LIKE MANY YOUNG ADULTS STARTING OUT IN THE WORLD, 21-year-old Eva* sometimes gets nostalgic for her childhood. The easy parts, anyway – many of which didn’t involve the Internet.

“We used to have this thing on Facebook called the Honesty Box, which was just always full of brutal comments, like really, really mean,” she recounts. Then there was the “school hotties” website, set up by a friend, which ranked girls’ looks and outfits on a weekly basis. And if a girl was rumoured to be sexually active in any way? ”Kids just threw out the words ‘slut’ and ‘whore’ like they were nothing. It was ridiculous.”

Now that she’s older and working in a Toronto restaurant, Eva breathes easier: she no longer lives with the daily possibility of seeing her peers targeted by mean girls at school. But she feels bad for her younger cousins, whom she believes have it much worse than people her age ever did.

The Internet’s promise of global connection has been largely fulfilled, but we now know that not all of those connections are supportive and helpful. Only slightly ironically, Eva says, “I feel that I lived in the dying days of innocence.”

Studies suggest that nasty behaviour between kids on the Internet, commonly known as “cyberbullying,” is a concern.

* “EVA” AND “DANIEL” ARE PSEUDONYMS.
A 2008 survey of 2,186 youths in Grades 6, 7, 10 and 11, conducted at U of T’s Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work, revealed that 50 per cent of them had experienced online bullying. By 2011, a similar survey in Nova Scotia put the number at 60 per cent, with that figure rising to 69 per cent in a 2013 British study.

Of course, those numbers might be higher or lower, depending on your definition of what cyberbullying is. Agreed-upon examples include a systematic campaign of Facebook hatred; a fake, defamatory website set up in the target’s name; or a campaign wherein intimate pictures of a victim are obtained consensually, then passed around linked to her address and phone number. These are the types of awful activities that have been linked to depression, anxiety and suicide among teenagers.

Eva saw her friends face a daily stream of vitriol that, in an earlier day, might have been kept well out of the public eye. That is the norm for more than half of teens today. (In the 2008 survey, cyberbullying was defined as conduct that caused “willful and repeated harm.” Comments that stay on the Internet perpetually are perhaps by definition repeated.)

“Girls will call it drama and boys call it trash talk,” says Faye Mishna, dean of the Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work and an international authority on the phenomenon. “We call that cyberbullying, but they don’t.”

In fact, the first thing 16-year-old Daniel* wants me to know is that “I’ve been trash-talked a lot online, but I’ve never been cyberbullied.” Yes, he’s been called “faggot,” been threatened with violence and told to go kill himself – “but kids just kind of take that in stride, they’re always joking.”

How teens deal with online meanness depends on a variety of factors. Mishna says that “some kids are more vulnerable than others, depending on their supports, their resources and other issues they may be struggling with.”

A child therapist, Mishna started studying bullying quite by accident. Some 20 years ago she worked as the clinical director of Integra, a centre dedicated to helping children with learning disorders and psychosocial problems.

“It came out that one of the things kids loved about coming to [Integra] was that they didn’t have to worry about being bullied there” because they were in a friendly environment, she says. “So a penny dropped…. I realized that the bullying was affecting them just as much as the disability.” When Mishna left in 1999 to become a professor at U of T, the idea of taking on traditional bullying as the subject for her program of research seemed a “no-brainer.” Some seven years later, she trained her focus on cyberbullying, and has been monitoring its grim evolution ever since.

Being bullied was once thought to “build character,” but this idea has been debunked in the last 40 years. “That’s an old-school way of thinking: boys will be boys,” says Mishna. “The research shows that it builds low self-esteem and other problems. It also hurts the kids who bully, potentially turning later into adult sexual aggression, harassment, domestic violence and workplace bullying.”

Mishna began her research “fairly early” after cyberbullying was identified as a growing social problem. She says it’s a burgeoning area of interest for students in different fields, including education and information technology as well as social work. Factor-Inwentash is a natural place to investigate the phenomenon, she adds: social workers have always dealt with issues of discrimination and marginalization. When studying mental health concerns, their profession places special emphasis on examining the social environments from which such problems arise.

Under the aegis of the faculty, Mishna has acted as principal investigator on a number of cyberbullying projects over the past few years. One of these examined just who gets cyberbullied. As with traditional bullying, someone who suffers badly from cyberbullying is usually someone grappling with a difference. “Appearance is a big thing, how you look. Bad grades, any kind of disability. Racism and homophobia as well,” she says. In contrast with traditional bullying, it’s worth noting that the roles can be very fluid: the bullied these days more often become bullies themselves.

