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Teen aggression: Is media really to blame?

Sinar Harian, Malaysia

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As screens become inseparable from teenage life, experts say aggression is often rooted in deeper emotional struggles, family dynamics, mental health pressures and not just social media alone



Over time, intense media can make everyday life seem boring, increasing a teen's desire for extreme stimulation and drama."

- Columbia Asia Hospital Puchong consultant psychiatrist, Dr Aida Harlina Abdul Razak



By SYAHIRAH MOKHTAZAR

Teenagers today are growing up in a world where screens are deeply woven into everyday life. From violent video games and endless scrolling to online drama and viral fight videos, digital media has become part of modern adolescence.

So when a teenager suddenly becomes more irritable, withdrawn or aggressive, many parents immediately blame one thing: the phone.

But according to Columbia Asia Hospital Puchong consultant psychiatrist Dr Aida Harlina Abdul Razak, the answer is far more complicated.

"Media is better understood as heat under a pot. If the pot is already filled with stress, anger, or emotional pain, added heat can cause it to boil over more easily," she said.

In other words, digital media may amplify emotions that already exist – but it is rarely the sole cause of teenage aggression.

Dr Aida explained that adolescence is already a highly emotional stage because the teenage brain is still developing.

While the emotional part of the brain is highly active during the teen years, the thinking brain which is responsible for impulse control and decision-making, is still maturing and may only fully develop in the mid-20s.

This imbalance can make teenagers more reactive and vulnerable to intense online content.

"Over time, intense media can make everyday life seem boring, increasing a teen's desire for extreme stimulation and drama," she said.



Hidden emotional drivers

Still, Dr Aida stressed that not every teenager exposed to violent games or aggressive online content will become violent themselves. Research only shows a small but consistent link between violent media and aggressive behaviour.

The bigger issue often lies beneath the surface.

Some teenagers who are already struggling emotionally may be drawn to aggressive content because it reflects how they feel internally. Others may become more reactive after repeated exposure to toxic online environments.

"Media does not create aggression on its own but amplifies and reinforces what is already happening inside a teen," she said.

Teenagers are also highly sensitive to criticism, exclusion and online humiliation. In today's social media culture, likes, views and followers can heavily affect self-esteem during crucial identity-building years.

But screens are only one part of the puzzle.

Dr Aida highlighted other contributors to teen aggression, including family conflict, bullying, sleep deprivation, academic pressure and mental health conditions such

as anxiety, ADHD and trauma.

"Frequent arguments teach teens that this is a normal way to handle problems," she said.

Instead of completely banning devices (something she described as unrealistic), Dr Aida encourages parents to focus on healthier digital habits.

Simple boundaries such as no phones during meals, avoiding screens before bedtime and charging devices outside the bedroom can help create healthier routines.

More importantly, parents should create safe spaces for conversations instead of immediately resorting to punishment or criticism.

Rather than saying, "You're always on that stupid phone," she suggests trying "I notice you seem more upset after spending a long time online. How does it make you feel?"

Dr Aida also urged parents to watch for warning signs that may require professional help, including physical aggression, major emotional changes, withdrawal or talk of self-harm.

Ultimately, she believes the conversation should move beyond blaming screens alone.



Experts say movement helps teenagers release stress, improve sleep, boost confidence and regulate emotions during one of the most challenging stages of growing up.



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SUMMARIES

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