

Young victims of cyber bullying more likely to suffer from depression

Young victims of electronic or cyber bullying - which occurs online or by cell phone - are more likely to suffer from depression than their tormentors are, a new study finds.

Traditional bullying, the kind that occurs in the school building or face-to-face, is different. Victims and bully-victims - those who both dish it out and take it - are more likely to suffer from depression than are those who are bullies, but not victims.

"The type of bullying we're looking at peaks in middle school," said study co-author Ronald Iannotti, Ph.D.

Researchers at the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child and Human Health Development looked at survey results on bullying behaviours and signs of depression in 7313 students in grades six through 10.

Cyber bullying is a relatively new area of study. Lead author Jing Wang, Ph.D., said the greater depression in victims alone compared to others involved in cyber bullying was unexpected.

Jorge Srabstein, M.D., who has no affiliation with the new study, said the findings "really highlight the toxicity of cyber bullying." He is medical director of the Clinic for Health Problems Related to Bullying at Children's National Medical Centre.

In traditional bullying, "somebody writes an insult on the bathroom wall and it's confined to the environment of the school," Srabstein said. But with cyber bullying, "in the majority of victimisation, there is a wider resonance of abuse, to all corners of the world."

Isolated

"Individuals can be more isolated when bullying occurs by cell phone or computer," Iannotti said. "The mechanism for cyber bullying is 'I'm making fun of you; I could have made a photo of you that's not even true and it can go to Facebook.' The audience is much greater. That can be devastating - not knowing how many people have seen that text message or photo."

Data from the Health Behaviour in School-Aged Children 2005 Survey showed that more than half of students either had bullied others or experienced verbal bullying, like name-calling, at least once in the past couple of months and more than half were involved in relational bullying, like isolation from peers. About a fifth had either engaged in or experienced physical bullying, like hitting, and about 14% were involved in cyber bullying.

Gender was not a factor: boys and girls equally were vulnerable.

What was not clear is which comes first: "We can't be sure whether depressed kids have lower self-esteem and so are more easily bullied or the other way around," Iannotti said.

In 2006, Megan Meier, a Missouri teen, committed suicide because of online bullying. In a case that illustrates how the trend can cross boundaries of age and identity, her adult tormentors pretended to be a boy who first befriended, then insulted, and finally "dumped" her.

New laws

A new Missouri law requires school districts to add the terms "cyber-bullying" and "electronic communications" to existing anti-bullying policies and other states have enacted similar laws.

In his June testimony before the US House Education and Labour Committee, Srabstein gave recommendations to address student cyber safety in the context of the Elementary and Secondary School Education Act reauthorisation.

In worldwide efforts, a common thread is that you cannot confront bullying without educating people and changing the community culture.

"Children might not be aware that the incidents they have experienced are cyber bullying," Wang said.

Many kids are reluctant to speak up. "Unfortunately, it's universally ingrained that reporting bullying is being a 'snitch' and trying to get someone in trouble," Srabstein said. "Instead of punishing perpetrators, they should undergo counselling about the harm they have inflicted and understand that they must stop the mistreatment."

"Kids may be reluctant to tell their parents in case they lose their computer or cell phone privileges," Iannotti said. On the other side, he said, "parents should monitor children's phones and computers," another tough sell.

Source: Journal of Adolescent Health

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