

Research shows 'friends' often lead in teen cyber aggression

October 5 2015, by Phil Roth

A research project involving Dr. Marion Underwood, dean of graduate studies and professor of psychological sciences, has found that most online conflicts among teens occur with friends and that reading social media without posting (often known as "lurking") is associated with psychological distress.

Underwood said that because [social media](#) dominates the lives of so many teens, the door is wide open for negative online experiences.

"Most young people will be the victims of cyberbullying. And quite often, that aggression comes from their so-called friends," she said.

Underwood helped to develop the research model for a study done by CNN for a special that is scheduled to air Monday, Oct. 5. She said the study is groundbreaking because it is the first study to examine what 13-year-olds actually post and say on social media outlets such as Instagram, Twitter and Facebook.

Underwood is one of the foremost researchers in the developmental origins and outcomes of social aggression and how adolescents' [digital communication](#) relates to adjustment. Her work has been published in numerous scientific journals, and her research program has been supported by the National Institutes of Health since 1995. In 2003, she authored a book, *Social Aggression among Girls*. Since 2003, she and her research group have been conducting a longitudinal study of origins and outcomes of social aggression, and how adolescents use digital

communication.

Underwood recently received a five-year award of \$1.6 million from the Eunice Kennedy Shriver Institute of Child Health and Human Development to support additional analyses of a large data set she has been compiling for years.

Under the new grant, she and her collaborators will focus on three primary questions:

- How social aggression in online and offline relationships relates to psychological adjustment
- How qualities of parent-child and peer relationships predict social aggression online and offline
- How other types of digital communication relate to adolescents' relationships and adjustment (excessive talk about problems, pro-social communication, and communication about sex).

The CNN research is being featured Monday on CNN's Anderson Cooper 360 in a special called #Being Thirteen: Inside the Secret World of Teens. It examines the social media communication of 200 13-year-olds, including more than 150,000 of their social media posts.

"Vulnerable teens are at risk when they see pictures of friends getting together without them or parties to which they were not invited," Underwood said. "Perhaps even more seriously, teens are exposed to an unending parade of highly groomed, curated pictures of friends looking glamorous and having a wonderful time."

Underwood said parental involvement in their children's social media lives is important. She said parents need to join whatever social platforms their children are using so they can understand how social media works and get a glimpse of what their adolescents are

broadcasting to the world.

She also said parents need to understand that adolescents care deeply about their digital worlds.

"Our study showed that parental monitoring does make a difference. Although children perceive that parents don't really understand their online social lives, having parents who try to monitor buffers the negative effects of online conflict with friends," Underwood said.

Underwood served for two years as a consultant to CNN producers and is interviewed on the program.

"This special is the result of a two-year collaboration between me, Robert Faris at UC Davis and the AC360 team. This partnership has been a great experience, because the AC360 producers were genuinely interested in the scientific questions and practical implications, committed to getting the science exactly right, and dedicated to creating a compelling documentary to share the results."

Underwood said Anderson Cooper helped demonstrate the findings from the study with on-camera interviews.

"I was particularly impressed by how he interviewed the 13-year-olds and their parents, talking with them about their online lives, showing them some of their online activities, and sensitively pointing out that they were not the only ones who presented themselves differently online than in person," she said.

Provided by University of Texas at Dallas

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