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In a wired world, children unable to escape cyberbullying

By **Stephanie Chen**, CNN**STORY HIGHLIGHTS**

- Cyberbullying occurs when harassment or cruel comments are made in cyberspace
- About 20 percent of children have experienced cyberbullying or been the bully, survey says
- Some states have passed laws to address problem, but courts still have to catch up, experts say
- NIH study: Cyberbullying causes higher levels of depression than face-to-face bullying

Editor's note: *Bullying is in our schools, and it's online. Why do kids do it? What can be done to put an end to it? Don't miss an "AC360°" special report in collaboration with PEOPLE Magazine, "Bullying: No Escape," all this week at 10 p.m. ET on CNN.*

(CNN) -- Jason, 13, knows he is an easy target for bullies at his middle school in Long Island, New York.

His diminutive stature hinders him from retaliating against the taller, heavier boys who tease him. He prefers to wear skinny jeans and black zip-up hoodies, fashion choices that induce comments like "emo" or "gay" from classmates. He has an affinity for comic books and Xbox games such as "Halo" and "Call of Duty," and for pursuing these hobbies, other kids call him a loser.

Jason says he has been ostracized and was once punched in the neck at school, but the peer torment does not end when he enters the comfort of his home, on the weekends or during summer vacations. Last year, he says he became a victim of cyberbullying -- vicious, viral and incessant attacks through text messages, e-mails and Facebook posts that have both replaced and supplemented traditional schoolyard bullying.

[Read about a New Jersey college student who committed suicide after being harassed with the internet](#)

"It's really horrifying the next day after the message has been sent around, and you're the laughingstock of the school," Jason says. "You have no idea why or what's funny."

October marks National Bullying Prevention Month, a topic that has made headlines lately. Last week, authorities found the body of Tyler Clementi, a New Jersey college student, who committed suicide after two other students allegedly placed a camera in his dorm room without his knowledge and then broadcast his sexual encounter online.

[Read about CNN's weeklong coverage on bullying](#)

Kids are more digitally connected than ever, according to the [Kaiser Family Foundation](#), which reported that children devoted an average 7½ hours a day to their gadgets. The proliferation of cell phones, iPods and Facebook brings a complicated challenge for parents, teachers and students: The constant exposure to technology and the web amplifies opportunities for children to bully each other online.

[Have you been bullied? Share your experiences](#)

One in five youths between age 10 and 18 have been a victim of cyberbullying or participated in cyberbullying, according to a survey of 4,400 children conducted by the [Cyberbullying Research Center](#), an organization tracking the internet bullying trend. This figure is conservative, because children are often afraid to come forward to their parents, bullying experts say.

Cyberbullying can take on various forms, from a middle-schooler firing a hurtful text message to high school teens harassing a boyfriend or girlfriend online. The [National Crime Prevention Council](#) defines cyberbullying -- a term practically nonexistent more than a decade ago --- as what "happens when teens use the internet, cell phones, or other devices to send or post text or images intended to hurt or embarrass another person."

"It's a daily nightmare," said Alexandra Penn, founder of [Champions Against Bullying](#), a nonprofit based in Los Angeles, California, that provides resources for reducing incidences of traditional and internet bullying in schools. "There's nowhere to run, nowhere to hide."

Internet bullying results in depression, suicides

Jason, the New York middle-schooler, tried following the crowd last year.

When gray shorts and red T-shirts became trendy, he wore them to school. Still, the bullies haunted him online. They called Jason, an honor student, dumb. They made fun of his thin frame.

Jason, who has a Facebook account, says he contemplated abstaining from the social network. But he says that would have been useless, because bullies continued to write negative comments about him in mass group messages behind his back.

"There's nothing I can really do," he said.

Sameer Hinduja, a co-director of the Cyberbullying Research Center, says the most common form of bullying consists of hurtful comments or online rumors. A majority of the bullying is also done anonymously, experts say, because these kinds of bullies like hiding behind a computer screen. Cyberbullying can also be a cruel cycle. Many kids who cyberbully have been bullied at some point.

