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Victims Find Little Escape From Cyber Bullies

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Adolescents are linked electronically to their friends for most of their waking hours, often with some very unfriendly results, including psychiatric problems.

Bullying—it's not just for nasty kids in the schoolyard anymore. Direct bullying among adolescents—physical aggression, threats, insults, and teasing—has been joined by indirect aggression such as social exclusion, rumors, and shaming, transmitted not by whispers but by ubiquitous handheld technology, said speakers at the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry meeting in New York last October.



Credit: Tommaso Colia/istockphoto

In some ways, the online bullying is worse than the old-fashioned kind, said Elizabeth Englander, Ph.D., of the Massachusetts Aggression Reduction Center at Bridgewater State University. People will say or do anything online because the intermediary technology disinhibits them.

“The factors that constrain actions in person are just not available online,” she said. “Kids think that if it's online, it doesn't count.”

Plus, teenagers spend lots of time online.

“This is a generation totally immersed in technology, putting in 50 hours a week on electronic media,” said Ruth Gerson, M.D., a child psychiatry resident at New York University Medical Center. About 93 percent of teenagers have access to computers, cell phones, iPods, and other devices connected to the Internet.

Cyber World Immersion

Texting is the mode of choice. Half of all teens send at least 50 text messages a day, and one-third send more than 100. E-mail and phone conversations are for the over-30 set, said Gerson.

Teens send more than who's-dating-whom or I'm-at-the-mall news. They also text threats, unflattering pictures, and ethnic slurs. They steal passwords and send fake messages, pretending to be someone else. They engage in “sexting,” sending provocative or nude pictures of themselves or others.

Some gender differences are apparent. Boys target acquaintances or former friends, but not their best friends. Girls get intensely personal, targeting their closest friends—the very people who ought to provide their social support.

Furthermore, victims feel trapped, said Gerson. Cyberbullying can follow them wherever they go and include whoever in their social world is online. What might have been a momentary schoolyard spat gets extended in time and space as others join in and text, vent, and update.

Victims can be at risk for depression, substance use, or suicidality. However, bullies aren't immune either, whether as cause or effect. They show higher levels of mood problems, aggressive behavior, and conduct problems. They risk legal action. Many bullies are also victims of bullying by others, more commonly so among girls, said Gerson.

Generation Gap at Work

“Kids are comfortable about technology but are not knowledgeable about its implications,” said Englander. Parents may not be as knowledgeable or as comfortable with technology and so shy away from addressing the issue with their children. Also, adults tend to think that if they are good parents and their children are good children, they won't be involved in bullying. “Not so,” she said.

Clinicians should routinely ask their young patients if they have cell phones, if they use them to text, if they belong to social-networking sites (like Facebook), and if they have ever experienced bullying.

Also, parents should understand that a cell phone is more than a handy tool for talking to other people, said Englander.

“It's not a phone,” she said. “It's a portable computer.”

If they want to give their child a device that is only used for phone calls, they should be sure the text and Internet capabilities are disabled, she said. Parents must assert that all the fun, nonacademic uses of the computer are a privilege, not a right.

“The trick to addressing safety and privacy issues is to do it before there are any problems,” said Englander. “So when those problems happen, the children will come to parents because they know they are interested and they know they care about it. If parents never bring it up, children will think they don't know or don't care, or both.”

Adults must coach children, especially girls, on the value of friendship, she said. “They need to learn how to get along with friends and how to work out a conflict that doesn't destroy a relationship.” ■