

Young people are exposed to more hate online during COVID

November 10 2020, by Joanne Orlando



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COVID has led to children spending more time [on screens](#) using social

networks, communication apps, chat rooms and online gaming.

While this has undoubtedly allowed them to keep in touch with friends, or connect with new ones, during the pandemic, they are also being exposed to [increased levels of online hate](#).

That's not just the bullying and harassment we often hear about. They're also being exposed to everyday negativity—Twitter pile-ons, people demonizing celebrities, or knee-jerk reactions lashing out at others—several times a day.

This risks normalizing this type of online behavior, and may also risk [children's](#) mental health and well-being.

What are children exposed to?

Hate [speech can consist of](#) comments, images or symbols that attack or use disapproving or discriminatory language about a person or group, on the basis of who they are.

It can even be [coded language to spread hate](#), as seen on the world's most popular social platform for children, TikTok. For example, the number 14 refers to a 14-word-long white supremacist slogan.

People can be exposed to [hate speech](#) directly, or witness it between others. And [one study](#), which analyzed millions of websites, popular teen chat sites and gaming sites, found children were exposed to much higher levels of online hate during the pandemic than before it.

The study, run by a company that uses artificial intelligence to detect and filter online content, found a 70% increase in hate between children and teens during online chats. It also found a 40% increase in toxicity among young gamers communicating using gaming chat.

Of particular note is the [rise of hate](#) on TikTok during the pandemic. TikTok has hundreds of millions of users, many of them children and teenagers. During the pandemic's early stages, researchers saw a sharp spike in far-right extremist posts, including ideologies of fascism, racism, anti-Semitism, anti-immigration and xenophobia.

Children [may also](#) inadvertently get caught up in online hate during times of uncertainty, such as a pandemic. This may be when the entire family may be in distress and children have long periods of unsupervised screen time.

Witnessing hate normalizes it

[We know](#) the more derogatory language about immigrants and minority groups people are exposed to (online and offline), the more intergroup relations deteriorate.

This leads to empathy for others being replaced by contempt. Terms like "[hive mind](#)" (being expected to conform to popular opinion online or risk being the target of hate) and "[lynching](#)" (a coordinated social media celebrity hate storm) are now used to describe this online contempt.

Being exposed to hate speech also leads young people to become [less sensitive](#) to hateful language. The more hate speech a child observes, the less upset they are about it. [They develop](#) a *laissez-faire* attitude, become indifferent, seeing hateful comments as jokes, minimizing the impact, or linking hateful content to freedom of speech.

There is also little reputational or punitive risk involved with bad behavior online. A child playing soccer might get sent off the field in a real-life sporting game for "flaming," or "griefing" (deliberately irritating and harassing other players). But there is no such consequence in [online gaming](#).

Social platforms, including [Facebook](#) and [TikTok](#), have recently expanded their hate speech guidelines. These guidelines, however, cannot eradicate hate speech as their definitions are too narrow, allowing hate to seep through.

So kids are growing up learning "bad behavior" online is tolerated, even expected. If what children see every day on their screen is people communicating with them badly, it becomes normalized and they are willing to accept it is part of life.

Witnessing hate affects children's health and well-being

[Prince Harry](#) recently warned of a "global crisis of hate" on social media that affects people's mental health.

It impacts the mental health of all involved: those giving out the hate, those receiving it, and those observing it.

If a young person has negative, insulting attitudes or opinions, this is often put down to having [unresolved emotional issues](#). However, channeling pent-up emotions into hate speech does not resolve these emotional issues. As hate posts can go viral, it can encourage more hate posts.

And for people who are exposed to this behavior, this takes its toll. The increased mental preparedness it takes to deal with or respond to microaggressions and hate translates into chronically elevated level of stress—so-called [low-grade toxic stress](#).

In the short term, too much [low-grade toxic stress](#) lowers our mood and drains our energy, leaving us fatigued. Prolonged low-grade toxic stress

can lead to adverse health outcomes, such as depression or anxiety, disruption of the development of brain architecture and other organ systems, and increases in the risk of stress-related disease and cognitive impairment, well into the adult years.

It can also cause a child to develop a [low threshold for stress](#) throughout life.

Children growing up in already vulnerable, stressed environments [will be more impacted](#) by the stress they are also exposed to long-term online.

What to do

Unfortunately, we can't eradicate hate online. But the more we understand why others post hate speech and the strategies they use to do this helps a child be more in control of their environment and therefore less impacted by it.

Hate speech is driven not only by negativity, but also by the simplicity in how groups are portrayed, for instance, boys are superior, girls are side-kicks. Teach children to notice over-simplicity and its use as a put-down strategy.

An aggressor (the one dishing out the hurt) can also easily hide behind a non-identifying pseudonym or username. This type of anonymity allows people to separate themselves from who they are in real life. It makes them feel free to use hostility and criticism as a viable way of dealing with their pain, or unresolved issues. Teach your child to be aware of this.

Resources on the impact of [toxic stress](#) on young people, [mental health support](#) and what to do if you experience or witness [online hate](#) are available for parents and children.

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