"Many adults think bullying has to do with sexual predators online, but the biggest concern is peer harassment and conflict and some of the issues that have just blown up with adolescent drama," Hinduja said.

Read: Why did Tyler Clementi die?

Recent research shows that cyberbullying can cause higher levels of depression in a child than traditional bullying. Compared with face-to-face bullying of schoolchildren, a child who had experienced cyberbullying from someone anonymous "may be more likely to feel isolated, dehumanized or helpless at the time of the attack," according a [study from the National Institutes of Health](#). The study relied on surveys from more than 7,000 students.

Bullying experts say cyberbullying has lasting effects on children and teens. Messages posted on the internet are often permanent and difficult to remove. With one click of a mouse, comments can reach hundreds or thousands of students.

While rare, suicide can be the result of online harassment. In 2003, Ryan Halligan, a 13-year-old middle school student in Vermont, killed himself after he was bullied online.

"The kids said, 'You know, you're finally going to stop complaining,' and my son [said], 'Yes, tonight's the night, I'm going to do it. You'll read about it in the papers tomorrow,' " John Halligan, Ryan's father, said to CNN in 2005. "And the kids said, 'It's about f'ing time.' "

Cyberbullying evolves, challenges hard to tackle

While a decade ago, cyberbullying primarily affected youths between age 11 and 15, the number of children facing harassment through a digital device is growing.

"We are seeing cyberbullying happening at broader age ranges and for longer periods of time," said Parry Aftab, who started the group [Wired Safety](#), one of the first advocacy organizations to address online abuses in the mid-1990s. "It's exploding."

Even second-graders use innocent social networking sites such as Webkinz -- where children can purchase cyberpets and chat with each other online -- as a bullying tool, she says. For example, Aftab has heard about children threatening to post mean comments in a chatroom or steal the other child's account information.

Susan McVeigh, a spokeswoman at WebKinz, says bullying can occasionally occur on the site, but the company monitors the chat rooms carefully.

"When you get thousands of kids, the first thing they want to do is push the boundaries," she said . "It's the site's responsibility to push back and say that's not in the spirit of the site."

States and schools are responding to the problem, but there is a long way to go, because the new technology continues to reach children daily, cyberbully experts say. In August, schools and police in West Bridgewater, Massachusetts, set up a text tip line so students can report cyberbullying incidences, according to CNN affiliate WHDH. In 2007, Arkansas passed a law that allowed school officials to take action against cyberbullies who commit acts off school property.

Some advocacy groups say they are concerned about what happens when the cases enter the courts.

"The legal system is going to do some scrambling to catch up with what new technologies do to make it possible," says Andrea Press, a sociology professor at the University of Virginia who came out with the book "The New Media Environment."

Private companies are taking action, too. Facebook, the largest social networking site, with more than 500 million members, says it is also aggressively trying to curb cyberbullying, using pop-up warnings and canceling the accounts of people who cyberbully or use hate speech.

"For us, the experience on the site is the core," said Joe Sullivan, chief security officer at Facebook. "We want to protect and improve, and something like this is repulsive."

Despite the laws and policies that address cyberbullying, some experts say children need to take action among their friends. Many children are afraid to come forward in fear of retaliation. Also, teens may stay quiet because they believe they "need to learn to deal with it," according to a psychological study from the [University of California, Los Angeles, in 2008](#).

Until a few weeks ago, Jason's mother was unaware that students attacked her son online.

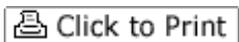
"It's just hard in general, because I feel like my hands are tied," she said. "I don't know what to do. I don't want anyone to retaliate against him. I don't want him to get into trouble."

As Jason started eighth grade this year, the cyberbullying has subsided, probably because the kids found someone new to pick on, he says.

"Before all this happened, I would try to change myself," he said. "Now I see that I like myself and I enjoy myself, and I think that if they don't like me, they don't appreciate me, then I'm strong enough to say I don't need to talk to that person."

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