The bully behind the screen

School students, both boys and girls, are now becoming victims of cyber bullying. Easy access to social media and lack of stringent cyber laws is making the bullies invincible.

By [Dia Rekhi](#) | Express News Service | Published: 30th May 2018 |

CHENNAI: K Ananya* is a 15-year-old studying in a private school in the city. A few months ago, her mother noticed that she would constantly have an excuse to not attend school. First she claimed she felt feverish, then she complained of a headache, later cramps, and food poisoning another day. "I noticed a pattern over a few weeks where at least two or three days a week she would stay at home," her mother said. "What puzzled me was that whenever we went to the doctor, everything seemed normal. It made me wonder. I also noticed that she stayed in her room most of the time, started talking less and had stopped going out to meet friends."

Despite asking her repeatedly what the matter was, Ananya kept quiet. Concerned, her mother approached the teachers at the school who were equally surprised as they also noticed her grades slipping gradually. "And then one day, as I was passing her room, I heard her sobbing," her mother recounted with tears.

"I comforted her and asked her to share her concerns and she didn't say a word. She showed me her phone where a chat with one of her classmates was open and he was calling her names. She told me that they had been in a relationship and were not together anymore. She had sent him some revealing pictures and he was threatening to upload them on the Internet if she did not get back with him."

Ananya is not alone. Experts believe that cyber bullying is far more rampant and serious than we make it out to be. It is becoming a cause for concern among parents, teachers and counsellors. "Five in 10 children are bullied and the other five are the bullies. More children are getting bullied incessantly online by the day. Cyber bullying is 24/7 and causes mental trauma to the child who lives in constant fear," said Nirali Bhatia, a cyber psychologist.

Earlier bullying was restricted within the school, now it spills over to the Internet where the cloak of 'anonymity' provides 'bullies' the courage to harass others either through targeted abusive messages or by misusing photographs or videos. "Children are ill informed about the Internet," said a counsellor in a school in the city anonymously. "In school, they feel their teachers will punish them if they are caught. They feel invincible online. They think they can do anything and get away with it, which is not so. They don't consider what they are doing is an 'offence,' as anyone being bullied or trolled can seek legal action against the perpetrators."

While the law does not explicitly define 'cyber bullying,' lawyers said that it is a serious offence and one that is increasingly becoming common among children and youngsters.

Through interactions with school children and youngsters, experts said that bullies consider this as their freedom of speech and expression, to say what they want about another person. "While we are guaranteed that freedom, if it makes the other person feel intimidated or harassed, it can count as harassment," said Salman Waris, partner at Tech Legis.

While most of the cases he has dealt with were of young girls who were in a similar situation as Ananya, he said that boys too can be at the receiving end. "Most children are very young, often girls, who don't know how to handle the bullying as they are not able to discuss their issues with their parents. Schools should provide adequate awareness on how children should deal with these situations," said Waris.

In the selfie era, children are extremely sensitive to comments on their looks. Take A Rahul for instance. As a 10-year-old who was heavier than his classmates, he was bombarded with 'fat' jokes on WhatsApp or would have his Facebook wall flooded with posts calling him 'Elephant' or 'Hippo' or other unsavoury names, and a slew of memes about how he had a big appetite or could not run fast. When posted on Facebook, it would encourage others to contribute to the name calling.

"It turned worse," said Rahul's mother. "He began to starve himself. His tiffin box would come back untouched. He even asked me if he could join a gym! He hated going to school and would use any excuse to bunk. I noticed this and approached his class teacher. She immediately took action and made the children realise that they were not merely teasing Rahul but hurting him. The kids understood and stopped it. Maybe they were just unaware that they were causing their friend distress."

Most psychologists echo this sentiment. "Often, when children tease someone they don't realise when to draw the line," said Bhatia. (*Name changed on request)

Why so harsh?

When it comes to the cyber space, there is a lack of empathy as one does not have to face the person, and there is a lack of eye contact which can lead to 'severely harsh behaviour.'

There are consequences.

Nirali Bhatia, a cyber psychologist says that children don't realise the consequences or that it is causing distress to the other child. The perpetrators also don't understand that

their inappropriate behaviour online can affect their chances for a job or studying in a university as well.

http://www.newindianexpress.com/cities/chennai/2018/may/30/the-bully-behind-the-screen-1821577.html