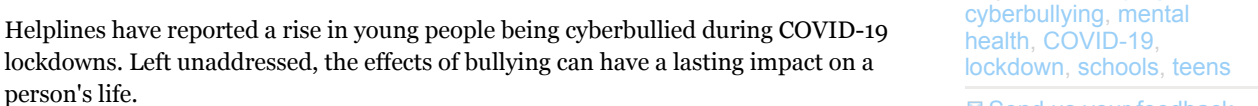


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SCIENCE COVID: More young people cyberbullied during lockdown

Hopelines have reported a rise in young people being cyberbullied during COVID-19 lockdowns. Left unaddressed, the effects of bullying can have a lasting impact on a person's life.



When schools closed, young people spent even more time online. For 16-year-old Abby Rayner, the bullying didn't stop when she came home at the end of the day. 'I got bullied in school really badly,' she told DW, 'but social media was the worst bit - it's not like you can escape it.'

Until recently, Rayner had been in supervised care after a British court ruled she was at risk of self-harm if left alone. It was the culmination of years of being bullied both online and offline.

Rayner is one of thousands of young people who have experienced cyberbullying in the past year. As countries were forced into lockdown to curb the spread of SARS-CoV-2, schools closed and children's screen time soared.

A survey of more than 6,000 10-18-year-olds from June to August last year found that about 50% of children had experienced at least one kind of cyberbullying in their lifetime, according to a report published in February by the European Commission's Joint Research Centre (JRC).

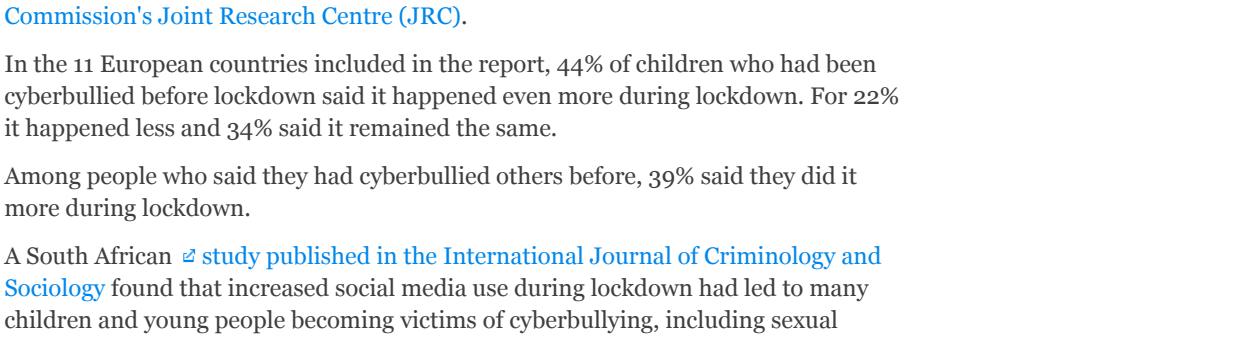
In the 11 European countries included in the report, 44% of children who had been cyberbullied before lockdown said it happened even more during lockdown. For 22% it happened less and 34% said it remained the same.

Among people who said they had cyberbullied others before, 39% said they did it more during lockdown. A South African study published in the International Journal of Criminology and Sociology found that increased social media use during lockdown had led to many children and young people becoming victims of cyberbullying.

The World Health Organization (WHO) has described bullying as a major public health problem. It can result in depression, anxiety and sometimes suicide. It can also lead to substance abuse, social withdrawal, missing school or dropping out, and can have implications later in life, according to the WHO.

Mara Popovac, a lecturer in psychology at the University of Buckingham in the UK, says she is concerned about kids being bullied in person when they return to school if they have been cyberbullied during lockdowns.

'There's often links between offline and online bullying,' Popovac told DW. 'There's research, including my own, which shows that those who experience bullying in both online and offline contexts have more severe outcomes.'



Messages and calls to NGOs rise During the pandemic, some non-government organizations (NGOs) have seen an increase in the number of calls and messages from young people seeking support because they were being bullied.

Zeichen Gegen Mobbing (or Signs against Bullying), a German NGO that helps people being bullied, told DW there had been an increase in the number of children asking them for support, said Marek Fink, the NGO's founder.

