

Cyberbullying: What Your Parents Don't Know Could Kill You

Online bullying or harassment is a huge problem in places all around the world. While name-calling and gossip have long been a part of childhood, our digital lives have changed the ways these nasty names and rumors spread and made them much more dangerous.

Online cruelty was once limited to text messages, but cyberbullying has evolved beyond instant messaging. Now, embarrassing images and videos can spread rapidly among a person's classmates, and the victim can see how many of their so-called "friends" have viewed it or clicked the like button. This makes the effect of even a single bullying message much more devastating.

There have also been changes to the kinds of people who are bullying others. Traditionally, bullies would often be larger or stronger than their victims, or a perpetrator with high social status could use their high standing to escape punishment. With cyberbullying, however, people who might not have acted as bullies face-to-face are able to indulge their worst impulses online. What's more, people often behave differently in groups online than they would in real life. They have a reduced sense of personal responsibility and are more willing to join in with what everyone else is doing.

Of all the ways the Internet has changed bullying, the most surprising is that it allows people to bully themselves. Some anonymously post mean comments about themselves to see if their friends will come to their defense. But others, who may be suffering from depression, engage in this activity as a form of digital self-harm.

It takes just a few seconds to post a mean comment online, but the consequences are often long-lasting. Many teen suicides are the result of cyberbullying, a situation that leaves their parents and friends shocked because they had no idea the bullying was occurring. Since it's so hard to know what is happening online, many adults simply want to forbid children from using social media at all. Although the parents mean well, this approach may not be realistic because social media has become central to the way teens build and maintain relationships with each other.

What can you do to stop cyberbullying? The most important thing to do is to reach out to someone. If you are the victim of cyberbullying or know of someone who is committing online bullying, know that there are many people who want to help. Don't isolate yourself or allow the phone screen to prevent you from reaching out for help.