Cyber bullies told my daughter to kill herself – we must help children face up to online abuse

More teenagers have experienced online bullying since the start of the pandemic and parents need to be aware of the signs

By Sarah Rodrigues
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Sarah Rodrigues: 'Not every child will go to an adult and let them know that they are on the receiving end of the type of nastiness' | CREDIT: Clara Molden

Twitter is well known for being a cesspit of derision and mockery; a haunt for trolls eager to vent their spleen from behind the safety of a username. Of course, it's fine to disagree with someone's views. What's not fine is when that disagreement becomes abusive and personal. It's not fine when it is spiteful, vindictive and humiliating.

In my family, we're firm believers in the idea that the way somebody treats you says everything about how they are feeling about themselves, and nothing about you – so goodness only knows what Chrissy Teigen (model and wife of singer John Legend) was feeling recently, when she is alleged to have taken to social media to bully and harass other celebrities.

Model Courtney Stodden recently revealed that Teigen had publicly and privately urged her to kill herself, and that she fantasised about Stodden taking a "dirt nap" (being buried) and to "Go. To Sleep. Forever." Of actor Lindsay Lohan, who has admitted to self-harming in the past, Teigen tweeted "Lindsay adds a few more slits to her wrist when she sees Emma Stone".

It's tempting to dismiss this kind of behaviour as the hyperbole and drama of La-La Land; of inflated egos and celeb nonsense but sadly, this is not the case - a fact I came to know first hand recently, when some students from a local boys' school started targeting my 14-year-old daughter.

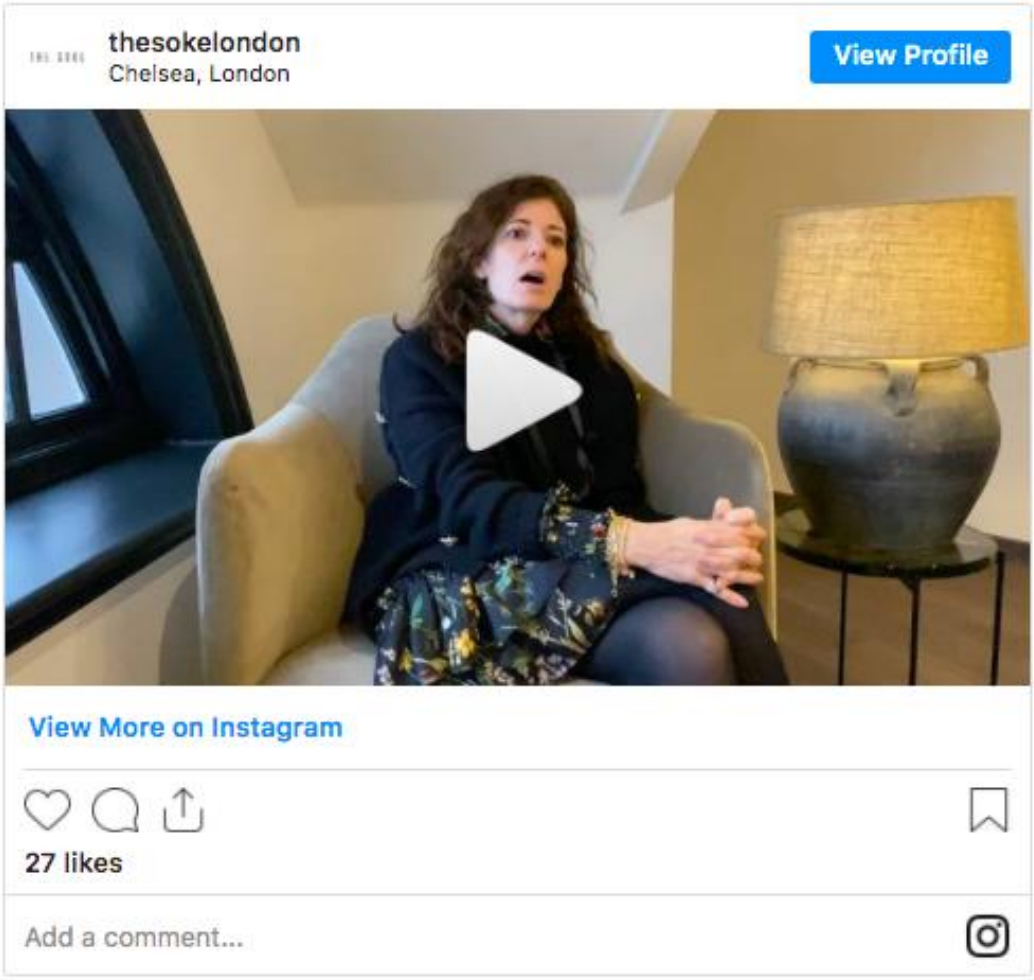
It started, as such things so often do, with them finding her attractive. They saw a picture of her on the social media feed of a mutual contact and both made virtual approaches. Their efforts were awkward, but not revolting nor wildly inappropriate; at the same time, she was polite but distant, her responses neither scathing nor encouraging.

It's perhaps this latter point that created the issue: within the space of a few months, these same two boys were using social media to try to humiliate my daughter on the subjects of everything from sexuality and gender identity to her race and "teen tribe".

Having decided, from her dress sense and fondness for vampire shows, that she was "emo" – a tribe associated with heightened sensitivity, depressive tendencies and self-harm - they started telling her to cut herself and to post pictures of her wrists.

