write horrible things and are subjected to bullying," Ms McLean said.

"If you know what this site is known for then why go there?"

"[Parents and children] have to work together and make it uncool to be there." Sites like Ask.fm should be forced to take down harmful content within 3 hours of it being reported, according to some submissions from parents and schools to the federal government's inquiry into boosting online safety for children. Companies including Google and Facebook also argue smaller social media sites like Ask.fm, Snapchat and the newer Secret should be on the list of companies that the government can compel to remove content.

"Bullying behaviour happens online regardless of the size of the platform," Facebook said in its submission.

Ryde schoolgirl Katia van Hilten, who has an interest in anti-bullying - or "extreme meanness" as it is called at her school - said Ask.fm was the "worst of social media" for bullying, and had become a big thing among her peers this year.

"You post a question to all your followers and it's all anonymous. People post some really mean stuff on there," the 14-year-old said. "At least with Facebook and Instagram you can see who's posting it."

A spokeswoman for Ask.fm said the site had been overhauled in the past six months to improve the safety of users. The anonymous function can now be turned off, while moderators can respond to complaints within 24 hours and take down any offensive content, she said.

People who breach the site's terms of use are blocked from accessing the affected user. Repeat offenders are blocked from accessing Ask.fm at all, and the site can pass details on to police.

"With the rise of social networking sites online, cruelty and meanness has become very visible," the spokeswoman said. "We believe that [this visibility] should be used to understand the behaviour and issues facing young people better."

Source: <http://www.smh.com.au/digital-life/digital-life-news/seeking-answers-on-askfm-breeds-bullying-online-for-australian-teenagers-20140412-36k1d.html#ixzz2yu2OFYPx>