Gay youth (or those perceived to be gay) are frequently victimized by school bullies online, but Daniel isn’t a bit perturbed by all the homophobic language he sees daily.

“The word fag has a completely different meaning now,”
he says. “Fag means somebody who’s weird or like a nerd. Somebody you don’t like, you use it as an insult. I guess it’s evolved from being a homosexual slur.”

At the same time, he doesn’t counter my objection that outside his limited cyber circle, this usage is considered offensive. “And I guess sometimes you don’t know if a kid is actually gay or not,” he says, reflecting. “It could be very hurtful.”

Words are certainly a problem. But some of the most tragic instances of cyberbullying have involved pictures as well: compromising imagery that spreads from one device to the next with the destructive speed of a medieval plague.

The suicides of Amanda Todd and Rehtaeh Parsons alerted most Canadians to the problem of cyberbullying. In the former case, the 15-year-old B.C. girl was both blackmailed by an adult predator and cyberbullied by other teenagers. Parsons, a 17-year-old Nova Scotian, was the victim of an alleged gang rape, which was photographed and distributed by the perpetrators.

The uproar resulting from the cyberbullying aspect of these tragedies has given way to newly proposed legislation. Bill C-13, which awaits third reading in the House of Commons, would make it illegal to distribute “intimate images” without the consent of the person depicted.

But Mishna says using the blunt instrument of the law on teenagers isn’t necessarily the answer. “It should be a last resort. Philosophically, it misses the point. This isn’t just about kids breaking the law; it’s about kids living in this new world.” A new frontier, in other words, where it will take some time to develop the rules and socialize children as to what those are.

Schools these days are rife with anti-bullying workshops, which Mishna thinks are of limited effectiveness. “Workshops alone don’t work; most people who work in the area say the best solution is not a one-off. It has to be a combination of things,” including an ongoing discussion and teaching, she says.

In his eight-year experience as a crown attorney, U of T adjunct law professor Brock Jones (MA 2001, JD 2004) has witnessed how humiliation via the Internet can worsen the sting of other youth crimes such as beatings, which get filmed, then circulated online.

This naturally provides evidence for prosecutors to work with: “In terms of criminal prosecution, it may shore up the strength of the crown’s case,” he says. “However, my personal view is that it causes great harm to the victim. You could walk away from getting shoved or even robbed. But once a crime gets on social media, it never ends.”

Jones believes that the current emphasis on “informal proceedings” works well with teenagers who are engaging in online harassment. “The police will go to the parents, tell the teens that this is an offence, give them a warning, and try to set them up with diversionary programs and education. This reflects the fact that [teen cyberbullying] is usually done out of childishness and ignorance, rather than true malice.”

He agrees, though, that there is a point when bullying becomes a matter for the criminal courts to decide. And Mishna points out that the cases of Todd and Parsons, which have drawn national attention to cyberbullying, are actually cases of far worse crimes – child pornography and sexual assault, respectively. “Cyberbullying is serious, but we tend to talk about that” – meaning the online culture of taunts and insults – “and ignore the other [aspects of those cases],” she says. “Suicide is always multideterminate.”

Mishna is currently in the final phase of a three-year study on cyberbullying, involving children in Grades 4, 7 and 10, as well as parents and teachers. Her research is revealing that the sexualized nature of cyberbullying against girls is an issue. In journalist Paula Todd’s new book, Extreme Mean: Trolls, Bullies and Predators Online, Todd points out how it’s now practically a societal norm for a teenage girl to take a topless “selfie” and send it via text to a boy she likes: “Law enforcement staff, prosecutors and a few principals in the U.S. confirmed that asking for ‘pre-date visuals’ is widespread in some school districts.”

Everyone’s heard about jilted boys getting back at girls by hitting “send” on a nude photo taken while the two were dating. But Daniel tells me that, “a lot of times,” boys will proudly brandish pictures of current girlfriends without their knowledge. His mother is incredulous that he’s seen such pictures online. “Oh, I’d never send pictures of my own girlfriend,” he says, consoling her. “But I’ve seen pictures of other girls, because they get passed around.”

Bullying has always been with us; anyone who’s ever been to school knows that. “The research shows that cyberbullying is less prevalent than traditional bullying,” says Mishna. She also says that bullying offline can get continued online, and vice versa, making it hard to separate the phenomena.

But cyberbullying is unique for several reasons. Bullies used to have a perceptible advantage over their victims: they were taller, stronger, better-looking, wealthier, etc. But in cyberspace, huddled before a device, anyone can bully – which is why targets so often switch places and go on the offensive themselves. And that also means anyone can be a victim, too (there’s a myth that girls get cyberbullied more than boys, says Mishna; they are equally vulnerable).

