

Inside People: Is your child a cyberbully?

by Jane Clifford

If you have teens or preteens in your house, it probably comes as no surprise that summer means more time to spend online. What may come as a surprise is how they spend some of that time.

CYBERBULLYING - According to one survey, about one-third of all teenagers who use the Internet say they have been targets of a range of annoying and potentially menacing online activities. CNS Photo courtesy of Virginia Beutler. "About one-third of all teenagers who use the Internet say they have been targets of a range of annoying and potentially menacing online activities," writes Amanda Lenhart, senior research analyst at the Pew Internet & American Life Project (www.pewinternet.org) in her report on cyberbullying, released June 27.

The report identified the top cyberbullying activities: receiving threatening messages; having private e-mails or text messages forwarded without consent; having an embarrassing picture posted without permission; or having rumors about them spread online.

Those things can feel more extreme to victims than the actions of a bully on the playground, in the cafeteria or locker room because of several factors cited by the National Crime Prevention Council (www.ncpc.org):

- It reaches your child at home, taking away the place he or she feels most safe.

- It's harsher. Often kids say things online they wouldn't say in person because they can't see the other person's reaction.

- It's far reaching. Kids can send e-mails making fun of someone to their entire class or school with a few clicks, or post them on a Web site for the whole world to see.

Internet child-safety advocates say your kids probably won't tell you if they're victims of cyberbullying.

"Most children will avoid telling their parents about a cyberbullying incident, fearing they will only make things worse (calling the other parents, the school, blaming the victim or taking away Internet privileges)," says Parry Aftab of Wired Safety (www.wiredsafety.org), which offers tips for handling this and other issues. Aftab and other experts urge us to be supportive and not overreact. And to be aware that a child is just as likely to be a cyberbully as a victim of cyberbullying, often going back and forth between the two roles.

"They may not even realize that they are seen as a cyberbully," Aftab says.

We need to be aware that the more time young users spend online, chatting or visiting certain sites, the more likely they are to be cyberbullied.

For example, the Pew study found that teenagers who use social network sites like MySpace and Facebook, and teens who use the Internet daily, are more likely to say that they have been cyberbullied. And girls more often than boys.

"Nearly four in 10 social network users have been cyberbullied in some way, compared with 22 percent of online teens who do not use social networks," Lenhart reported.

The No. 1 piece of advice for parents is the same: Talk to our kids about their lives offline and monitor what they're doing online.

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