One 11-year-old girl contacted the NGO after being bullied by her classmates for half a year. She told Zeichen Gegen Mobbing that photos of her were posted in a WhatsApp group chat and her peers wrote comments like 'Joke of the day,' 'She looks like s\*\*t' again, 'Nobody wants you anyway' and 'Who's up for ignoring her?'

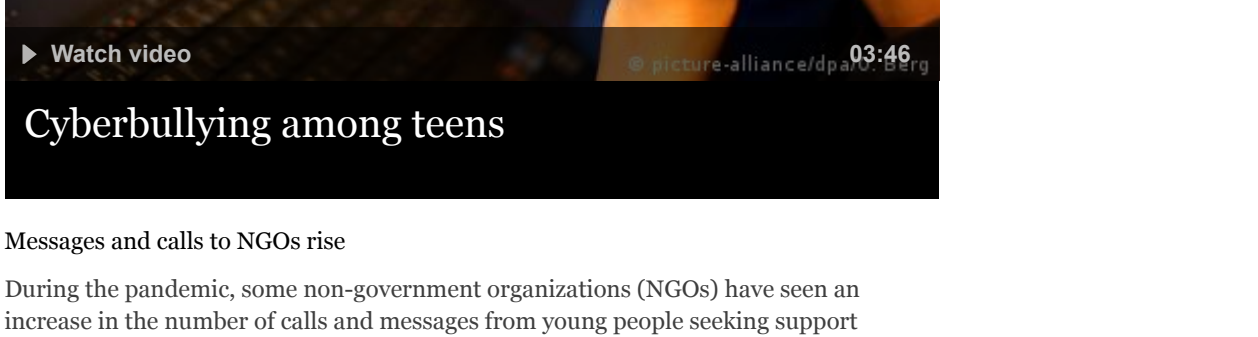
The idea of returning to school had made her feel sick, she told staff, and the bullying continued when she went back. BulliesOut, a UK charity that provides an email mentoring service, received 400 requests in 2020, about 200 more than in 2019, mainly from young people and children.

Linda James, the founder of BulliesOut, said that young people who wrote to them reported being bullied more. 'They were self-harming, they couldn't see an end, they were worried about their futures, some of them were talking of suicide,' James said. 'It's absolutely heartbreaking.'

James has lived the damaging consequences of being bullied herself - she developed an eating disorder after being bullied when she was younger. But the real motivation for starting a support platform came when her 10-year-old son, now in his late twenties, was bullied to the point that he was hospitalized.

'I knew how it made people feel because I knew how it made me feel, and then I saw what it did to my son,' James told DW. Abby Rayner is one of the young people that BulliesOut has trained to become a youth ambassador. She has also published a book titled Bullycide, a term that describes instances of suicide where bullying is the leading cause.

In it, she shares how being bullied affected her life and advises others on what they can do if they are being bullied.

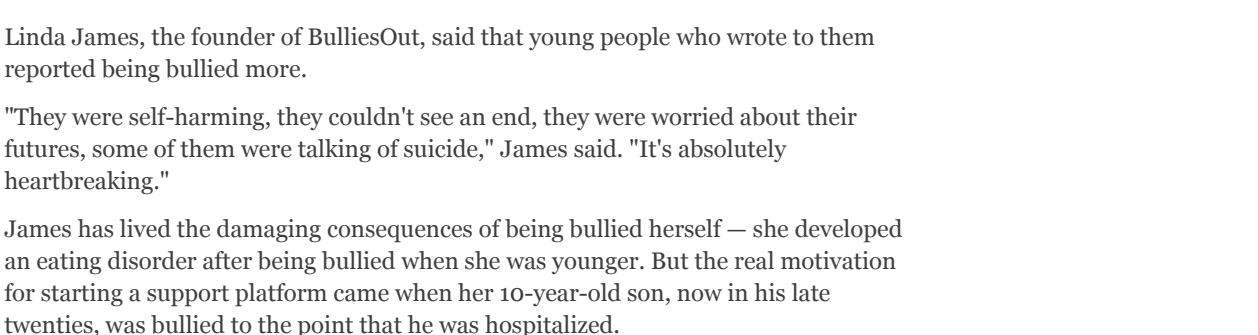


Tips for young influencers and parents An obvious solution could be parents taking their child's phone away, but the fear of this happening can result in young people not telling anyone they are being bullied. 'You don't want that, because that's you being punished and you're the one being bullied,' Rayner said.

