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OPINION, OP ED**KARNIKA SETH**

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Protect our kids from trolls

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Cyberbullying directly impacts a child's psychology, his/her self-esteem and morale.



Representational image

Is children accessing the Internet a boon or a bane? It can become a bane if a child is victimised through cyberbullying or faces other kinds of online victimisation. The recent incident of a 12-year-old boy bullied

online by Facebook users, with comments and pictures circulated on the Internet, has alarmed the social media community at large. On the Internet, children face many threats. A harmless comment on social media by a child can attract the attention of paedophiles, child predators or cyberbullies who derive pleasure by harassing a child for personal or commercial gratification. In simple terms, cyberbullying means to harass someone by sending abusive, obscene or other objectionable content in textual, video or audio formats. A child may be bullied or defamed by creating a fake profile page; he or she may be harassed via cyber-stalking, that is closely watching or following a child by digital means to intimidate or harass him or her.

Cyberbullying directly impacts a child's psychology, his/her self-esteem and morale. In severe cases, it may even lead to suicide or substance abuse. Parents must therefore keep a strict vigil on the psychology of children and their general social media hygiene. Children often invite new members to their network or accept friendship requests from strangers, which can be dangerous. Many Internet profiles are fake or anonymous as cyber criminals misuse technology to target children for ulterior motives. Children are gullible and often share personal ideas, discuss events and personal interests without thinking of the consequences. They may post pictures with a geotag revealing their location details or download e-books, movies or other files without anti-virus checks. Cyberbullying is also possible where another child or adult, who is known to the child, makes a fake identity to bully him/her.

Nowadays, children often share selfies or reveal their passwords to someone they think they can trust. But later they are betrayed and their

personal information is either put online or their account accessed without permission for illegal purposes. This violator could be a neighbour, a schoolfriend or even a complete stranger. There are many forms of cyberbullying. “Happy slapping” is a form of cyberbullying where a mobile or camera is used to record an incident where a child is being bullied or beaten up. This is then uploaded on social media. “Rumour spreading” involves circulating gossip through email, texts or circulating pictures. Trolling implies making abusive and hurtful statements about someone on the social media.

The 12-year-old who was cyberbullied and barraged with Facebook comments such as the “bitch please” page or those like “chotta bheem band ho gaya kya” is a clear example of trolling by adults. A naïve boy shouldn’t be bullied by adults, who must adhere to basic netiquette! Children bullied on the Internet are often reluctant to talk about the problem with their family and friends or seek professional help. Though India ranks third in the world in the number of cyberbullying cases (according to a recent Microsoft survey), most parents don’t report such cases to the police or to the school authorities (if a school mate is suspected) for fear of social stigma or delay in the probe by law-enforcement agencies. Most people aren’t aware of special laws in India to protect children from online crimes.

The Information Technology Act 2000 and Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act 2012 are two important laws with specific provisions to protect children from crimes like online harassment, identity theft, sexual grooming, pornography or stalking. While cyberbullying for sexual purposes is a crime punishable with up to three years of imprisonment under the Posco Act, child grooming and child

pornography is punishable with a term that may extend up to five years in jail and a fine that may extend up to Rs 10 lakhs under the IT Act.

Defamation is an offence punishable under the Indian Penal Code with upto two years imprisonment and a fine. Criminal intimidation (that covers cyberbullying acts with a threat to cause injury to a person, his/her property or reputation) is an offence punishable with imprisonment of up to two years, a fine or both. In order to protect children from being bullied, a few best practices must be adopted by parents, teachers and the children themselves. If a child is being bullied online, he/she should seek professional help from a cyberlaw expert who will write to the Internet service provider to block/delete the objectionable profile/comment. It is important to keep the digital screenshot of the objectionable material uploaded or published on social media so that the matter can be appropriately reported to the ISP and/or the police for action and investigation.

At times, an earlier profile can simply be deleted and a new profile page may be created to end the harassment. But it is advisable to report the matter, particularly in the case of anonymous or fake identities on social media to identify the person behind the cyber harassment. It is advisable to adhere to age criteria norms on a particular social media platform while creating an account. If a schoolmate is involved in cyberbullying it must be reported to the school counsellor, teacher or principal. It is our responsibility to educate our children on how to use the Internet wisely and cautiously, and to be mindful that by uploading some information on the Internet, its footprints will stay even if the information is later deleted. Children need to be made aware that cyber

criminals lurk on the Internet and they must share any disturbing incidents experienced in cyberspace with a trusted adult