

Founder's Thoughts

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When I first began working in this space, I noticed a consistent pattern—not just in behavior, but in how that behavior was understood.

Digital harm was often separated into categories. Bullying. Harassment. Conflict. Each label carried its own meaning, its own response, and its own limitations. What was often missing was a broader view of how these behaviors connect.

Over time, it became clear that many of these experiences were not isolated incidents. They were patterns—built through repetition, shaped through interaction, and often overlooked because they were evaluated one moment at a time.

This realization led to what I now refer to as the “Puzzle Effect.”

The idea is simple. A single piece, on its own, does not show the full picture. It is only when multiple pieces are placed together that the image becomes clear. The same can be true of digital interactions.

When I began applying this perspective, the way I understood online behavior changed. What once appeared to be separate incidents began to reveal patterns of repetition, targeting, and escalation. Not in every case—but often enough to recognize that something broader was happening.

This publication reflects that perspective.

It is not intended to replace existing language or redefine every interaction. It is meant to expand how we look at digital behavior—particularly in environments involving children, where interactions are constant, evolving, and deeply connected to social development.

Children are growing up in digital spaces that are complex and always active. Their experiences do not begin and end with a single message or moment. They are shaped over time, across platforms, and within relationships that extend beyond what is immediately visible.

Understanding this does not require us to assume the worst. It simply asks us to look more closely.

If there is one takeaway from this work, it is this:

> Sometimes, the most important part of the picture is not the individual piece—but how the pieces fit together.

— Colleen Lawson

Founder & President, Voices Unhidden™

Section I — Introduction

When Technology-Facilitated Harassment and Stalking Touches Our Children

Technology-Facilitated Harassment and Stalking (TFHS) is often discussed in the context of adult experiences. However, these behaviors are not limited by age, platform, or environment. Children and adolescents are active participants in digital spaces, and as a result, they are also impacted by the same patterns of online interaction.

In youth environments, these behaviors are most commonly recognized under the term “cyberbullying.” While this terminology is widely used and understood, it does not fully capture the broader behavioral patterns that may be present. Repeated messaging, targeted interactions, group dynamics, and ongoing digital engagement are not isolated to single incidents—they often develop over time.

This publication does not seek to redefine or replace existing terminology. Instead, it provides a broader framework for understanding how commonly recognized behaviors, such as cyberbullying, can exist within the wider context of Technology-Facilitated Harassment and Stalking.

Understanding this connection is not about elevating concern unnecessarily. It is about improving clarity. When behaviors are viewed only as isolated incidents, important patterns may be overlooked. When those same behaviors are viewed collectively, a more complete picture can emerge.

Children experience digital interactions differently than adults. Their social environments, communication styles, and developmental stages all influence how these interactions are interpreted and experienced. As a result, recognizing patterns—rather than focusing solely on individual moments—becomes especially important.

This publication introduces a pattern-based perspective, including the concept referred to as the “Puzzle Effect,” to support a more comprehensive understanding of digital behavior in youth environments. By doing so, it aims to provide parents, educators, and communities with a clearer lens through which to recognize, interpret, and respond to these experiences.

The goal is not to alarm, but to inform. By expanding how these behaviors are understood, more effective and thoughtful responses can follow.

Section II — Understanding the Scope: What the Data Shows

Digital interaction is a central part of childhood and adolescence. As access to devices and social platforms has increased, so has the prevalence of negative online experiences among youth. Research consistently shows that what is commonly labeled as “cyberbullying” is not an isolated or rare occurrence.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), approximately 15–16% of high school students in the United States report being electronically bullied within a 12-month period. Similarly, data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) indicates that about 22% of students ages 12–18 report experiencing bullying, with a significant portion of those incidents occurring online or through digital communication.

Independent research from Cyberbullying Research Center further expands this understanding, finding that nearly 60% of U.S. teens have experienced some form of cyberbullying at least once in their lifetime, with many reporting repeated incidents rather than one-time occurrences.

Globally, findings from the World Health Organization (WHO) show that approximately 1 in 6 school-aged children report experiencing cyberbullying, reinforcing that this is not limited to a single region or demographic.

These statistics are important not only because of their scale, but because of what they represent. The term “cyberbullying” is used to describe behaviors that are:

- Intentional
- Repeated
- Digitally facilitated
- Directed at a specific individual

These characteristics closely align with the broader behavioral patterns associated with Technology-Facilitated Harassment and Stalking (TFHS).

This does not mean that all instances of cyberbullying should be reclassified. However, it does highlight an important connection:

> The behaviors being measured under cyberbullying statistics often reflect the same foundational elements that define broader patterns of technology-facilitated harm.

