Teenagers Are Unhappy As Ever – Is Social Media The Culprit?

By Hilary Smith

According to a new study done by ChildLine, a child counseling group, today's children are dealing with new pressures that stem from social media. When the organization first launched 30 years ago, they found that children were most worried about sexual abuse and family planning problems, however these days, ChildLine has found that the major concerns for children are self-esteem, unhappiness and loneliness.

ChildLine found that the feelings of unhappiness tend to begin in pre-teen kids and carry on throughout the teenage years. Although more females than males reported feelings of low self-esteem and general unhappiness, that doesn't mean that males weren't affected at all.

What's causing these negative emotions?

Children who sought help through ChildLine reported that they felt the internet and social media was a huge part of their lives and one of the reasons why they felt so isolated.

One 13-year-old girl who anonymously contacted ChildLine for support was reported to have said, "I hate myself. When I look at other girls online posting photos of themselves it makes me feel really worthless and ugly. I'm struggling to cope with these feelings and stay in my bedroom most of the time."

This girl was not alone, with many other children echoing the sentiments of loneliness and isolation. Even though social media is designed to bring people together and simplify the communication process, the truth is that it leads children to compare themselves to others and also leaves them vulnerable to cyberbullying.

In fact, a separate study found that 87% of today's youth has witnessed cyberbullying, and over one-third of kids admit to being cyberbullied. When kids are repeatedly cyberbullied, the consequences can be serious. More than 80% of cyberbullying victims feel that it negatively impacts their self-esteem, and 30% have even turned to self-harming behaviors as a result of being cyberbullied.

Although these problems are new to this generation, that doesn't mean that they shouldn't be taken seriously.

What can parents do?

ChildLine has also seen a huge increase in the number of counseling sessions that take place, with over 35,000 occurring between 2014 and 2015. This shows that children are willing and ready to reach out to help if it's available. Parents should take this as an encouraging sign and do their part to help children with self-esteem and loneliness.

1. Monitor your child's social media usage and always be aware of what apps he or she is using. Check in frequently and ask them whether they have witnessed or been a victim of cyberbullying. If they have, don't brush it off. Talk to them about what they're feeling and why they shouldn't be concerned with what other people think. Don't use the "sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me" approach that so many parents lean on. Instead, acknowledge your child's feelings and help them move past the negativity by telling them that their worth cannot be determined by others.

2. Limit the time that they're allowed to use their smartphone or the computer. If you limit the access that they have to these tools, you may be able to prevent your kids from becoming wrapped up in the world of social media. Try to get them involved with after-school activities or clubs that will take them away from social media. Or, try setting "no-phone zones" throughout your house. Prevent teens from using their phones during dinner or in their bedrooms. This will help keep kids off of social media and help them get more involved with the family.

3. Teach children never to respond to cyberbullying. Sometimes, bullies are just trying to get a reaction from their target, and giving into what they want will give them even more power and control. Instead, teach your children to alert you or a teacher at school about cyberbullying.

4. Talk to your teen's school about the issue of cyberbullying. Find out if the school already has educational programs in place to teach kids about the dangers of cyberbullying. If they don't, try to find a local organization or group of parents who are willing to step up and help raise awareness. Some teens are under the impression that cyberbullying is not serious, and this pattern of thought needs to be changed, one teen at a time.

Kids shouldn't have to grow up in a world where they feel alone or unhappy, but with a little help from their parents, they may be able to overcome the negatives of social media.