Recipe for teen bullying

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Mixing the teenage mind, text messaging and social media can be a recipe for dangerous miscues in the communication age, experts say.

A study released this month and co-written by a Florida Atlantic University professor reveals the dangers of cyberbullying among teenagers and how a simple text message or Facebook post taken out of context can lead to violence.

As in any generation, teenagers use relationships as status symbols, experts say. But with text messages and social media, relationships are more about keeping tabs and less about giving space, said Prof Sameer Hinduja, of FAU, co-director of the Cyberbullying Research Centre.

A generation ago, when people spoke face to face or on landlines, there was less misunderstanding, he said.

"Online, all you're left with is your interpretation of that text," Prof Hinduja said. "Are they flirting? Is he cheating?"

A generation ago, there was also a parental buffer, he said. A parent might have picked up the house phone and not liked someone calling a child all the time.

But now, teenagers in the United States send out an average of 3000 text messages a month, Prof Hinduja, who teaches criminology at FAU, said.

He co-wrote the study with Justin Patchin, a professor at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. It is available online at http://www.cyberbullying.us.

The study revealed that 85% of teenage boys and 92% of girls engage in psychological aggression with their dating partner. It also showed that 24% of boys and 40% of girls physically attack their partner.

"Privacy violations can occur as perpetrators check up on, monitor, and even stalk their partners," the study said. "There have also been incidents where aggressors utilise textual, audio, picture or video content stored on their cellphones or computers to
blackmail, extort or otherwise manipulate their partner into saying or doing something against their will."

Prof Hinduja would not disclose the school district the study is based on.

Neither Broward nor Palm Beach County schools in Florida allow pupils to use cellphones in class. Officials say most cyberbullying happens away from school grounds.

"There’s two to three times more cyberbullying than face-to-face bullying," said Aimee Wood, a prevention specialist at Broward County schools. "They don't see a reaction, so there's a lack of empathy. They just hit send without thinking."

Ms Wood said about half of Broward County's schoolchildren had been cyberbullied.

"It continues to evolve," she said, "As we get more advanced, so do children's methods of abusing each other."

It is unclear how many pupils have been the victims of cyberbullies in Palm Beach County. But it happens, according to Kimberly Mazauskas, a violence prevention co-ordinator at Palm Beach County schools.

"The kids have a different opinion of what personal privacy is," Ms Mazauskas said. "Because they don't see someone on the other line, they don't feel that it's the real world."