TODAY'S STUDENTS:

Bullying and Social Anxiety with a Virtual Twist

By Pat Fontana

There once was a time, not so very long ago, when children socialized by playing games together at each other's homes, in the park, or on a neighborhood playground. Teenagers would talk and laugh during a trip to the mall, while hanging out together in their parents' basement after school, or when playing on a sports team on the weekends. Today, social interaction for young people of all ages consists mostly of what they see and type on a screen.

Chief among the issues facing students in the 21st century is the use and overuse of social media, which has the serious potential to not only create anxiety itself but also to exacerbate issues that are lurking beneath the surface. Students who are prone to depression or angst because of other situations they are dealing with at home or at school often have those mental health conditions magnified under the pressures of social media.

The group Project Semicolon focuses on helping young people with those issues that can lead to depression, anxiety, and other mental health conditions. Dedicated to the prevention of suicide in particular, Project Semicolon's work is "based on the foundation and belief that suicide is preventable and everyone has a role to play in preventing suicide."

Amy Bleuel founded the organization because she had dealt with many of the issues that face students today. She struggled with being bullied and being rejected throughout her young life. She said that the semicolon symbol

represents an open opportunity for acknowledging and resolving the issues and then to keep going.

As the group's website (www.projectsemicolon) emphasizes, mental illness is a medical problem that may result from "significant changes in thinking, emotion and/or behavior" or from "distress and/or problems functioning in social, work, or family activities."

For many young people, those changes and problems face them in school. There may be underlying issues they have to deal with at home, but school can present an environment ripe for bullying, teasing, rumors, and peer pressure.

Most discussions of school pressures, including social media and its associated cyberbullying, focus on the high school and middle school environments. However, elementary school students are also affected by issues that can impact their mental health. In fact, the issues may actually start there. Children in grades K-6 today have grown up in a digital world. As toddlers, they may have had iPads for entertainment and by

the fourth or fifth grade, if not earlier, they carry cell phones.

These students are influenced not only by their peers, as is expected of school-age children, but also by their parents, who are on social media on a regular basis. The parents have given their children cell phones so they can reach each other at any given point during the day, instilling (although innocuously) their sense of constant connectivity and instant gratification.

Dr. John M. Garruto, DEd, NCSP, a Nationally Certified School Psychologist, says that the social media issues we are all dealing with are a "new dynamic that has become pervasive," particularly among students. Dr. Garruto, a school psychologist at Kingsford Park Elementary School and an adjunct professor at SUNY Oswego, adds that it is a "misperception that this is something we'd only see in grades seven and up."

We all feel the need to be plugged in and connected in today's virtual world. Information of all types is so immediately available that we have developed a kind of addiction to

constantly updating that information. As Dr. Garruto says, that "lends itself nicely to social media."

"FEAR OF MISSING OUT"

Students who used to whisper in the hallways or pass notes in class are now glued to their cell phones, checking their updated number of posted "likes" or making sure they've read the latest posts by their friends — and their enemies. A popular term for this situation, FOMO or "fear of missing out," has even made it to the Oxford English Dictionary. FOMO causes students to check their social media outlets constantly, or at least as often as they can get away with it at school.

After school, instead of meeting up with friends in person for those activities that used to constitute social interactions, students retreat to their rooms and their screens. As Dr. Garruto points out, "This is a true paradox because the children feel this need to constantly be connected to each other but almost within silos."

Interaction now means chatting or tweeting or posting, virtually. Some students say that interaction is so important that, even after checking a stream once they will go back and check it again immediately, just to see if any updates have been posted in the last few seconds because they don't want to miss out.

FOMO also adds to the stress in an already stressful situation at school. Middle school has always been a challenging time for students who are in transition from childhood to the teenage years. Even in grades

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Fomo

| fōmō |

noun

a state of **mental** or emotional strain caused by the fear of missing out.

five and six, Dr. Garruto says, students are distancing themselves from parents and becoming more influenced by their peers. He adds that "technology can magnify for good or for ill" when developing those peer relationships.

Dr. Garruto also emphasizes that there are other issues that students may deal with that are also stressful in themselves and become more intense with the pressures of social media. He cites examples of situations where "children are born to parents struggling with drug addiction and they are not having basic needs met," even as they proceed through elementary, middle, and even high school.

There are also students whose parents are struggling to provide for them. These issues affect the mental health of students who have not been nourished physically or emotionally.

Test anxiety is another issue facing today's students, as the emphasis on standardized testing and metrics increases. Pressure to do well on tests leads to higher stakes, including choice of colleges and potential for acceptance by those colleges.

