Urge Parents to Guide Teens' Cell Phone Use

BY BRUCE K. DIXON

Chicago Bureau

CHICAGO — Clear parental expectations about adolescents' cell phone use can support family relationships, a survey of 196 parent-adolescent dyads shows.

Helping parents realize this can assist them in launching their adolescents toward adulthood, said Robert S. Weisskirch, Ph.D., of California State University Monterey Bay, Seaside.

It's estimated that more than half of adolescents now carry cell phones. The few studies that have been done suggest that they identify security or safety as the primary reason for using the technology, Dr. Weisskirch said in a poster presentation at a meeting sponsored by the Society for Research on Adolescence.

For this study, parent-adolescent dyads from across the United States completed separate questionnaires. Of these, 83% were white, and 80% of the parents indicated they were currently married or in a domestic partnership.

The dyads were identified as 13% father-son, 11% father-daughter, 30% mother-son, and 46% mother-daughter. All the adolescents were of high school age and included all four grades.

The teenagers rated 18 items on a variety of typical situations and circumstances in which they would have to call their parents, including "to ask permission to do something," "to ask for a ride somewhere or to be picked up," and "argue by phone." Parents answered the same questions, though they were reworded to reflect their perspectives.

Also, the adolescents rated 23 items on how often the parents call them for specific reasons or situations. Examples included, "to make sure you are where you said you would be," "to see how your day went," and "to ask what you want to eat." The same questions were given to parents.

Parents and their children also completed a 22-item measure of parental self-efficacy by rating their degree of confidence in doing each of the items. Additionally, the participants rated six dimensions of parenting: closeness, monitoring, support, communication, conflict, and peer approval.

For adolescents, calling their parents for social support and in response to monitoring was associated with support, communication, peer approval, family closeness, and successful monitoring, Dr. Weisskirch said.

From the parents' perspective, adolescents calling for social support increased parent ratings of communication and closeness in the relationship, while teen-initiated calls in response to monitoring increased parental ratings of support, closeness, and monitoring.

However, arrangements were likely to sour when parents initiated calls perceived by their children to constitute overmonitoring. Calls made to track schoolwork or calling when upset were associated with increased conflict, he said.

"For parents, it's a warning that, while you want to call your kids, you don't want to do it too often because that's going to create more problems," Dr. Weisskirch said in an interview.

> **Giving children instructions that they understand strengthens the parent-child relationship.**
>
> **DR. WEISSKIRCH**

He posited that adolescents want the autonomy to respond without the feeling of being monitored. However, adolescents who perceived an obligation to inform parents of their whereabouts have parents who have more parental self-efficacy.

"It's all about setting expectations about how the adolescent is supposed to use the cell phone," the researcher said in an interview. "If those guidelines are given as instructions and not an order, and the child understands them, the parent-child relationship will be strengthened." ■

Cyberbullying Is Common, Psychologically Damaging

BY BRUCE K. DIXON

Chicago Bureau

CHICAGO — Bullying over the Internet is common, and it is associated with symptoms of psychopathology in boys and girls, according to researchers at the University of Florida in Gainesville.

"Peer victimization using the medium of cyberspace . . . carries similar negative repercussions for adolescent adjustment compared to more traditional, face-to-face forms of victimization," Lisa M. Sontag of the department of psychology at the university and her colleagues reported. Their study was presented in a poster session at a meeting sponsored by the Society for Adolescent Research.

They found that among a study population of 268 middle school students, almost 40% said they had been targets of cyberbullying. More girls than boys reported being harassed (46% vs.35%), but the difference was not significant.

The student sample, drawn from two large public schools in the Gainesville area, was 66% female, had a mean age of 12 years, and a racial composition that was 50% white, one-fourth black, 10% Hispanic, and the rest "other."

The mean family socioeconomic status boiled down to "some college and occupation level comparable to clerical worker or small-business owner."

