

It's all about the drama

When does gossip and being mean online tip over into bullying?

Name calling, spreading rumours, arguing... the digital world has given teenagers a new stage for their social dramas. But what if a throwaway comment is misconstrued or a joke gets out of hand? And at what point could teasing, gossiping and being mean be considered something more serious, like bullying? **Digital Parenting** looks at some of the latest research and offers pointers for parents.

“Why does she look so worried?” you ask yourself, as you catch your teenage daughter’s eye across the living room. She’s been glued to her mobile for the last hour with only an occasional glance up at the TV and something seems to be bothering her.

The truth could be quite complex. With places like Facebook and BlackBerry Messenger (‘BBM’) now such important social hubs for young people, they are often

navigating them without the kind of parental guidance they would get in other areas of their life. Just like in the real world, they come across a broad spectrum of personalities and behaviour online and they are developing their own coping mechanisms, often in line with what is considered to be ‘the norm’ within their own community.

Against this backdrop, research reveals that many children and teenagers are not even using the same language as adults would to describe negative online behaviour – referring to it as ‘drama’ rather than ‘bullying’.

“Discovering new interests, building friendships and testing boundaries is all part of growing up,” comments Annie Mullins OBE of Vodafone. “A lot of this is now done through social networks and smartphones and young people are developing increasingly sophisticated ways of creating and managing their digital persona. For some children and teenagers, the internet and other technologies give them a sense of freedom and perceived anonymity so they might behave very differently online to how

they do in real life – that can be difficult for parents to understand.”

While much of what young people see and experience in the digital world is positive (teens comment that social networking sites help them to strengthen friendships and feel good about themselves, for example), it is not without its challenges. Just like in the real world, your child might come across meanness, cruelty and bullying online and when this kind of behaviour takes place in front of an audience of hundreds of other teenagers on Facebook or via text message, it can be particularly hard to handle.

As Amanda Lenhart of the Pew Research Center’s Internet & American Life Project explains, “Social networking sites have created new spaces for teens to interact and they witness a mixture of altruism and cruelty on those sites. For most teens, these are exciting and rewarding spaces. But the majority have also seen a darker side. And for a subset of teens, the world of social media isn’t a pretty place because it presents a climate of drama and mean behaviour.”

Meanness (be it someone being mean to your own child or your child being mean to someone else) can be a difficult pill to swallow for any parent. Throw in the ‘digital factor’ and even the most savvy mums and dads might find it difficult to know how to help their son and daughter stay in control. What advice should you give them about dealing with things like name calling on Facebook or a rumour being rapidly spread by text message? When does online meanness become bullying? What practical steps can your child take to help protect themselves?

Positive and negative behaviour online

The good news is that positive behaviour is prominent on places like Facebook. In a 2011 study of teens by Pew Internet in partnership with the Family Online Safety Institute (‘FOSI’), Lenhart and her colleagues found that more than two-thirds of young people who use social networking websites say their peers are mostly kind to one another on such sites.

Useful websites

Beatbullying
www.beatbullying.org

Beat Bullying

ChildLine
www.childline.org.uk

ChildLine

Cybermentors
www.cybermentors.org.uk

Cyber Mentors

common sense media

Common Sense Media
www.commonsensemedia.org

Take action

1 TALK to your child regularly about their online friendships as well as their offline friendships

2 REASSURE them that they can come to you if they have any concerns about people being mean to them online

3 BEAR in mind that what you, as an adult, might consider to be bullying might simply be seen as gossip or drama to your child – be sensitive to how they want to handle matters

4 LOOK OUT for behaviour changes that could be a sign that your son or daughter is being bullied or is bullying someone else

5 MAKE THE MOST OF tools like Parental Controls on your child's computer, mobile and games console, privacy settings and 'Report/Block' options on social networking websites like Facebook

6 OFFER practical as well as emotional support if your child tells you they're being bullied – help them to save emails or texts as evidence, take screen shots of websites, and contact their internet or mobile provider

7 RESIST the temptation to approach the bully yourself, even if it's someone you or your child knows – if it's a fellow student, speak to their teacher so that the school can take the appropriate action as part of its anti-bullying policy

8 ENCOURAGE them to tell you, or a teacher, if they witness any meanness or bullying

On the other hand, 88% of these teens said they have witnessed people being mean and cruel to other people on these sites and 15% reported that they have personally been the target of mean or cruel behaviour.

