

When 'digital bullying' goes too far

By Leslie Katz

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Two years ago, Ryan routinely spent two to three hours a night instant messaging with classmates. Then he noticed a pattern: "It made me feel terrible."

Kids, the 13-year-old said, spent the better part of their evenings insulting one another online. "They'd start getting really mad at you, and sometimes it wouldn't even make sense," said the Manhattan teenager, who asked that his last name not be used. "It made me really cautious about what people were really saying behind my back. Leaving IM and walking around, I still was thinking about it. It felt really horrible."

Ryan--whose experience disturbed him so much he avoided instant messaging for nearly two years and now uses it only occasionally--is far from alone.

News.context

What's new:

Kids are mocked and threatened routinely via text messaging and IM--the media of choice for bullies in the digital age.

Bottom line:

Children who make themselves accessible to parents and friends via phone, game console or other gadgets also expose themselves to unwanted communication. However, help is available if kids know where to turn, experts say.



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According to a [recent survey](#) by U.K. children's charity [NCH](#), one in five kids has been bullied via digital phone or computer. Bullying by text message was the most common form of abuse reported, with 14 percent of children interviewed saying they had received upsetting messages on their mobile phones. The interactions run the gamut from disconcerting to downright terrifying.

"You've got 'you're big, you're fat, you smell and nobody likes you' right through to 'we know where you live and we're going to burn down your house and you're going to die,'" said John Carr, head of the children's technology unit for NCH, formerly known as the National Children's Home.

Carr said he's especially concerned about bullying via mobile phone. These days, roughly 55 percent of kids ages 13 to 17 have cell phones, estimates Linda Barrabee, wireless market

analyst for The Yankee Group. For many kids, a cell phone is nothing short of an appendage.

"Mobile phones are among a child's most precious possessions," Carr said. "This is their space, something they control. When something goes wrong with the mobile phone, they feel especially vulnerable."

It's a potential flip side of the digital lifestyle: Children who make themselves accessible to parents and friends via phone, game console or other always-on gadgets also open themselves up to unwanted communication. What's more, the time-honored humiliation of being taunted in front of others can now live on in perpetuity on cell phones and Web sites.

"There's no sanctuary anymore," Carr said. "It's more pernicious and more insidious than it was in the olden days."

The NCH survey, titled "[Putting U in the Picture \(PDF file\)](#)," collated responses from 770 youngsters ages 11 to 19. One in 10 said someone had used a camera phone to snap their picture in a way that made them feel uncomfortable, embarrassed or threatened. Of those, 17 percent believed the images had been forwarded to others.

The report cited instances of so-called "happy slapping," an extreme form of techno-bullying where physical assaults are recorded on mobile phones and distributed to Web sites and other phones via video messaging.

Happy slapping has drawn particularly wide attention in Britain, where several high-profile cases have aroused concern among parents, educators and legislators. Over the weekend, British police announced that they had [arrested three 14-year-old boys](#) in connection with the alleged rape of an 11-year-old girl whose attack was videotaped and sent to peers at her North London school.

Scarred for life

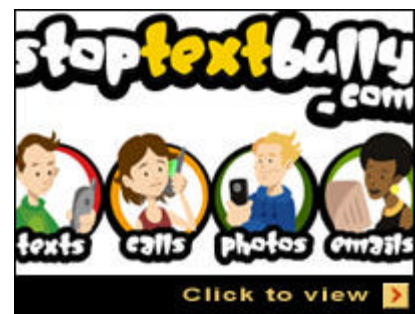
Earlier this month, another British girl had surgery to remove a pellet from her leg after a young man allegedly [shot her with an air rifle](#) while his friend photographed the assault with his mobile phone.

And in May, a Hercules, Calif., high school student was [charged with felony assault](#) for allegedly punching a classmate in a school locker room in a videotaped incident that was posted on the Internet. The 17-year-old victim ended up with a crushed jaw and a black eye.

But the damage doesn't have to be physical to be profound.

In 2003, the parents of Quebec teenager Ghyslain Raza sued his classmates for digitizing and publishing a private video Raza made of himself practicing "Star Wars" light saber moves. Raza was the target of worldwide ridicule after the video was uploaded to the Net.