They told her that she was “leng” (good looking) but that being “emo” made her ugly and that she was therefore a waste of space and should kill herself. They said that her friends – many of whom identify as non-binary or gay – were disgusting; sinners; a disgrace. I could share more of the things that they said, but they have no place in the public domain: still less on the screen of a young adult.

“Around 60 percent of my teenage clients are seeing me because of online bullying,” says Dr Shadi Shahnavaz, Head of Family Therapy at The Soke, a private mental health centre in London, acknowledging that this figure has increased substantially since the beginning of the first lockdown.



“The way young people communicate had already been altered by the proliferation of social media, even before the pandemic – but with face-to-face interactions limited, they have become even more dependent on these platforms.”

The danger, of course, is twofold. Not only are young people putting themselves out there in ways that they’d likely not countenance “irl” (in real life) because they feel that the relative anonymity of a username, the safety of their own four walls and the disappearing nature of Snapchat makes them untouchable, but they are also able to say things that they’d surely never say to someone’s face.

“There’s a filter that people, unless they’re a sociopath, tend to apply in real life situations,” says Dr Shahnavaz. “Online, however, relative anonymity and distance seem to allow people to be as vicious as they want.”

But why do they want to be vicious? Is there any truth in the idea that how someone treats you is a reflection of their state of mind, rather than a reflection on you?

“Absolutely,” says Dr Shahnavaz. “People who can be that unpleasant to other people are really just suffering themselves, and they express it in anger and bitterness. The thing is, though, that I don’t think teenagers should try to understand why and empathise with them: that’s not the goal. The goal is to just understand that what these people do is wrong, and that it shouldn’t happen.”

Knowing that “it’s them, not you”, may, however, be useful in helping young people to understand that they do not need to feel guilty or ashamed about the abuse they’ve been subjected to; in understanding that it’s not their fault. According to Dr Shahnavaz, many of her clients feel that they have in some way deserved their humiliation; that if they were thinner, or more attractive, or more interesting, it wouldn’t have happened.

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I know that I am lucky to have a resilient, open and communicative child, with whom I share a close relationship. I'm aware that I'm fortunate that she came to me with the problem and willingly handed over her phone so that I could see everything that had built up to this point.

Yet I'm equally aware that not all young people have that kind of a bond with an adult. What becomes of those children, when they are subjected to harassment online?

"Unfortunately, most young people don't have those sorts of relationships with adults; added to which they feel ashamed and that it's their fault," says Dr Shahnavaz.

"The reason they eventually come to therapy is because their parents can see that they are self-harming, or that they are depressed, or that they've stopped eating - or perhaps the school has noticed something - but nobody knows why and the child won't say. Even when they come to me, as a therapist, it takes a while before they are willing to admit the nature of the trauma they've experienced."

And make no mistake: this is not mere 'teasing' or 'banter'. It is traumatic. According to Dr Shahnavaz, many of her young clients exhibit signs of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as a result of their experiences, and research has shown that bullying is one of the worst traumas that a person can experience, due to its insidiousness and ability to sow self-doubt.

"Some traumas are easier to contextualise, because you know that the other person is the guilty party," she says. "With bullying, however, there is blame, guilt and shame: the victim tends to take on these feelings, in addition to the pain of the bullying itself."

She emphasises, too, that it only takes one person to have an impact on another: even if five other people have been complimentary, supportive or kind, it is that one humiliating comment that will stay with you.

Numbers to call

Samaritans, available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year: samaritans.org.
If you need a response immediately, it's best to call on the phone (this number is FREE to call):
☎ 116 123

MIND, the mental health charity: mind.org.uk
☎ 0300 123 3393

Rethink Mental Illness: rethink.org
☎ 0300 5000 927

The fact that young people are so surgically attached to their phones is, of course, part of the problem. "The previous generation may have experienced bullying in school, but they'd be able to go home, regroup and take a break from it," she says. "Now, it's with them - in their hand, in their pocket, by their bed - all of the time. It's torture on a constant basis - and it's soul destroying."

So, given that not every child will go to an adult and let them know that they are on the receiving end of the type of nastiness that my daughter experienced, how can parents know whether their child needs support?

"Look out for changes - any changes, even small ones," says Dr Shahnavaz. "They may be a bit quieter, a bit more distant; they may have less appetite or their sleep patterns may be disrupted.

"They may be spending a lot of time alone – not only because they are frightened of being bullied, but also because they feel that they're not good enough: that they are fat, ugly, boring, uncool.

"They start to believe these things, so just be really attuned to your child and keep talking to them - even if they shut you down the first time, or couple of times, keep instigating conversations." She says that when you're side by side - walking or driving - is one of the best times to do this.

We should also, of course, be monitoring phone use and removing phones from bedrooms overnight. Depending on the child's age, it may even be reasonable to access their apps and check content and comments; even with an older child, she says, we should be "talking about social media and making them aware of its potential for harm".

As powerless as the victim of online harassment may feel, it's worth reassuring them that they are not, and that bullies can be held accountable.

My daughter had the presence of mind to take screenshots of the comments and I took them to the head of the boys' school: both boys have now been temporarily excluded and will be making a public apology to my daughter, in the presence of their parents, the head and a police liaison officer.

She's by no means perfect, but in this situation, she can feel empowered about having done the right thing.

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