Net-Depressed

Add another worry to the list of "anxieties that didn't even exist 10 years ago." It turns out that social networking sites can help bring down despotic regimes in Tunisia and Egypt, but they can also be addictive and destructive for kids, according to new guidelines on social media published by the American Academy of Pediatrics.

The condition that some in the media are calling "Facebook Depression" is tied to the sometimes-brutal experiences kids have on social networking sites. Dr. Gwenn O'Keeffe, a Boston-area pediatrician and lead author of the new guidelines, says friend tallies, status updates, and even photos of happy people doing happy things can make some kids feel bad about themselves if they feel like their own "boring lives" pale in comparison.

O'Keeffe says online social isolation can actually leverage a teenager's emotions more powerfully than traditional isolating experiences, such as sitting alone in a crowded school cafeteria. On Facebook, kids often get a radically skewed view of real life—people who look happy online may be, in truth, miserable. But that's not what it looks like. According to the Academy's guidelines, online harassment "can cause profound psycho-social outcomes" that include suicide. Compounding the effect, says O'Keeffe, is that social media also has the power to "interfere with [teenagers'] homework, sleep, and physical activity."

Megan Moreno, a University of Wisconsin adolescent medicine specialist who's studied online social networking among college students, says Facebook can help some kids build healthy social connections, but can have the opposite effect on teenagers who are prone to depression. In a Fox News online report, 16-year-old Abby Abolt of Chicago, a frequent Facebook user, says the site has never made her feel depressed, but she understands how it might affect some kids. "If you really didn't have that many friends and weren't really doing much with your life, and saw other peoples' status updates and pictures and what they were doing with friends, I could see how that would make them upset," she says.

Despite all the attention cyber-bullying has demanded over the last 12 months, kids say traditional forms of abusive behavior are still their biggest concerns. According to the Josephson Ethics Institute, one in three teenagers (33%) say physical violence is still a big problem at their school, compared to 36% who said the same in 2008. Half (50%) say they've bullied, teased, or taunted someone within the past year—a number that hasn't changed in three years.

The pretexts for bullying are timeless, including:

- **People who belong to a different group (21% in 2010 and 22% in 2008),**

- **People who are of a different race (42% in each year),**

- **People who hit someone because they're angry (52% and 54%), or**

- **People who bring a weapon to school (10% and 11%).**

One more timeless truth about bullying—guys are far more likely to be both the perpetrator and the victim than girls are. Teenage boys are more than twice as likely as girls to "strongly agree" it's okay to hit or threaten a person who makes them angry (12% vs. 5%). And guys are more likely to say they've bullied someone at least two times in the past year (33% vs. 21%).

None of these findings blot out the reality of cyberbullying—one in 10 teenagers (11%) admit they've bullied someone online, according to McAfee and Harris Interactive. And half (52%) say they know someone who's been a victim of a cyberbully. Unlike traditional bullying behaviors, cyber-space bullies and victims are more likely to be girls than boys.