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Preventing Teen Victimization On- and Offline

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In a recent study, leading prevention expert David Finkelhor found that about one in six adolescents are sexually harassed every year (Finkelhor, Turner, Shattuck, & Hamby, 2013). This is affirmed in the media's almost daily recounting of new incidents of peer bullying and victimization. These incidents occur both in person and online. Given the pervasive presence of the Internet and social media in the lives of adolescents, this study offers valuable information to caring adults and parents as they encourage and support teens and youth who are navigating the mine field that is "growing up" in today's society.

This new study looked at whether having friends that you shared time, interests and space with in person had any real, measurable impact on the odds of an adolescent being victimized by bullying or sexual assault (Ybarra, Mitchell, Palmer, & Reisner, 2014). Some interesting discoveries in the study can inform us as parents and adults who interact with adolescents as we continue to work to protect them from abuse and to support these young people developing into healthy, happy, functioning adults.

First, they discovered what adolescents value in relationships, and what they perceive as supportive actions, do not often correspond with reality. Second, adolescents value both online and in person friends, and report that they feel safe online (Ybarra, et al.). Adolescents also say their online friends are their biggest supporters. This is particularly true for youth who may pursue lifestyles outside of the mainstream.

In contrast to this perception among adolescents is the evidence that peer and sexual victimization of adolescents, and in particular these less orthodox lifestyles, is unacceptably high. The Internet is not necessarily more dangerous than in person situations, but many young people and adolescents think that it is safer. As a result, they may rely on the Internet and their social contacts online more heavily than their parents, friends and other responsible adults in their life. However, researchers also suggest that, because they trust the Internet so much, it may provide youth with important tools related to victimization. For example, the Internet may be a really effective way of providing young people with coping skills, avenues for catharsis, or even information about ways to talk about and deal with problems they are facing. (Ybarra, et al.).

Spending time in person with friends is the strongest support adolescents have for facing bullying, sexual victimization or other assaults. That is a fact. However, having online social support is valuable and virtually indispensable for these young people in today's world. Realizing how important these relationships online are to the adolescents in our life (and that they feel safe online) can inform us in our



communication with them. Using what matters to them to help us educate and raise them is the smart thing to do.

Being aware of the pervasive nature of the Internet in our children's lives requires us to do more to help our children realize the risks of online communication as well as to be more savvy in our use of the benefits of Internet access. This responsibility is much greater if we are living with or working with youth facing challenges or who are bullied. This group is often faced with challenges we cannot even imagine. Constantly reminding them that you love and care for them and they are not alone in whatever they are facing can help them understand that you are a reliable support network when others attack. Finding resources for them online can also show them that you want them to grow up healthy and happy with the support they need.

In today's high tech world, the responsibility of parenting and of caring for and supporting all our adolescents is much more complicated. Finding ways to allow them to develop as individuals and, at the same time, protecting them from harms we can see that they cannot, is much more difficult than it was even thirty years ago. Take time to talk and listen to your children. Let them tell you what's going on with them, what they need, how they are being challenged, what matters to them, what they value, etc. Listen and learn—it is your best avenue to supporting and raising strong, responsible, caring adults and to protecting young people from both peer and sexual victimization.

REFERENCES:

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