

Is technology ruining our kids?

Not according to public health researcher Michele Ybarra, who outlined why, in general, there is little cause for alarm.



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Young people are using new technologies at ever-increasing rates, with 93 percent of young people now online, 73 percent on MySpace or Facebook, and 75 percent owning cell phones, up from 63 percent who owned cellphones in 2006, according to data from the Pew Internet American Life Project.

With this increased access comes greater worry for parents, teachers and counselors, whose anxiety is fueled by media reports of young people engaging in "sexting"— sending provocative photos of themselves to others via cell phone—and concerns that new technologies might create more avenues for bullying and harassment.

But are these fears realistic? No, said APA 2011 Annual Convention invited speaker Michele Ybarra, PhD, a public health and child mental health researcher who is president and research director of the nonprofit research organization Internet Solutions for Kids. Citing data from two ongoing studies, Ybarra said it's time to calm our nerves, save perhaps for a small group of young people who report being distressed by bullying and an even smaller number who "sex" and simultaneously report engaging in other forms of sexual activity.

"We need to better identify youth who are struggling and likely need individual help," said Ybarra. But at the same time, she said, we should refuse to give in to fear-mongering and hyperbolic statements about technology because the data simply don't support the idea that technology is changing or encouraging bullying, sexting or other types of harassment.

Bullies online

To examine how new technologies may be changing behaviors, including bullying and harassment, Ybarra tracked about 1,600 young people from 2006 to 2008 as part of the ongoing longitudinal Growing up with Media study funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. She asked young people ages 10 to 15 about levels of bullying— defined as ongoing, repetitive peer aggression or victimization that is marked by a power differential between bully and victim—and harassment, a larger umbrella term that encompasses mean and rude comments, threatening and aggressive behaviors, spreading rumors and other annoying or hurtful behaviors.

Despite media reports suggesting an increase in the amount and intensity of online bullying, it's no more common or distressing than it was three years ago, Ybarra's data show. And many young people escape cyberbullying and harassment altogether: About 62 percent are not victims each year, compared with 24 percent who are harassed but not bullied, 13 percent who are both harassed and bullied, and 1 percent who are bullied only, she found.

Data on where and how bullying takes place also suggest inflated concerns about technology's impact, Ybarra said. About 40 percent of bullying still takes place in person, compared with 10 percent through phone calls, 14 percent by text messages, 17 percent online and 10 percent in some other way.

For many youngsters, bullying is also limited to a single place and communication type, her data also show: 21 percent who reported bullying said it happened only through one mode, while 11 percent

said they were bullied via two modes, for example in person and online. When asked about distressing experiences, twice as many young people said they were very or extremely upset by the bullying that occurred at school compared to online. The one technological arena where bullying may be increasing is text messaging, but more tracking is needed to see if that is an actual trend, Ybarra said.

A small group of youngsters is cause for concern, however, she said: Twelve percent of those surveyed said they were bullied in several places and through several modes—in person, online and by phone, for example. In addition, about one in four study participants aged 12 to 15 who reported any bullying or harassment also reported high levels of distress, she found.

Given that other research she and others have conducted shows that young people harassed and bullied online are more likely to be bullied off line and to report more depression, suicidal ideation, alcohol use, social problems and poor caregiver relations, better monitoring to more quickly identify struggling youth is warranted, she said.

"These data suggest that some young people who are being harassed and bullied online are likely facing multiple challenges across multiple areas," she said.

What about sex?

The newer technologies also don't appear to be driving many more children and teens into accessing sexual content, Ybarra's data show. For the most part, they are still finding it the old-fashioned way: in TV shows, movies and music. Some 75 percent of young people said that at least some of the TV shows and movies they watched showed people kissing, fondling or having sex, while 69 percent said songs they listened to contained sexual content. By comparison, 19 percent of youth said that at least some of the games they played showed people kissing, fondling or having sex, and 25 percent said at least some of the websites they go to featured similar material.

"Yes, they're being exposed to sex online, and yes, they're being exposed to sex in video games," she said. "But if you want to affect the rates of young people's exposure to sexual material, I'd focus on television and music."

Ybarra's data also show that teens' rates of watching pornography rises by age but not across time. For instance, in 2010, young people were no more likely to visit X-rated websites than they were in 2006, although as they got older, they were more likely to seek it out.

"That's what you'd expect. These trends match the developmental trajectory of typical adolescent sexual development," she said.

Sexting, too, fails to match the hype, Ybarra said. According to Positive Youth Development, an ongoing study of 3,777 young people funded by the National Institute of Child Health and Development, only 3 percent of boys and 6 percent of girls ages 13 to 18 reported sexting—sending or showing someone sexual pictures of yourself where you are nude or nearly nude. Girls were twice as likely to sext as boys, and sexting increases as young people get older.

Because sexting is strongly associated with other types of sexual behavior including kissing, fondling and oral sex, sexting may be a marker of risky sexual behavior more generally, she added. But it's unclear whether the behavior of this small group should provoke serious worry, or whether in some cases it is simply a normal expression of developing sexuality, Ybarra said. In fact, stalking—both in person and via all technology types—is much more prevalent than sexting. And because stalking in any form is unwanted, unsolicited and potentially dangerous, it represents greater cause for concern, she said.

The bright side

Despite doom-and-gloom prognoses about young people's entanglement with these technologies, they actually offer a wealth of ways to promote this age group's mental, social and physical

well-being, Ybarra said. Examples include exercise programs like "Dance Dance Revolution" and websites for young people with chronic illnesses that can help them understand and manage their conditions.

Technology can likewise be a powerful social tool for young people, especially those who might feel isolated, her data show. Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth, for instance, are more likely than heterosexual youth to report using the Internet to make friends. They're also much more likely to say their online friends listen better and are more understanding, less judgmental and more likely to let them be themselves.

In sum, while new technologies might land some youngsters in more trouble than they would have gotten in otherwise, the Internet and cellphone are at least as likely to be a boon for this age group, Ybarra concluded.

"For young people who may feel more isolated and socially stigmatized—and in fact for young people in general—the Internet may be an incredibly positive influence that allows them to make friends and connect with others in healthy ways."

<http://www.apa.org/monitor/2011/10/technology.aspx>

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