

7 Reasons Good Kids Do Bad Things on the Internet



PARENTS OFTEN WONDER how children who were raised well can end up engaging in hateful, illegal, sexually provocative, bullying or harassing activities on the Internet. Any child may be a victim or perpetrator of bad behavior on the Internet. It's dangerous to assume that your child is immune just because he or she gets good grades or is polite to adults. Here are seven factors that can help explain why good kids do bad things online.

1. It's easy and fast.

As a parent, you have probably witnessed the strong and changeable emotions of pubescent kids. On the Internet, strong emotions can be released at the speed of a keystroke, but the ripple effects can last much longer. It's especially common for teens to post whatever they're feeling, thinking or doing whenever the impulse comes up, because the part of the brain that is in charge of impulse control and long-term consequences is not fully developed until somewhere between 20 and 25 years old. Teens aren't thinking about the future when they post nasty comments to--or about--someone online, or present themselves in embarrassing, degrading or sexually provocative ways.

2. The illusion of privacy.

When kids are on the Internet in their own rooms and the audience is invisible, they begin to feel like they are in a private space. They get bolder because they can't see or hear the people who are reading their messages or viewing their embarrassing or provocative photos. They don't pause to realize that even if they only send pictures to a select group of friends, they can't control to whom their friends send them, or who is downloading them and saving them forever.

3. The paradox of parental expectations.

No one is all good or all bad. Yet parents, teachers and peers often label kids to fit their first impressions and stereotypes (e.g., "the good one," "the smart one," "the problem child," "the shy one," "the athlete," etc.). Living up to being "good" brings love and attention, so kids who have been labeled this way may feel great pressure to conform to these expectations in real life. Rather than feeling genuine and understood, they begin to feel like shiny objects on display for others. The "good one" is the public face, while wishes and attitudes that they have been taught are wrong or shameful get buried deep inside. Resentment and frustration may build up in the child until an opportunity arrives for privacy and anonymity. The Internet has the potential to become the perfect outlet for the expression of "bad" thoughts that have been hidden away.

4. Emotional and physical distance.

The child who bullies or harasses someone online doesn't witness the emotional and physical reaction of his or her target. This makes it much harder to feel compassion, and easier to ignore or discount the victim's pain, suffering and anger. The child who bullies or harasses on the Internet is also safer from physical retaliation. Because of the physical distance from the target, a small or fragile child who has been the victim of bullying in real life may then be tempted to become a verbal bully online.

5. Loss of self-awareness and "groupthink."

An anonymous member of a large group of supporters feels less responsible for his or her actions and less likely to question whether the behavior is getting out of control. Bad group behavior can seem less bad, and even seem like the right thing to do at the time. This is true in real life as well as online – think about jeering crowds egging on a fight. Adults and kids who start hate groups on social networking sites and get lots of people to join the group create the impression that they have a lot of support. This emboldens them to make increasingly mean-spirited comments about others.

"Kids think the Internet is so huge that they can say and do whatever they want without anyone knowing who they are."

SGT. KIRK HON
DENVER POLICE DEPARTMENT

6. Fallout from super-parenting.

Many kids today are showered with attention and accolades from their parents and guardians. Often, these super-parents run interference for their children. As a result some of these kids have a stronger sense of entitlement, and weaker sense of personal responsibility, which allows them to think they deserve to get away with bad behavior.

7. Today, bad behavior can bring anyone 15 minutes of fame.

It's normal for adolescents to be self-absorbed as they develop their own identities. It's also normal to model behavior that gets attention and peer acknowledgment. Bad deeds draw big audiences on reality television, and a bad deed captured on video can quickly be seen around the world by millions online. Infamy and tasteless, derogatory humor get more attention than acts of kindness. Sadly, bad behavior sells!

TIPS FOR PARENTS AND GUARDIANS

- ▶ Don't label or pigeonhole your kids: Check your "endearing" nicknames for them, and the ones their siblings use. Are the names kind, or are they embarrassing, one-dimensional or demeaning in some way?
- ▶ Think about how you praise your kids and how you talk about them to others. Do you brag about their accomplishments but not their character?
- ▶ Talk with your children about the illusion of privacy on the Internet
- ▶ Be your child's moral compass. Don't get caught in "Do as I say, not as I do."
- ▶ Books that can help:
 - *Parents Do Make a Difference: How to Raise Kids with Solid Character, Strong Minds, and Caring Hearts*, by **Michele Borba** (for pre-teens)
 - A wonderful one for all ages to read together is: *Internet & Computer Ethics for Kids: (and Parents & Teachers Who Haven't Got a Clue)*, by **Winn Schwartau**