Is Facebook Making You Mean?

Experts Say Online Communication Can Bring Out Your Nasty Side

By Lauren Tarshis

1   Anna* did not think she was being mean. Not really.

2   She was taking a break from her homework, checking her Facebook page. Maya, a girl she knew from her seventh-grade class, had posted a photo of herself from a recent trip to Disney World. She was standing with Mickey Mouse. Dozens of kids had commented on the picture. The first few comments beneath the photo were sweet.

3   "Cute!"

4   "OHHHHHHH!!!!!!!!"

5   By the third or fourth comment, the tone had changed.

6   "Nice boyfriend!"

7   "You're dating?

8   "I thought it was kind of funny," Anna remembers. "And so many people had written stuff."

9   So almost without thinking, Anna typed in a comment of her own: "ummmmm . . . ew?"

10   Then she moved on, thinking nothing more about Maya and Mickey.

11   The next day, Anna was called to the assistant principal's office. She stood in shock as the guidance counselor showed her a printout of all the comments on Maya's picture.

12   Maya had been so distraught over the comments that she stayed home from school that day. Her mom had called the principal. And now every kid who had posted a joking or sarcastic comment was being called to the office one by one.

13   Anna was completely confused. "It was just two words," she says.

Jokes That Go Too Far

14   Rude comments and insensitive jokes have always been part of the middle school (and adult!) world. But experts say that Facebook and other forms of online communication make the problem worse. One of the most important ways in which we communicate with each other is through subtle emotional signals—your best friend's blush when you mention a girl he likes, the flash of anger in your mother's eyes when you say you'll take out the garbage later. Over the phone, we can hear a change in a person's tone, or the ominous pause that sends a message to back off. Online communication takes all of these signals away.

15   "You don't see the impact of what you write," says Beth Yohe, an associate director for the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), which runs antibullying programs around the country.

* *Names and identifying details have been changed.*

16   This goes not only for jokes and snide comments like Anna's, but also for more hostile behavior. Devon, 13, says that not long ago, a friend lashed out at her in a Facebook post. "He said that I had spread rumors about him," Devon explains. "I never did. But he wouldn't stop writing it." The posts, written in all capital letters and punctuated by endless exclamation points, made it seem like he was screaming in her face.

17   Devon says the boy is a quiet kid, "always really sweet." She points out that lots of kids act differently on Facebook than they do in person. "I guess because I wasn't right there," she says, "he just let it all out."

Reaching Across Walls

18   So does this mean that Facebook is all about hurt feelings and wounded egos?

19   Not at all. The online world has powerful benefits, especially for kids who find it hard to make friends at school. "These kids can find whole communities online where they feel comfortable," says Yohe.

20   Online, kids will reach across social boundaries—the invisible walls that often separate one group of friends from another. Aaron, 12, says that his 459 Facebook friends include kids he doesn't talk to much at school. "We get to know each other better on Facebook," he says.

21   Studies support the idea that Facebook can help kids build positive connections. Researchers at the University of Virginia found that the majority of kids use Facebook to build solid friendships and to spread positive messages. But what about those "ummmmm . . . ew?"s and other comments that are hurtful or embarrassing?

22   Experts say that just as teens have to learn how to manage more demanding schoolwork and greater responsibilities at home, they also need to learn how to behave more sensitively online. The bottom line: Think before you post. That can be difficult to do, considering that you're probably on Facebook while simultaneously doing homework, watching your little sister, and eyeing the finals of American Idol. But the words you post, typed with barely a thought, are out in the world forever.

23   As schools crack down on all forms of negative online behavior, many are taking steps to help kids learn to avoid problems online. Some, for example, offer inschool workshops like the ADL's CyberALLY, which Yohe directs.

24   In the meantime, some kids, like Anna, are learning through experience. The day she was called to the principal's office, she apologized to Maya.

25   In person.