But, for the moment, a court has determined that she isn't allowed to use her smartphone. Bullying on Instagram was the worst for Rayner. After being bullied in school for years, her mental health suffered. 'I found it hard to put into words how I was feeling,' she said.

On Instagram, she would tap the heart icon on posts with quotes that resonated with how she felt, and eventually she started following the accounts that posted them - often pro self-harm and suicide accounts. 'These are really negative accounts,' Rayner told DW. Through the accounts, she was added to group chats where strangers would tell her to self-harm or kill herself.

'It is a massive thing over Instagram,' said Rayner. 'I know people who aren't here anymore.' A study published in the Journal of Adolescent Health in January 2016 found that people who posted self-harm content on Instagram used ambiguous hashtags to avoid people outside of their community finding the posts. The researchers identified more than 10 hashtags, of which only a third generated content advisory warnings from Instagram.



Pro-self harm communities on Instagram use ambiguous hashtags to hide their content Dangerous Instagram communities For a young person, these Instagram communities can give the impression that they love, support and care about you, said bullying researcher Popovac, but they're a major online risk in terms of content.

When Rayner scrolled through her Instagram feed she would see pictures of self-harm and videos of people overdosing. 'That's not something that's normal to see,' said Rayner, 'none of that could have a positive impact on someone.'

'The more time you spend on that sort of content, the more normalized it becomes and your thinking shifts with that community, especially as you create bonds with other members,' Popovac said. There are always people waiting to make negative comments on social media, said BulliesOut founder James.

She said her charity recommends children and young people keep their accounts private, only allow people they know well in the real world to follow them, and be careful about who they follow. 'Follow things that make you feel good, make you feel happy, make you feel positive,' James said.

Sharing the burden Despite the risk of having their phone taken away, for someone who is being bullied, sharing what they are going through with someone they trust - whether that's an adult, friend, or someone else - can help them feel less alone, and disrupt the bullying cycle.

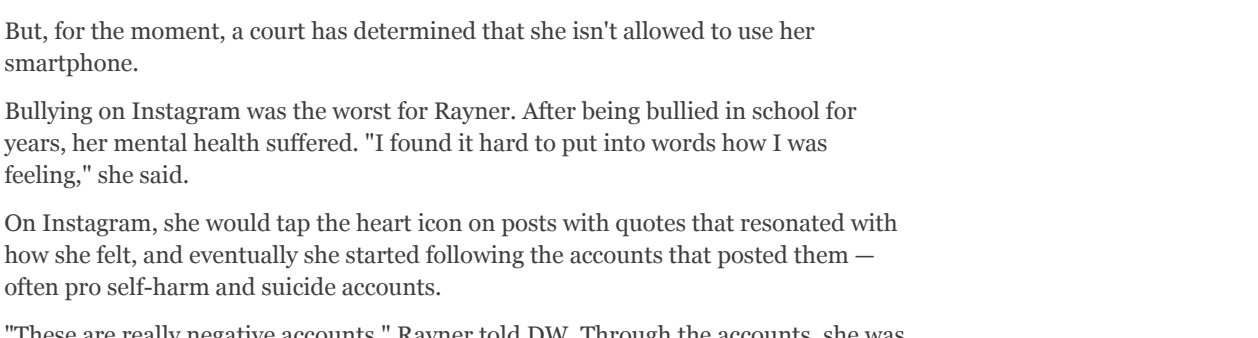
'Those who sit with these problems by themselves for extended periods of time can be more at risk of poorer mental health outcomes including suicidal ideation,' Popovac told DW. Schools can also train young people to become mentors or 'anti-bullying ambassadors' who can advise those being bullied.

At Munich International School, senior guidance counselor Christopher Floor is working on destigmatizing reaching out to others for help. Some kids had reported to him that they didn't want to bring others down with their feelings of sadness and loneliness.

'We're trying to combat that kind of thing and say: 'Would you feel burdened if a friend were to reach out to you and say 'I'm feeling kind of sad and lonely?'' Floor told DW. Rayner wants others who are being bullied to know that it doesn't have to define them.

'Being bullied doesn't necessarily have to affect your future,' said Rayner. 'It's an experience that I wouldn't wish on anyone, but I've been bullied and I can change it and make something out of my life.'

If you need mental health support or someone to talk to, help is available through organizations like Befrienders Worldwide.



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