Some students, Dr. Garruto says, are predisposed to mental health issues. Other factors such as social media pressures are "new twists that almost make the problem more difficult." As Project Semicolon emphasizes, those mental health issues can be generated from distresses or a significant shift in thinking. These factors are often a reaction to the issues faced by students in the school environment and beyond.

SOCIAL ANXIETY

Before cell phones became so prevalent, bullying among young people was a term generally applied to a physical situation where one child would pressure another into doing something undesirable or unpleasant. For example, a bully might threaten to physically harm another child unless that child gave up his lunch money

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for the week. In today's virtual world, bullying has also turned to technology and uses social media as its vehicle for harm.

Cyberbullying is easier than physically bullying someone, as it is now easier to hide behind the keyboard. A student can snap photos without being detected, post them on social media, and encourage other students to share them. Even when posted on sites that promise to delete these photos within seconds, the images live on in other students' phones. Nothing is ever really deleted online.

And so the cyberbullying can continue, from the safety of virtual obscurity. The victimized student is the subject of a new form of teasing and rumors and must find a way to deal with that new level of stress created by a virtual bully on social media.

Another form of cyberbullying is manifested when a student very deliberately and aggressively omits another student when tagging everyone in a group photo posted on social media. This is the virtual equivalent of not being picked for a team or not being invited to a party. The targeted student feels the stress of being left out in a very obvious way that is evident to everyone else who has access to the photo, which could potentially be hundreds of other kids.

Social status is an age-old concern. The pressure to wear the latest and most expensive clothes or to sport the trendiest shoes has given way to a new pressure to carry the most high-end cell phone and to get the most "views" and "likes" on social media. With that cell phone comes the power to leverage additional social status or to suffer through additional shame and embarrassment, as students constantly feel the need to gain their peers' approval on social media.

Students are faced with these social media issues throughout their

entire day. Most admit to checking their status constantly or reviewing feeds repeatedly, to make sure they haven't missed anything or, more importantly, to see how many people like them. As Dr. Garruto points out, for students in today's virtual environment of social interaction and cyberbullying, "making it through the day is a matter of no one saying anything bad about me."

Project Semicolon provides an example of "Jade," an eighth grader who was bullied online. Mean messages were conveyed through emails, texts, and social media posts. For Jade, the situation become so painful that she eventually had to change schools to get away from it.

Anxiety over social media posts and cyberbullying exacerbates other underlying issues facing students. Peer pressure, test anxiety, and adjustments when moving between grades or between schools have always been a part of the school experience. Today's students struggle with the magnification of those issues in the ever-present world of social media.

WHAT CAN **WE DO?**

Dr. Garruto, who has been practicing for 20 years in the central New York area, offers some solutions and emphasizes that some action is already being taken in the state of New York to help those victims of cyberbullying. Dr. Garruto is the president-elect of the New York Association of School Psychologists

and serves on the Ethics Board of the National Association of School Psychologists and has been active in educating students and adults about the pressures students face in school today.

In the state of New York, Dr. Garruto points out, "If students are engaging in cyberbullying, the school is still required to investigate even if it happens off school grounds." The state of New York passed the Dignity for All Students Act (DASA) in 2010 and the act took effect on July 1, 2012. Briefly, the act "seeks to provide the state's public elementary and secondary school students with a safe and supportive environment free from discrimination, intimidation, taunting, harassment, and bullying on school property, a school bus and/or at a school function."

In addition to this recognition of the issues from the administrative side, students should be educated about how to be smarter on social media, Dr. Garruto suggests. They need to understand the true consequences of their actions.

Cyberbullying has led many students to experience low self-esteem, stress over peer pressure and their desire to fit in, and aggravated symptoms of underlying mental health issues. The negative consequences can lead to severe results, including suicide, among young people who are the targets of cyberbullying.

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One positive aspect of social media is that there can be a digital thumbprint. Even when students think they are posting anonymously or incognito, cyber investigations can still find them.

Project Semicolon advises young people to always tell a responsible adult if they are being bullied. Students may feel ashamed by the bullying, not wanting to admit to their parents they are victims or they may be afraid of repercussion if they "tell" on the bullies. However, Project Semicolon suggests that "adults in positions of authority — parents, teachers, or coaches — often can find ways to resolve dangerous bullying problems without the bully ever learning how they found out about it."

Issues at school have changed significantly in the past few decades on some levels. Yet on other levels, those issues are still basically the same. Acceptance, fitting in, social anxiety, test anxiety, and the pressure to do well academically will undoubtedly be issues for students for a long time to come. The exponentially increasing capabilities of technology and the pervasive, almost inherent requirement of students carrying cell phones have most certainly changed the way those issues manifest.

Dr. Garruto suggests, though, that we "can keep trying to get rid of the things kids do or we can make stronger kids." After a few thoughtful seconds, he adds, "Actually both need to be done."

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