Research Paper

BULLYING OF CHILDREN IN THE VIRTUAL AND REALISTIC WORLD

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Dr. Sonika Choudhary[1]

[1]Associate Professor, Dept. of Home Science, R.G. (P.G.)College ,Meerut , Uttar Pradesh, India

ABSTRACT

Children at each and every age are affected by the change in their environment; be it positive or negative. Technological revolutions have submerged the children's and adolescents' life as is evidenced with the increase in the use of computers, smart phones and internet. Though all these have augmented their knowledge but still it has robbed them of a number of things as well. India has a growing young population with all these technologies but what they lack is digital literacy and online safety measures that exposes them to a number of cyber crimes. These crimes not only have short term but log term repercussions causing deviance in their personality as well. The onus to guide and protect this young population from these vices rests not only on their parents and teachers but also on social media and all the law- enforcing agencies at the national and international level.

KEYWORDS: Cyber-bullying, children, adolescent, laws, social-media, internet, cyber-crimes.

DISCUSSION

'Children are our future and our future lies before us like a path of driven snow. Carefully we have to tread as every mark will show.' It is very clear from the above that Children are a product of both material and non- material environment, both having a profound influence on them. Environment involves change and nowhere is that change greater than in the technology. The technological revolutions have submerged the children and adolescents as evidenced with increase in the use of computers and the internet (Mortimer & Larson, 2002a, b, Saettler, 2005). These expanding array of media shape adolescents judgments and behavior and control their maximum time (Nichols & Good, 2004). No doubt, internet is a platform of never ending and latest information but use of computers and internet have also led to loss of imagination and creativity in children.

Storytelling, reading, talking, drawing and playing have been replaced by texting, surfing, watching videos, playing games and listening to music on tablets, laptops & phones in many homes. Screen time has made children dependent on external stimuli for entertainment.

Screen time also lowers empathy and their ability to engage with peers. Children hooked to screens have fewer friends and are more likely to have attention & other conduct problems.

Their health is likely to be affected as well. More and more children are turning into obese as they spend less time outdoors and more time sitting and eating junk food. Also light from backlit screens disrupt the body's sleep- wake cycle leading to fitful sleep. Sleeping less and waking up several times during the night makes children irritable and less energetic. Lack of sleep also adds to weight gain. Also it leads to short sightedness in children as continuously focusing at a fixed screen

causes eyestrain and reduced the blinking rate, making the eyes dry, gritty and painful.

Another painful arena related to internet that the children and adolescents are facing is Cyber Bullying. Cyber bullying is one of the most common forms of bullying that children experience these days. Cyber bullying is actually the use of digital technologies with intent to offend, humiliate, threaten, harass or abuse somebody. The recent survey by Dr. Parikh and his team from Fortis Healthcare (December, 2016) found every two in three children are bullied, of which 36% are bullied online by those unknown to them. This kind of bullying usually targets vulnerable children. Bullying is not restricted to physical violence but includes verbal or social abuse as well as emotional abuse. All of these can have significant psychological impact on children with Children and adolescents getting greater access to technology, cyber bullying is becoming a matter of concern. It includes threatening others through social networking sites, sending provocative messages and harassing others on the internet. It mostly takes the form of derisive messages, sex- texting, critical emails, defamatory posts and the sharing of private photographs. Sometimes it involves excluding someone from an online page or group, invasion of privacy, posting sensitive personal information, impersonating someone with fake identities or accounts (amounting to emotional abuse).

The impact of this kind of bullying can be severe. Cyber bullied children are more likely to experience anxiety, depression, fear, loneliness and low self- esteem. Often, these kids feel overwhelmed, vulnerable and powerless as they find it difficult to feel safe, because bullying invades their home through cell phones and computers. Bullying often preys on the victims worst fears, which makes them feel inadequate and worthless. This in turn, can lead to unwillingness to attend school or poor grades and may even push the kids towards alcohol, drugs or self harm. It is prevalent in both the gender even though in researches boys have been found to bully more than girls. According to National Crimes records Bureau, 2011, most of the offenders arrested for cyber crime cases are children who are in the age group of 18 to 30 years only.

Bullies and their victims have typically been distinguished from one another to contrast the social, psychological and academic adjustment correlates associated with these roles in the peer group. Bullies can be divided into proactive and reactive aggressors. Proactive aggressors are thought to utilize aggression as an instrumental social strategy that is organized and goal directed (e.g., bullying other children to gain dominant peer status or possession of some material good). Thus bullies generally view the use of aggression as an acceptable and effective tactic. Reactive aggressors, on the other hand, tend to attribute hostility in any provocation from their peers and consequently choose to use aggression in response to perceived threat.

