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Schools flag risky social media trends for teens

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■ *A Class VIII girl was treated as an outcast in school because she did not have enough followers on her social media account. Her friends refused to have "tiffin" with her.*

■ *Another Class IX girl kept sending her private pictures to an "online friend".*

Calcutta: Adolescents and teenagers are increasingly seeking external validation through social media "followers". Many of them are looking for peer recognition online, which is making them more vulnerable to becoming an "online prey", several schools report.

"There is an intense need

for external validation. Children from a very young age have started to make reels or stories and post them online. There is a need to prove to the world you are different, unique, and you crave for that adulation which comes in the form of followers, most of whom are unknown to them," said Pratima Nayar, principal, junior school, Calcutta International School.

The hankering for social validation is an immediate fallout of having a device with them and not having adequate maturity to understand its risks or dangers, teachers said.

Need for attention

"This is a two-minute genera-

tion with fleeting concentration. They cannot sit through a 20-minute cartoon or a TV show without swapping. When they are posting something online, they want instant likes and want to be heard, seen and noticed almost immediately," said Jessica Gomes Surana, principal, Birla High School Mukundapur.

Satabdi Bhattacharjee, principal of The Newtown School, said that the need for peer acceptance drives students further into the online world.

"Children seek attention, and some get it through participating in school activities, where teachers recognise them. But there is another set of children who find attention



online," said Bhattacharjee.

They have no connection in the real world and take recourse to online, Gomes Surana said.

There have been instances when students have used the online platform to settle scores with each other, said a psychologist.

There have been instances of students using images of a peer, morphing them and cre-

ating a fake profile.

"They cannot handle situations in real time and use social media to get back at a peer. We counsel students and tell them they are leaving digital footprints which can go against them when they are applying for college admissions," said Gomes Surana.

Cyber safety sessions

Schools conduct sessions on cyber safety to make children aware of how their online activities can land them in trouble.

National English School Calcutta had a session with a cybersecurity consultant, Rakshit Tandon, recently.

Tandon spoke to students about cybercrime like iden-

tity theft, misuse of personal information, online fraud and cyberbullying.

He advised them against chatting with strangers and warned against downloading unknown or unverified apps that may compromise their safety.

"The whole idea of conducting this session is to save children from falling into any online trap..." said Mousumi Saha, principal, National English School Calcutta.

Quest for followers

Bhattacharjee said that in their quest for attention, adolescents can go to any lengths to gain followers.

"They have 1,000 followers, and most of them are un-

known to them, so naturally they become cyber prey and vulnerable to predators," said Bhattacharjee.

Psychiatrist Sanjay Garg described this social media attention as a "vicious cycle".

"It causes more and more need to get gratification. For example, you post something, get 100 likes, but next time you don't get as many, and you feel low and dejected. In that case, they want the next post to be unique enough to draw more attention," said Garg.

Not having enough social media attention makes you an "outcast" among your peers, which amounts to indirect bullying and peer pressure, said Garg.