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Text-Message Bullying Becoming More Common

By REUTERS

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NEW YORK (Reuters Health) - A growing number of U.S. kids say they have been picked on via text messaging, while there has been little change in online harassment, researchers reported Monday.

Of more than 1,100 middle school and high school students surveyed in 2008, 24 percent said they had ever been "harassed" by texting. That was up from about 14 percent in a survey of the same kids the year before.

"Harassment" meant that peers had spread rumors about them, made "rude or mean comments," or threatened them.

Outright bullying, which was defined as being repeatedly picked on, was less common. In 2008, about eight percent of kids said they'd ever been bullied via text, versus just over six percent the year before.

Researchers say the findings, reported in the journal *Pediatrics*, suggest that attention needs to be paid to kids' text-messaging world. But they also stress that parents need not be alarmed.

"This is not a reason to become distressed or take kids' cellphones away," said lead researcher Michele L. Ybarra, of Internet Solutions for Kids, Inc., in San Clemente, California.

"The majority of kids seem to be navigating these new technologies pretty healthfully," she told Reuters Health.

A researcher not involved in the study agreed.

"I don't think it makes sense for parents to get anxious about every new technology, or every new study," said David Finkelhor, who directs the Crimes Against Children Research Center at the University of New Hampshire in Durham.

And on balance, Finkelhor told Reuters Health, this latest study is "relatively reassuring."

The study included 1,588 10- to 15-year-olds who were surveyed online for the first time in 2006. The survey was repeated in 2007 and 2008, with about three-quarters of the original group taking part in all three.

When it came to Internet-based harassment, there was little change over time. By 2008, 39 percent of students said they'd ever been harassed online, with most saying it had happened "a few times." Less than 15 percent said they'd ever been cyber-bullied.

And even when kids were picked on, most seemed to take it in stride.

Of those who said they'd been harassed online in 2008, 20 percent reported being "very or extremely upset" by the most serious incident. That was down a bit from 25 percent in 2006. (The study did not ask about distress over text-message harassment.)

"If online bullying were getting worse," Ybarra noted, "I would expect to see more kids saying they're distressed by it. But we didn't see that, and I think that's good news."

But, she added, that's not to minimize the distress some kids do feel. "We need to do a better job of identifying these kids, and helping them."

Both Ybarra and Finkelhor said the message for parents is to try to help their kids manage their relationships in a healthy way. "These things, at the core, are relationship problems," Ybarra said.

"A lot of the old parenting messages still hold true, like teaching your kids the 'golden rule,'" Finkelhor said. "These are discussions that aren't specific to the Internet or cellphones."

And despite concerns that technology has made teasing and taunting easier, Finkelhor said there's evidence that overall, kids are doing less of it these days. "Bullying and victimization are down over the period that Internet use has gone up. It's improving," he said.

Finkelhor credited greater awareness of the problem, among schools and parents, for that decline.

And both researchers noted that despite the ubiquitous cellphones and computers, cyber-bullying remains a smaller threat than the old-fashioned kind.

"Meanness and bullying are still much more likely to occur face-to-face," Finkelhor said.

SOURCE: <http://bit.ly/svg6r4> Pediatrics, online November 21, 2011.