Regardless of the motivation for using aggressive behaviour, bullies likely choose aggression as a means of interpersonal negotiation because of exposure to such behaviour at home or school, such as coercive or punitive parental discipline. Impulsivity, emotional reactivity , attention deficits, disruptiveness and other externalizing behaviours commonly characterize bullying children and these types of traits likely foster the increasing peer rejection that bullies have been found to experience as they progress in life. Additional their academic pursuits, whether from a coexistent lack of preparation for school or as a result of the distraction from academics that bullying provides. Early negative experiences in the school environment seem to put bullies at increased risk for school absenteeism and dropout in middle school and high school. In addition to children's exposure to aggressive interpersonal strategies in their environments, adults and peers tolerance of or lack of attention to bullying problems can further reinforce such childhood peer interactions. Bullying during the school years subsequently places children at high risk for antisocial, aggressive behaviours later in adolescence and adulthood (e.g., delinquency and criminal offences)

Similar to bullies, the targets of aggression (i.e. victims) have also been subdivided based upon their responses to bullying. Developmental theorists have distinguished between passive victims and proactive victims. Passive victims are defined as anxious and unsecure children who tend to avoid conflict and refrain from defending themselves when bullied. They are often physically weaker than their peers, withdrawn, lacking in assertiveness and respond with passive submission to the requests of others. Provocative victims, on the other hand, frequently tend to defend themselves and may provoke bullies to victimize them by losing their tempers and irritating and teasing other children, including the bully. They are frequently characterized as impulsive overly reactive and lacking an ability to regulate their emotions. Because provocative victims are often unsuccessful in their use of aggression and

attempts to defend themselves, they often become distressed and frustrated in their social interactions, reading to anxiety, depression, loneliness and low self esteem.

Children are the most vulnerable sections of society and are easily exploited in the cyber world due to lack of majority in them. These days it is seen that even sexual exploitation of the children has started online. The offenders chat online with young children by wrongly stating / representing their age and lure them towards sex. With these latest technologies it has become very easy for the criminal to contact children. Children are easily exploited by online criminals not only because of their age and majority but also as they heavily rely on networking sites for social interaction. Offenders use false identities in chat room to lure victims for personal meetings. This leads to child abuse and exploitation such as trafficking and sex tourism. The child never knows the person with whom he/she is chatting. It is only when they happen to meet each other in person that they see an old man in their 40's and 50's with whom they are chatting and realize their mistake. Many children commit suicides when their offensive pictures are posted online. Children often avoid telling their parents about this mistake which causes further trouble. The victims of online exploitation are forced to live with their abuse for the rest of their lives. Children often unknowingly or deliberately share personal information without realizing that by just forwarding this message they can be made to suffer penal charges. Facebook photographs, whatsapp messages are uploaded and shared by children without knowing the gravity of things and the impact that will it have on their future.

Currently, there are about 400 million internet users in India and the number is growing with access to mobile internet. There are around 371 million mobile internet users in India (www.internetsociety.org/Mobile). The majority of those users are youths. According to some conservative estimates, India has about 134 million children with mobile phones, but what they lack is digital literacy and online safety measures that exposes them to cyber bullying, sexual predation and other crimes.

In September this year, UNICEF Launched the Child Online Protection in India Report that highlighted the risks and threats faced by children when using the internet and social media. The report said that offline forms of crime and violence against children were finding new forms of expression in the online world and their effects on children were amplified. Being able to stay anonymous online and impersonate others may embolden people into offensive and criminal acts and lower the deterrent potential of laws.

Cyber crimes against children and adolescents have many forms, like cyber bullying, cyber stalking, child pornography etc. However to date cybercrimes against children in India are under-reported and have been receiving very little attention. The Government is still considering developing an institutional mechanism to tackle online crimes against children, which has recorded an alarming surge with official data showing 100% increase in cases during 2013-14. The Union women and child development ministry, in India has set up a group, called national alliance against child sexual abuse, to recommend measures to deal with such cases. For the first time the government is taking notice of the severity of the problem. According to Mrs. Menaka Gandhi, Women and Child Welfare Minister in India, "Defenses against child pornography needs to be institutionalized"

There is no accurate data on the number of children being exploited in pornographic material but a 2007 survey by Indian government says 4.46% of 12,000 kids had been photographed in the nude. "Even if an internet user stumbles upon a child sexual abuse image in India and Reports it, there is no specialized expertise to take down images as many of them are hosted in servers located outside India. Currently there is no way to block the content from India," said Uma Subramanian, Founder and co-Director of the Aarambh India, a joint initiative of ADM Capital Foundation and Prerana, an anti-trafficking NGO.

The Website, www.aarabhindia.org, hosts India's first online hotline for reporting child porn.

