



Librarians offer refuge from cyberbullying

By Silvia Acevedo | FEBRUARY 27, 2020

When dealing with online abuse, cyberbullied teens are particularly selective in who they'll trust for help – and who they won't.

“Parents are the last resort,” says [Abigail Phillips](#), who researches youth online behavior as an assistant professor in the [School of Information Studies](#). “None of the teens I talked to would go to their parents first, even teens who were close to their parents.”

The reason? As near-adults, teens want to handle their own problems. Plus, they fear parental intervention, such as having their phone taken away, being told to delete a social media account, or being marched into the principal's office.

So they first seek help from friends. But Phillips has also found that librarians are well-positioned to help because ostracized teens often show up at libraries.



Abigail Phillips

“Cyberbullying and face-to-face, traditional bullying kind of go hand in hand,” Phillips says. “Teens go to the library in the morning or during lunchtime because maybe they don’t have very many friends. They don’t want to sit in the lunchroom by themselves, so they’ll go to the library and read books.”

There, they connect with library staff, who become part of their support system.

“Librarians have this interesting role where they’re an authority figure but they’re not like a teacher,” Phillips says. “They don’t give you a grade. They’re not like your parents. They can’t

ground you or anything.”

Phillips has studied cyberbullying as it relates to teens and library staff using in-person interviews, video diaries and online surveys. She’s learned that many kids attempt to diminish the pain of persistent bullying by describing it as simply people being mean. She also discovered something that even librarians didn’t immediately recognize: Their empathy makes libraries safe and welcoming spaces.

“They just saw that as part of their job,” Phillips says. “They didn’t really acknowledge that they were performing this kind of – I call it empathetic services. But it’s these daily interactions where empathy is being performed in trying to relate to a teenager. They’re there to help. Librarians are there, in general, to help people.”