"While teenage conflict is nothing new, today's gossip, jokes and arguments often play out through social media like Formspring, Twitter and Facebook," point out Dr Danah Boyd and Dr Alice Marwick, who have spoken to hundreds of teenagers about their online lives as part of their research for Microsoft.

So, how are teens dealing with this kind of negative behaviour? Do they stand up for themselves and others? Or do they sometimes join in?

According to the Pew Internet research, most teens who witness online cruelty choose to ignore it but nearly a quarter have joined in the harassment of others on a social networking site. 80% have stepped in and defended a victim of meanness, however.

When does online meanness tip over into bullying?

For young people and parents alike, it can be difficult to determine when meanness becomes something more serious, like bullying.

The UK charity Cybermentors defines cyberbullying as "...when someone uses technology, like the internet or a mobile phone, to deliberately hurt, humiliate, harass, intimidate or threaten someone else" and points out that bullying is something that is done on purpose and is a repeated action.

9% of teens who spoke to Pew Internet said that they had been bullied by text message in the last 12 months and 8% had been bullied online (via email, a social networking site or instant messaging).

Bullying – whether offline or online – can undermine a young person's confidence, self-esteem and sense of security and also affect their school attendance and performance. In the most serious cases, the victim might harm themselves or even feel that their life isn't worth living any more.

Even if your child has never bullied anyone in real life, they might act differently in the digital world. They might perceive that they are anonymous online or they might not realise that teasing and being mean to people via text or on Facebook is just as bad as saying it in person. In fact, writing and publishing a comment can have a much greater impact that saying something to someone's face when it can be shrugged off and a child may hesitate or think twice to say it all.

Teen talk

Understanding meanness and bullying has never been easy for parents but new research has revealed an added complication – adults and teens simply don't view these issues in the same way and they don't even use the same language to refer to them.

A new study by Boyd and Marwick investigates what teens like to call 'drama'. According to the authors, dramas on social networking sites like Facebook include posting inappropriate photos and videos, private conflicts that become public standoffs, cries for attention and relationship breakups, make-ups and jealousies.

Reflecting what teens see on soap operas and reality TV, these dramas take place in front of a captive online audience. Those watching on their laptop or mobile can even get involved themselves – by posting a message of support on someone's Facebook wall, for example.

While adults who witness this kind of behaviour might regard it as bullying, Boyd and Marwick ask whether teens refer to these interpersonal conflicts that are played out online as 'drama' as a way of defending themselves against the realities of aggression, gossip and bullying. In other words, do they call it 'drama' to save face and not take on the mantle of either bully or victim?

Parents matter

It certainly seems that the boundaries between meanness, drama and bullying are somewhat blurred in the digital world. What remains clear, however, is that families should have regular conversations about the kind of experiences their kids are having online and should also discuss why it's so important to behave responsibly and respectfully, just as you would expect them to in the real world. For, even if adults and young people seem to speak a different language at times, good digital manners can still be a common goal. ■

The four digital bullying roles

1 THE BULLY – the person who uses digital media tools to deliberately upset or harass their target

2 THE TARGET – the person who is being bullied

3 THE BYSTANDERS – the kids who are aware that something cruel is going on but who stay on the sidelines. In some cases, they might participate in the bullying themselves by commenting on a post or sharing a text

4 THE UPSTANDERS – those who take action by sticking up for the target, addressing the bully, or reporting the incident

Source: Common Sense Media