

Internet Gives Teenage Bullies Weapons to Wound From Afar

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By AMY HARMON Published: August 26, 2004

The fight started at school, when some eighth-grade girls stole a pencil case filled with makeup that belonged to a new classmate, Amanda Marcuson, and she reported them. But it did not end there. As soon as Amanda got home, the instant messages started popping up on her computer screen. She was a tattletale and a liar, they said. Shaken, she typed back, "You stole my stuff!" She was a "stuck-up bitch," came the instant response in the box on the screen, followed by a series of increasingly ugly epithets.

That evening, Amanda's mother tore her away from the computer to go to a basketball game with her family. But the barrage of electronic insults did not stop. Like a lot of other teenagers, Amanda has her Internet messages automatically forwarded to her cellphone, and by the end of the game she had received 50 - the limit of its capacity. "It seems like people can say a lot worse things to someone online than when they're actually talking to them," said Amanda, 14, of Birmingham, Mich., who transferred to the school last year. The girls never said another word to her in person, she said.

The episode reflects one of many ways that the technology lubricating the social lives of teenagers is amplifying standard adolescent cruelty. No longer confined to school grounds or daytime hours, "cyberbullies" are pursuing their quarries into their own bedrooms. Tools like e-mail messages and Web logs enable the harassment to be both less obvious to adults and more publicly humiliating, as gossip, put-downs and embarrassing pictures are circulated among a wide audience of peers with a few clicks.

The technology, which allows its users to inflict pain without being forced to see its effect, also seems to incite a deeper level of meanness. Psychologists say the distance between bully and victim on the Internet is leading to an unprecedented - and often unintentional - degree of brutality, especially when combined with a typical adolescent's lack of impulse control and underdeveloped empathy skills.

"We're always talking about protecting kids on the Internet from adults and bad people," said Parry Aftab, executive director of WiredSafety.org, a nonprofit group that has been fielding a growing number of calls from parents and school administrators worried about bullying. "We forget that we sometimes need to protect kids from kids."

For many teenagers, online harassment has become a part of everyday life. But schools, which tend to focus on problems that arise on their property, and parents, who tend to assume that their children know better than they do when it comes to computers, have long overlooked it. Only recently has it become pervasive enough that even the adults have started paying attention.

Like many other guidance counselors, Susan Yuratovac, a school psychologist at Hilltop Elementary School in Beachwood, Ohio, has for years worked with a wide spectrum of teenage aggression, including physical bullying and sexual harassment. This summer, Ms. Yuratovac said, she is devising a new curriculum to address the shift to electronic taunting.

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"I have kids coming into school upset daily because of what happened on the Internet the night before," Ms. Yuratovac said. "'We were online last night and somebody said I was fat,' or 'They asked me why I wear the same pair of jeans every day,' or 'They say I have Wal-Mart clothes.' "

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8 Recently, Ms. Yuratovac intervened when a 12-year-old girl showed her an instant message exchange in which a boy in her class wrote, "My brother says you have really good boobs." Boys make many more explicit sexual comments online than off, counselors say.

9 "I don't think the girl is fearful the boy is going to accost her, but I do think she is embarrassed," Ms. Yuratovac said. "They know it's mean, it's risky, it's nasty. I worry what it does to them inside. It's the kind of thing you carry with you for a lot of years."

10 The new weapons in the teenage arsenal of social cruelty include stealing each others' screen names and sending inflammatory messages to friends or crush-objects, forwarding private material to people for whom it was never intended and anonymously posting derogatory comments about fellow students on Web journals called blogs.

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