The Dark Side of the Feed: Cyberbullying and Digital Self-Harm Explained

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The Evolution of Cyberbullying

When many of today's parents were children, bullying was more of a face to face occurrence where bullies typically knew their victim, had to own their words or actions, and were only able to reach their target in specific environments. With the advent of the internet, and more affordable personal computers in the 1990s, bullying began to slowly evolve into what it looks like today.

Early Online Bullying

In the late 1990s to early 2000s, chat rooms reached peak popularity, and users began finding ways to create anonymous usernames to bully individuals in the chat. Targeted streams would even sometimes be used to turn an entire chat room against a particular user.

In AOL Instant Messenger during the same timeframe, individuals could not only message anonymously, but could also create away messages that were sometimes used to spread rumors. As the internet evolved and social media was created, MySpace featured the ability to rank friends by your top 8, leading young people to shuffle peers around regularly. Fake profiles continued to be created, and profile pages designed like "Burn Books" from the movie Mean Girls were used to mock classmates and teachers.

Cyberbullying Today

As the years have passed, and social media has evolved, the issue of cyberbullying has only become greater. Research from The Pew Research Center has consistently shown that cyberbullying impacts a substantial portion of American youth. In its most recent national survey, conducted in 2022, **46% of U.S. teens reported experiencing at least one form of cyberbullying.**

Cyberbullying can be found on social media, gaming platforms, messaging apps, email, and forums. It can look like name-calling, spreading false rumors, receiving explicit images

that were not requested, the Artificial Intelligence creation of damaging or explicit images of others, having explicit images shared without consent, physical threats, or the constant asking about a person's comings or goings from someone other than a parent.

The Rise of Digital Self-Harm

Along with traditional cyberbullying, experts have noted that digital self-harm has begun to grow. Digital self-harm is a form of self-harm, in which individuals anonymously post mean and hurtful comments about themselves on social media, or other online platforms.

To explore the prevalence of this behavior, researchers from Florida Atlantic University and the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire analyzed three nationwide studies from 2016, 2019, and 2021 of U.S. teens ages 13-17. Their findings, published in the Journal of School Violence, indicated that between **2019 and 2021 9-12% of American 13-17 year olds engaged in digital self-harm which demonstrated an 88% increase from 2016.**

The same study suggests that female students were more likely to have engaged in digital self-harm. Non-heterosexual students, as well as, those students who had experienced cyberbullying elsewhere were also more likely to have engaged in digital self-harming behaviors.

Mental Health Impacts

Both cyberbullying and digital self-harm can have serious impacts on the mental health of children and teens. According to the American Psychological Association, being victimized through cyberbullying can cause an increase of stress, and may result in anxiety and depression symptoms.

Cyberbullying can also cause educational harm as students may miss days of school, or experience academic performance problems. This can be especially true if cyberbullying is associated with face-to-face bullying as well. At times, cyberbullying can also result in the utilization of alcohol or drugs as coping mechanisms, as well as, self-harming behaviors or suicidal ideation.

Digital self-harm is associated with a five to sevenfold increase in the likelihood of reporting suicidal thoughts, and a nine to fifteenfold increase in the likelihood of a suicide attempt according to a study published by Child and Adolescent Mental Health.

Another study found that digital self-harm is also correlated with school or cyberbullying, drug use, and depressive symptoms.

What Parents Can Do

It is vitally important that parents monitor the online presence and activity of their children and teenagers across all devices and platforms. Before giving youth devices it is important for parents to discuss responsible use, and what kids should do if they encounter a situation where they may be uncomfortable.

Parents can also work with their children to create rules around privacy and safety, device usage, and online conflict. The best defense against cyberbullying and digital self-harm is an honest and open supportive relationship between parents and their children. Though it is easy to react quickly upon seeing or hearing about situations, curiosity in questioning, and remaining emotionally regulated during discussions can help youth feel more open to sharing what they are experiencing.

Red Flags

Parents may notice a number of red flags that could indicate that their children are struggling with cyberbullying or digital self-harm:

- **Avoiding devices** or becoming anxious, angry, or secretive about digital interactions
- **Social withdrawal**, including texting less or spending less time on social media
- **Skipping school or activities**
- **Deleting social media accounts** or changing account information
- **Mood shifts**, including changes in sleep, signs of depression, or unexplained drops in grades

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Steps to Take if Cyberbullying Is Happening

If you as a parent have noticed these red flags and discovered that cyberbullying is taking place, or your child has confided in you that they are experiencing this, there are a number of steps you can take:

1. **Document everything.**
   Take screenshots or photos of all messages, comments, or profiles.
2. **Block and report.**
   Use the block and report buttons available on each platform.
3. **Notify the school** if the perpetrator is in the same district.
   Provide documentation when reporting the bullying.
4. **Contact local law enforcement** if needed.
   This can be especially useful if the identity of the perpetrator is unknown or they are not within the same school district.
5. **Support your child's mental health.**
   Discuss the importance of mental healthcare and help them find a professional they feel comfortable with if their mental health is suspected to have been impacted.

In Conclusion

As online spaces and social media continue to expand and evolve, the responsibility to protect and guide young people has never been more important. The impact of cyberbullying and digital self-harm highlight how deeply online experiences can shape a child's emotional and academic well-being. They also remind us of the power parents hold through connection, curiosity, and consistent support. By remaining engaged, responding thoughtfully, and fostering open communication, parents can help their children navigate online challenges, and ensure they know they're never alone in facing them