Easy to bully digitally

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Two out of three children have experienced bullying via the Internet or mobile phones according to a survey made by Telenor in 2008. The survey also shows that parents are uncertain about what to do about this kind of bullying.

Research Fellow Tove Flack at the Centre for Behavioural Research (SAF) at the University of Stavanger has extensive experience in counselling work in anti-bullying, which includes the centre's program zero, where zero tolerance for bullying and active involvement are important concepts. Zero gives schools advice on how to prevent, detect and solve problems and create continuity. She has also worked with cases of bullying and conducted bullying research in schools. In her research and practice, she has particularly focused on hidden bullying.

"For many victims of bullying cyber-bullying is just one of several ways in which they are being harassed. This may mean that they never have any protected place. At school, they are left out or maligned and when they come home they receive insults on mobile phones and net. Access to social media in recent years has unfortunately given us some new bullying tools," Flack says.

Lower Threshold

She explains that the term bullying means experiencing harassment on a regular basis over time. Also when it comes to cyber-bullying, it is important to distinguish between those who are often harassed and those who have experienced harassment only occasionally.

Cyber-bullying takes place both through image and text. Among today's youth many have experienced seeing a picture they would never have shown to anyone, spread to all and sundry. Images remain online forever. Others have had to read characterizations of themselves that are very offensive and know that such accounts are shared with the general public.

"The threshold to bully one another through social media might possibly be lower than to bully someone in more traditional ways. When friends sit together, it may seem easy and non-committal to send off an anonymous message with a disrespectful message to another person. It is not unknown that hate groups are formed online, where children or young people unite to hate a particular person. Digital bullying can result in a person being frozen out by having that individual deleted from Facebook or from the contact list on one's mobile," Flack says.

"For adults it can be difficult enough to discover traditional bullying. Digital media create new and demanding challenges. It is important to have zero tolerance for bullying via the Internet in the same way as there should be zero tolerance for all types of harassment," she points out.

Girls most affected

The Data Inspectorate launched in March 2010 the service slettmeg.no. The service will help those who have had their identity violated online. Of a total of 508 inquiries about the site in June, July and August this year, 39.7 percent were about Facebook , Google came second (7.9 percent) and the press came third with 7.7 percent.

Twice as many girls as boys report having been bullied digitally, according to a survey conducted by TNS Gallup in connection with the campaign dubestemmer.no. The survey shows that social networking, SMS and instant messaging are the most widely used bully channels.

- Children and young people are normally not aware of how strongly it may affect the receiver. They do not consider that what they broadcast can be tracked down and that they may be accountable for their actions online. Many do not realize that they may be prosecuted when they violate or threaten others via the net, she said.

Schools must take action

Flack emphasizes that schools must take steps to gain control of bullying situations. She insists that different expertise about different forms of bullying is needed in order to succeed. Knowledge about the handling of digital bullying is included in SAF's anti-bullying program Zero, in which zero tolerance of bullying and active involvement are important concepts. Zero gives schools advice on how to prevent, detect and solve problems and create continuity.

"In order to detect traditional forms of bullying, schools must develop their ability to see and understand what is happening in communication and interaction between pupils. When it comes to cyber-bullying, special strategies are required," Flack says.

"Although cyber-bullying is largely an after-school problem, the schools have a great responsibility to contribute to prevention, detection and the stopping of bullying. They should take up the netiquette rules at an early stage and inform about the dangers. That should of course also parents do," she adds.

Warns against data refusal

In his doctoral work Research Fellow Arne Olav Nygard at the Reading Centre has followed the teaching in secondary schools. From his seat at the back of the classroom he has gained an insight into students' use of

computers and mobile phones. Social media are frequently open on small and large screens according to his observations.

"Surveys show that Facebook is very important right now, specially the chat and wall functions. In addition, young people often play online games together. The students have an almost constant social discourse going with friends in other classes and at other schools. This is an extension of existing social networks, Nygard explains.

He warns against easy solutions in the fight against cyber-bullying. To deny students the use of technology at school or at home, is the wrong way to go," Nygard says, who has taught courses to parents and given them some simple rules they can stick to.

"We must be careful to turn bullying into a technological question. In my view, bullying is first and foremost a social problem. To remove the PC and mobile phone is the easiest solution, but it should be the last one, for that is not where the problem is. The only thing parents and teachers achieve in this way is to remove themselves from the real issues. Moreover, the curriculum states that students must master data," the research fellow says.

Nygard realizes that bullying will find new channels in the digital networks, and that it may have other and unintended consequences. He still believes that adults also need to engage in, observe and learn the logic of the digital world. This will make it difficult for children to have a secret digital life," he believes.

"Parents can achieve a lot by being present. One measure might be to put the computer in the living room or in another central room. When the children have to sit near adults, they also see that the adults are included. Children should also learn to use their full names on the network," Nygard says.

"We need to set the limits for mobile and computer usage, but the technology is not something to be afraid of. As a parent you can start to become friends with your kids on Facebook, even if they think it isn't cool."

Provided by University of Stavanger

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