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Cyberbullying and Autism

Findings of a Recent Study

► AMELIA ANDERSON AND ABIGAIL PHILLIPS

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A recent study explored the intersection of teens with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) as public library users, their perceptions of and experiences with cyberbullying, and the potential role of public librarians in providing relevant digital citizenship programming. Surveys were conducted to learn more about the perspectives of teens with ASD regarding digital citizenship, as well as how public librarians can address their digital citizenship needs. The full study is currently under review for publication; shared here are the initial findings.

Teens with ASD, just as any other teenager, have the potential to engage in cyberbullying as both the victim and as the aggressor. What drives the impetus for this study is that teens on the spectrum can be at an increased risk for being bullied; differences in communication styles can also mean they might be more likely to be the bully, perhaps without even realizing it. Digital citizenship education might be valuable for these teens to help navigate the online environment.

Previous work found that public librarians are interested in providing digital citizenship support for teens on the spectrum, though many are not currently providing such programming. While willingness to provide services is essential, perhaps even more important is whether or not these programs would be welcomed, or even considered valuable, by the teens themselves. This study was done to learn directly from teens, and a call for participation was distributed through an online discussion forum designed for, and used by, individuals on the spectrum.

Teens in this study reported being library users, though their digital lives largely did not seem to intersect with how they used or spent time at the public library. Instead, the most commonly reported reason for using the public library was not to access technology but instead to “just sit and read.” The teens were willing to answer questions openly about their digital lives, and most demonstrated a desire to learn more about safe digital practices, but they did not view the library as the place for this education to occur. When asked what would bring them in for education about digital citizenship, the teens said that they would come if pizza was provided and if they were paid to attend. On a



more serious note, others stated that if they came to the library for digital citizenship education, they would like to learn from, and with, their peers. This information was viewed as more valuable when coming from someone their age. One participant said, “Getting basic information isn’t as helpful as the nuanced advice we can give each other.” This insight is particularly important, as it suggests that libraries interested in providing digital citizenship education for teens on the spectrum should do so in an inclusive environment. Not only is inclusion already a best practice for serving populations with diverse needs, but it is also supported in this study as to how teens with ASD would prefer to gain a better understanding of digital citizenship topics. ■

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