In August 2016, the ministry launched "e-box"- an online complaint box with www.ncpr.gov.in, where any child can report sexual harassment or abuse in school, home or elsewhere. But the point to be noted is that , if someone reports a child sexual abuse image hosted on some site, a police complaint is lodged. Thereafter the URL to hotline is hosted on www.aarambhindia.org . From here the reports are sent to UK-based IWF where an experts team assesses the criminality of the content. If the content is found to be criminal, IWF will determine the location from where it was uploaded. IWF will contact the hosting company and relevant law enforcement agency and initiate process to remove content. The URL will be added to IWF's blocking list.

There is an alarming gap in terms of prevention policies, skills training and support systems to deal with bullying. Those who have a solid support system tend to come out of the trauma rather quickly. However, it's not first the victim who requires therapy, even the perpetrators need professional help. From counseling to art therapy, psychiatrists use different mechanisms to break the ice and make children feel comfortable. Most get better with counseling and therapy but there is a small percentage that would require anti-anxiety or anti-depression drugs as they exhibit co-morbit symptoms. Parents should take lead in educating children about the pros and cons of sharing information online, teaching them about the importance of privacy of online accounts and creating awareness about the occurrences of cyber bullying. Following things can also help the kids:-

- **Encourage Media Literacy**

  Media has an enormous impact on children as they imbibe what they watch on television or read online. Media literacy is the ability to critically understand what is communicated through the media in order to make the right decisions. It can help students understand how media co-constructs reality, who it benefits and how to break the stereotypes propagated. Parents, on their part, should not restrict the use of internet by their children but allow them to take decisions on what to watch and what not to.

- **Parental Involvement**

  Parents should talk to their children about the potential dangers of cyber-crime. Such an involvement not only ensures a reliable source of information for the child , but also creates a support system. Parents should always be vigilant and see what their children are doing online. They should use Parental Control Software that filters the contents that can be viewed online and can restrict download of applications that they want to be viewed by their children. Also, they should make sure that their children do not post their personal details like their contact numbers, address, photographs, school address etc. In addition, they should make sure that they know the friends of their children with whom their child is chatting/interacting on web and restrict their chatting with strangers. Most importantly, they should help their child feel comfortable talking to them about any

incidence of cyber abuse and make them aware about reporting the matter to cyber crime police stations from where the offender can be offended.

- **Ability to distinguish between Fact and Fiction**

  The media, particularly social media, can be extremely dangerous if children were to blindly trust what they see online. They need to be taught to separate the virtual world from reality.

- **Make intelligent Choices**

  It is important to explain to children that while the world is at their fingertips-what they choose to do with it is up to them. They need to be trained to be aware of the potential dangers associated with the use of the internet, and to think before they decide to disclose any personal information.

- **Recognize the cyber world**

  While it is good to embrace technology and use it to your advantage, always maintain a balance. Cyber bullies often conceal their identity and such abuse can have major consequences

  Often the best way to respond to any form of bullying is not to respond at all, says experts. Cyber bullies always look for a response, hence the best remedy is to ignore their posts, texts and comments. But sometimes ignoring them can be difficult. In that case if one is getting very affected by what is written or said, one should report it to a higher authority like a parent, teacher, guidance counselor therapist, police or the internet service provider.

  Social networking sites are proved to be a great tool of sharing information but the kids need to follow some precautions while using them:-

- Personal information to be posted to a limited extent
- Use password that are not common for example use alphabets along with numerals
- Install and upgrade an anti-virus software regularly.

  In India Some of the legal provisions against it are.:- The National Policy of ICT in Schools, 2012. The information Technology Act, 2000 and the Information Technology (Amendment) Act, 2008 fortified by the Protection of Children from sexual offence act, 2012.
The Provisions of the IPC are also applied in online offences.

1. Section 13a, b, c – for using or engaging a child in any medium like print, electronic or any other technology for preparing, producing, offering, transmitting, publishing, facilitating & distributing pornographic materials.

2. Section – 15 – Storing any pornographic material in any form involving a child for commercial purposes.

3. Section 153A – hate speech or sedition,

4. Section 419 – Cheating by impersonation

5. Section 503- Sending threatening messages by email

6. Section 499 –Sending Defamatory messages by email

7. The others related to it are section 420, 500, 506, 507, 292 etc.

India has also endorsed the UNICEF building helpline (24x7) whose number is **1098.**

CONCLUSION

The protection of children from violence, abuse & exploitation is a major concern in India, but there is an inadequate knowledge base on exploitation of children in general and online risks and threats to children in particular. The challenge of creating a safe environment for children lies in developing a range of responses that strike an appropriate balance between maximizing the potential of ICT to promote and protect children's rights & opportunities while minimizing risks and ensuring children's safety and protection. The benefits of technology & its potential to empower children, together with recognition of the resourcefulness and evolving capacity of children to take an active and responsible role in their own protection and that of others, must lie at the heart of all initiatives. Furthermore schools, teachers, parents / guardians, policy makers & others key stakeholders should adopt a proactive approach towards fostering such a favourable environment.

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