Participants were categorized as "cyber-victims" if they responded yes to either of the following questions: "I have been directly teased or hassled in a mean way through e-mail, instant messenger, or text messaging, or have had someone tease me on a Web site in the past 6 months"; or "I have had rumors or mean things said about me to other people on a Web site, e-mail, instant messenger, or text message in the past 6 months."

The 105 students who reported being bullied rated significantly higher on all four measures of psychopathology used in the study, including "internalizing distress," "social aggression," "proactive aggression," and "reactive aggression," Ms. Sontag said in an interview.

"This suggests that cyberbullying has negative effects, but I want to caution that this assessment was done at a single time point, rather than over a period of time, so we can't conclusively determine cause and effect," she said. "It's possible that kids who are higher in anxious and depressive symptoms are more prone to be bullied."

> **The 105 students who reported being bullied rated far higher on measures of psychopathology.**
>
> **MS. SONTAG**

Proactive aggression, which is unprovoked, often is used to establish social dominance, while reactive aggression is the tendency to interpret benign situations as threatening. Social aggression is aimed at damaging another person's social reputation through gossip, rumor, or other actions designed to humiliate the victim.

It's important for clinicians and researchers interested in either assessing or examining aggressive behavior or the effects of victimization on mental health outcomes to consider the impact of cyberbullying in middle school and high school, she said. ■

Bullies and Victims Feel Worthless, Sad, Unsafe

BY MICHELE G. SULLIVAN

Mid-Atlantic Bureau

Adolescents who are involved in bullying—either as a victim, bully, or both—are more likely than bystanders to report feelings of low self-worth and sadness and to feel unsafe in their school.

These issues are most troubling in children who are both bullies and victims, Dr. Gwen M. Glew and her colleagues reported. The findings suggest, "that we should be particularly concerned about [these children] because they are much more likely to endorse carrying a gun to school," the investigators wrote (J. Ped. 2008;152:123-8).

Dr. Glew of the University of Washington, Seattle, and her associates surveyed 5,391 children from a single urban public school district in grades 7, 9, and 11. The students rated how often they bullied and were victims of bullying; their feelings of safety at school; their feelings of self-worth and daily sadness; and their judgments on the high-risk behaviors of bringing a gun to school, fighting, cheating, stealing, smoking, and drinking alcohol.

The researchers also obtained grade point averages for all surveyed students.

Overall, 74% of the students reported being neither a bully nor victim—these "bystanders" were used as the control group. Fifteen percent of students reported being bullied, 7% said they bullied others, and 4% were both bullies and victims.

Only 27% of the victims and 30% of the bully-victims said they had reported their victimization to another person.

Victims were twice as likely feel unsafe at school, sad on most days, and "no good at all," compared with bystanders, and after controlling for age, gender, ethnicity, and income status. They also were more likely to say that they didn't feel as if they belonged at their school.

Academic performance was significantly associated with being a victim; for every 1-point rise in grade point average, the odds of being a victim dropped by 10%. But victims were not more likely than bystanders to endorse the high-risk behaviors.

Bullies were almost twice as likely to report feeling unsafe at school and sad on most days, compared with bystanders. They were three times as likely to endorse the idea of beating up someone who starts a fight, and twice as likely to say it's OK to pick a fight or to cheat at school.

In addition, the investigators found that bully-victims were 2.5 times more likely to feel unsafe and to report feeling "no good at all" and twice as likely to report daily sadness, compared with bystanders. They also were three times more likely to say it was all right to bring a gun to school and to cheat. "There are many reasons why adolescents might endorse carrying a gun to school," Dr. Glew and her associates said, noting a 2000 report that found 66% of school shooters reported feeling "bullied, attacked, threatened, or persecuted prior to the incident."

The investigators' own findings are "consistent with the literature, which suggests that the bully-victim group is the most troubled."

The study was supported by a grant from the National Institutes of Mental Health; none of the investigators reported a conflict of interest. ■