Some viewers sympathized with the embarrassed teenager. Web sites dedicated themselves to buying him an iPod (which he received) and to having him appear in the final "Star Wars" film (he didn't). But Ghyslain's parents claim their son was so humiliated, he's undergoing psychiatric treatment and may be



scarred for life.

Bullying, said Carr of the NCH, "can turn you into a recluse and sap your self-esteem."

Still, in this age of ubiquitous file sharing, an incident that results in embarrassment can easily start out as an innocent stab at humor.

Take the Web phenomenon known as "Moshzilla." Earlier this year, 19-year-old student Alex Stram took his new digital camera to a San Diego hardcore rock show, snapped a slew of pictures and posted them to his online photo gallery. One funny but arguably less-than-flattering picture of a young woman moshing sparked the imaginations of viewers, who Photoshopped the mosher into a range of poses, including dancing in an iPod ad, walking on the moon, and duking it out in the boxing ring with Homer Simpson. Creative, to be sure. But some images were less innocuous, depicting the girl, for example, in sexually compromising positions.

"The message we're sending out is, 'Don't suffer in silence. This isn't just a bad joke.'"



-- John Carr, NCH
children's technology
unit

Within a few weeks, the photos had spread to multiple message boards, some of which were attracting a quarter of a million hits and 30 responses a page.

"I thought it was all in good clean fun," Stram told CNET News.com. "I didn't post a picture with any malicious intent."

The girl dubbed Moshzilla, apparently, wasn't too thrilled. "Some of the pictures that were Photoshopped were amazing; some were pretty malicious and cruel," she said in an interview on Moshzilla.com, a site that was set up by a mosher other than Stram as a tribute to the phenomenon. "So even though some of those pictures I laughed at hysterically with my boyfriend, you can't help but realize that you are being humiliated across the country. In a

nutshell, I feel sh***y."

A message on Moshzilla.com says the site has been taken down at the request of the 17-year-old girl in the picture and a threat of a lawsuit from her parents. Stram, for his part, hasn't been contacted by lawyers, but he has taken down the more explicit Moshzilla pics from his site. "I did try to censor," he said. "I didn't want it to get out of hand."

It comes down to context

Five months after posting the original shot, Stram still finds Photoshopped images of the girl in his in-box. And he's still amazed that a random picture he took at a Righteous Jams concert has spawned an Internet craze. The irony of Moshzilla's reported distress, he said, is that a friend of his whose picture is posted in the same gallery would love nothing more than to be Internet-infamous. "We were like, 'If my picture was all over the Internet, I would be proud of it,'" Stram said.

Carr of the NCH acknowledges that context is everything when it comes to determining what crosses the line from good-natured fun to digital bullying. Digital communication, after all, can lack the nuance of a smirk or a wink, and a comment that comes across as hilarious in person can seem heartless when flashed across a cell phone screen or monitor. In Ryan's experience, it's easier to slam others when you're not looking them in the eyes.

"IM seems kind of cool; it's another way of talking," he said. But sometimes, kids "use it to say messed-up things, as if it's OK to say on IM."

To help young people who have experienced distress as a result of digital bullying, NCH and British mobile phone service Tesco Mobile have launched an interactive Web site, StopTextBully.com, which identifies a variety of high-tech bullying tactics and offers guidelines for alerting authority figures, mobile phone networks, Internet service providers and more.

Categories represented on the site include threats by text message, phone, e-mails, Internet and chat rooms, as well as Web sites dedicated to denigrating young people in front of their peers.

"It's so easy to set up a Web site about anything from skating to your favorite group," the site says. "But it's not OK for a site to insult you or get people at school to say bad stuff about you or 'vote' about how you look or what you're like."

NCH and Tesco Mobile also have set up a 24-hour text message service for kids, who can text the word "bully" and receive a message containing advice and support.

Carr hopes young people will start acknowledging when they feel uncomfortable or threatened via their gadgets--and know that there's something they can do about it.

"We're trying to create a climate in which they feel they can come forward," Carr said. "The message we're sending out is, 'Don't suffer in silence. This isn't just a bad joke.'"



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