Cyberbullying is easier to do not only physically but emotionally. In Extreme Mean, Paula Todd explains that, removed from any social cues (such as a victim’s distressed face), it’s easier for a bully to behave psychopathically, devoid of whatever natural empathy he or she might otherwise possess.

If Bill C-13 meets with continued opposition, it won’t be the solution. And if it isn’t, what is? Fortunately, the problem is now being approached on multiple fronts. In the computer world, so-called “white knights” such as the hacktivist group...
Anonymous are currently doing their best to ferret out adult cyberstalkers and abusers. Their activities are serving as an example to bullied kids who are overexposed to social media’s dark side.

Some health-care providers, too, think they have a role to play. In a Canadian Medical Association Journal editorial published last April, deputy editor and U of T professor Matthew Stanbrook (BSc 1991 Victoria, MD 1995, PhD 2004) wrote: “Onset of new behavioural or mental health problems, psychosomatic symptoms or a decline in school performance should prompt questioning about bullying, including cyberbullying.”

Then there are the schools. Mishna says that in the early days of cyberbullying, they weren’t inclined to think it their problem, in that it usually occurs after hours. That attitude has now changed, with school-based social workers often called on to deal with problems as they come up.

“Cyberbullying does not operate in a vacuum,” writes OISE professor Kathy Bickmore in an email message. Bickmore studies peace-building in education, and says “peace-building is shaped by (and contributes to shaping) the pattern of human interactions in and around schools.”

While Bickmore says there is no one quick fix to the problem, she suggests punishing students is not the answer — but “building their capacities and inclinations to act non-violently toward one another is something schools can do.” She cites the effectiveness of restorative justice programs as an example (a conflict resolution model with Aboriginal roots, whereby inclusive dialogue about conflicts is used as an opportunity to learn and grow).

In a major research project conducted by Bickmore on safe and peaceful school practices in big-city school boards in Canada, she found that cyberbullying was being discussed in most schools she visited. “Such awareness-based education, however, is not sufficient by itself to resolve this complex problem,” she says, “because it doesn’t actually build less competitive or more respectful relationships, nor conflict communication skills.”

And then there are the bewildered parents: some of whom, even after their child’s suicide, have continued to receive hateful messages online about the child. But it’s extremely hard for people over 40 to police this environment: it’s not like monitoring homework and piano practice, things they grew up with and know about.

Kids believe, not without reason, that adults know less about social media than they do. So although cyberbullying is a common accompaniment to criminal cases involving youth, Brock Jones has rarely seen a case where victims complain directly to parents. “Usually it’s after the fact, when something gets distributed so widely that its discovery is inevitable.”

Kids also think parents don’t understand how wired their world truly is, and they are right. Further, Mishna says parents and other adults in general often overlook the Internet’s positive effects. “Some sites offer ways for kids who are different to connect online, where they feel safe and validated. They might not have a community or a family they can talk to otherwise,” she says. Isolation can lead to suicidal behaviour in teens: the Internet can offer a way out of that.

That’s why the number one thing that stops kids from telling their parents about cyberbullying is fear of getting their devices confiscated by adults who think going offline is the best way to solve the problem. After all, adults sometimes brag about not having Facebook and Twitter accounts: they tout the superiority of face-to-face engagement, and think teens should feel the same way. But Mishna says teens need those devices. “This generation doesn’t know a world without technology! It’s like saying, don’t eat food anymore.”

She suggests that parents instead employ a sort of harm-reduction strategy, along the lines of how we now treat, say, teen drinking. “We used to say don’t drink and drive. Now we say if you do drink, phone your parents. We have to do the same thing here, otherwise it’s just too dangerous.”

Technology really is the kids’ world, and that’s why some of the best solutions may ultimately come from them. Some examples of courageous activists in the area include 20-year-old Molly Burke, who endured brutal traditional bullying and cyberbullying growing up as a blind teenager in Oakville, Ontario and is now a motivational speaker; or Viraj Puri, a Virginia teenager who’s developed a heat map that tracks mentions of bullying on Twitter, Facebook and Google+.

Everyone hopes that if the question of netiquette is taken seriously by schools, parents, health-care workers, technology experts, the courts and kids themselves, a new ethic might well arise that will help make the dark and abusive aspects of today’s social media climate a thing of the past. Tragic suicides make the headlines, “and then the subject seems to go away,” says Mishna. “But it’s still going on every day. We can’t forget that.”

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