



How Mean Can Teens Be?

"Primetime" Special Shows How the Internet Can Fuel Bullying and Fighting

By KETURAH GRAY

Sept. 12, 2006 — - Everyone knows that adolescence is tough, but with the advance of technology, teenagers today have redefined the social battleground.

No longer restricted to schoolyard confrontations, they can bring home the catfights and conflicts, thanks to the Internet.

Watch "Primetime" on Thursday, Sept. 14, at 10 p.m. ET for a special hour on cyberbullying hosted by Diane Sawyer.

Lauren, a teen girl from Florida, says she has only one main friend she trusts. "But there's always that fear, and that doubt, that something can happen and all your secrets are out," she said.

Lauren and other girls quoted in this piece asked that their last names not be used to protect their privacy.

In loosely monitored cyberspace, where images are easily downloaded, privacy and secrets can be hard to maintain.

One girl, Paige, remembered, "In middle school, girls would bring their camera phones into the locker rooms. If they didn't like certain girls, that's the way they would get back at them."

Cell phones, instant messaging and personal Web sites like MySpace and Facebook are now common weapons of "cyberbullying," used to spread gossip, rumors and bequeath public lashings -- leaving teenagers with painful battle scars.

The technology often appeals to the strengths of girls, allowing them to fight with emotionally stinging words instead of physical brawn. Although boys and girls both participate in Internet hazing, experts say that girls are more invested in the potential of cyberbullying.

"Boys are more task-oriented," said Brigham Young University researcher Clyde Robinson, who has conducted studies with Brigham Young's Craig Hart and David Nelson to learn why some girls are mean early in life.

"Give 'em a task, and if they're gonna be mean or attack somebody, they'll get on to that task," Robinson said of boys. "The girls, they're going after the emotional jugular."

Bullying can start early, said Hart.

"Preschoolers can be very adept in being mean to one another in relational aggressive ways," Hart said. "If a child feels fairly insecure, to make themselves feel better about themselves, one way is to put others down."

John Halligan knows all about how socially cruel some kids can be. In middle school, several classmates, including a former friend, Ashley, started teasing Halligan's son, Ryan.

In online conversations, Ashley and other friends led Ryan to believe that she might be interested in him -- but then quickly turned it all around on him.

"When he sort of got interested, we're like, 'Oh, well, we would never go for someone like you. I can't believe you would think that,'" Ashley told "Primetime." "Like really, really cruel stuff that we said."

Like many teens, Ryan didn't share much of his pain. His parents had no idea that Ryan was under attack by kids who called him gay and girls who pretended to like him just so they could turn and call him a loser.

Many parents have a difficult time monitoring the bullying.

"Kids are natives to the Internet, and adults are the immigrants," said Elizabeth Englander of the Massachusetts Aggression Reduction Center. "Adults, being so far behind the eight ball, means we won't be able to educate kids on cyberbullying."

Englander said it creates a "perfect storm" in which kids have a separate, unmonitored universe where they can be naive enough to think there are no consequences.

Impulse + Internet Can Equal Disaster

Researcher David Nelson says the Internet can play on teens' weaknesses.

"This cyberbullying stuff, especially the instant, spontaneous nature of it, really plays on vulnerabilities of adolescence, because they have an underdeveloped sense of empathy in terms of how their actions affect others," Nelson said.

"If somebody fires a zinger at you, it's very easy to then get upset and immediately respond to it with a zinger of your own."

Arguments over boys, popularity, other classmates -- in the blink of an eye, your best friend can become your worst enemy.

When that happens, teenagers turn to the Internet. Web sites have been created to vote for a school's biggest slut, ugliest student, the most hated, and so on.

Boston teenager Jackie Garcia was the victim of an anonymous bully who posted a Web site created just to rip her apart.

Among the postings were such pointed barbs as "She looks like a male but is a female because of her big-ass eyes, pointy-ass fish lips. Opinion of people that know her say she looks like a witch."

According to Teri Schroeder, the head of iSafe, a foundation working to make young people more

responsible on the Internet, 58 percent of kids admit someone has said mean or hurtful things to them online.

More than four out of 10 say it has happened more than once. Additionally, 53 percent of kids admit having said something mean or hurtful to another person online. More than one in three have done it more than once.

"There are so many kids who would never bully face to face, but do online," said Englander. "Girls who cyberbully are girls who are very invested, do well in school, have friends, want to go to college. They believe that it's sort of fun and they'll never be caught."

Lauren, a student who admits to bullying others, supports that theory.

"It's mean, but at one point or another, we enjoyed doing it to a person that we really don't like," she said.

'Primetime' Role-Playing Experiment

ABC News worked with the Brigham Young child development researchers and iSafe's Schroeder to develop a role-play experiment that would peer into teenage rivalry with technology's new weapons.

Over the course of several days, 11 teenage girls who didn't previously know each other were sequestered with webcams, cell phones and Internet access, much as the girls have in real life.

The girls created made-up personalities to show what can happen when vying for the attention of popular kids.

A group of older kids, including boys, became the separate "popular" group. Although only a few years older than the girls in the experiment, the boys were amazed at how fast and technologically advanced the girls were.

"There's so many different things that they know how to do that I had no clue how to do," said Ryan, a college senior.

Over the course of the weekend, the girls put their arsenal to full use, working diligently to reach the top of the social hierarchy.

Sexual innuendos and physical attacks quickly became part of the game. Some of the girls remarked that they were unnerved how quickly their play acting started to feel real.

They admit that the anonymity of the Internet changes things and encouraged them to act in ways they wouldn't in person.

"Because you can't see the reaction to it and you can't see their facial expressions, or anything, and so, you're like basically talking to a computer screen," one participant, Lexxi, told "Primetime."

If they had been the victim of this kind of bullying campaign in real life, some of the girls said they wouldn't know how to respond.

"I think I would have just gone in my room and locked myself there," said Maddie.

The experiment was, perhaps, a wake-up call for these nice, successful girls that online bullying exchanges can be hurtful.

"I didn't know I could be that mean," said Gwyneth. "I think I'd need to get help or something."

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