Another key insight from the data is the role of repetition and escalation. Many youth do not experience a single isolated incident. Instead, they report:

- Ongoing interactions over time
- Multiple individuals participating or observing
- Continued exposure across platforms or spaces

These factors reinforce the importance of looking beyond individual events.

When viewed through a pattern-based lens, the data suggests that what is often treated as isolated behavior may, in some cases, reflect more sustained and interconnected digital experiences.

Understanding this distinction is critical. It allows for a more accurate interpretation of what children may be experiencing—not by redefining existing categories, but by recognizing how those categories may overlap within a broader framework of behavior.

Section III — Understanding the Pattern: The Puzzle Effect

One of the primary challenges in recognizing Technology-Facilitated Harassment and Stalking (TFHS), particularly in youth environments, is how individual behaviors are interpreted.

Digital interactions are often evaluated as single moments—one message, one comment, one post. When viewed in isolation, these actions may appear minor, typical, or easily dismissed. In many cases, they are categorized as ordinary peer conflict or routine online behavior.

However, these interactions rarely exist in isolation.

> The Puzzle Effect refers to the process of identifying patterns by examining how individual actions connect over time.

Rather than focusing on a single incident, the Puzzle Effect emphasizes the importance of observing how behaviors accumulate, repeat, and evolve. A message on its own may not raise concern. A series of messages—combined with monitoring, exclusion, or targeted engagement—may begin to form a more complete picture.

This perspective is especially relevant in youth environments, where digital communication is continuous and interconnected. Interactions occur across multiple platforms, within group settings, and over extended periods of time. As a result, patterns may develop gradually and may not be immediately recognized.

When incidents are assessed individually, important context can be lost. Repetition may go unnoticed. Targeting may not be clearly identified. Escalation may appear subtle rather than significant.

> Recognizing the pattern—rather than the single moment—provides a more accurate understanding of what a child may be experiencing.

The Puzzle Effect does not assume that all digital conflict is harmful or intentional. Instead, it provides a framework for distinguishing between isolated interactions and those that reflect repeated or targeted behavior.

Within the broader context of TFHS, this distinction is critical. Behaviors commonly described as cyberbullying—such as repeated messaging, group exclusion, or ongoing commentary—are not defined solely by their individual occurrence, but by how they connect over time.

By applying a pattern-based lens, parents, educators, and communities can better identify when digital interactions move beyond typical conflict and begin to reflect more sustained behavior.

Understanding this shift is not about redefining every interaction. It is about recognizing when multiple pieces, viewed together, begin to form a clearer and more meaningful picture.

Section IV — How These Behaviors Appear in Children’s Daily Lives

Digital interaction is a routine part of how children and adolescents communicate, socialize, and build relationships. As a result, behaviors associated with Technology-Facilitated Harassment and Stalking (TFHS) often appear within everyday digital experiences, rather than as clearly defined or immediately recognizable incidents.

In youth environments, these behaviors are most commonly identified as cyberbullying. However, when viewed through a broader lens, they may reflect patterns of repeated or targeted interaction over time.

These patterns do not typically begin as extreme or obvious. They often develop gradually within familiar spaces and interactions.

Common examples may include:

- Repeated Messaging or Commentary

Ongoing messages directed at a specific individual, which may increase in frequency or tone over time.

- Group-Based Interactions

Conversations within group chats or social platforms where one individual becomes the focus of repeated attention, exclusion, or negative commentary.

- Monitoring of Activity

Consistent observation of a child’s posts, interactions, or online presence, sometimes accompanied by responses that indicate awareness of their activity.

- Sharing or Reposting Content

Circulating messages, images, or posts in a way that draws attention to or isolates a specific individual.

- Shifts in Tone Over Time

Interactions that may begin as neutral or ambiguous but become increasingly negative, targeted, or persistent.

Individually, these behaviors may not always appear significant. In many cases, they are interpreted as typical peer interaction or conflict. However, when viewed collectively, they may begin to reflect patterns that are more sustained.

This is where the Puzzle Effect becomes relevant.

> A single interaction may seem minor. A series of connected interactions may indicate a pattern.

For children, these experiences often occur within the same spaces where they socialize and communicate daily. This can make it more difficult to distinguish between ordinary interaction and behavior that is becoming persistent or targeted.

It is also important to recognize that these patterns are not always immediately visible to adults. Much of children's digital interaction occurs in private or semi-private spaces, such as direct messages or group chats, where context may not be easily observed.

Understanding how these behaviors appear in everyday environments is an important step in recognizing when digital interactions may be evolving into something more sustained. This awareness supports more informed responses, without assuming that every interaction is harmful.

The focus is not on labeling individual moments, but on understanding how those moments connect.

Section V — Why These Behaviors Are Often Dismissed as “Just Bullying”

In youth environments, digital conflict is frequently categorized under a single, familiar term: “bullying.” This classification provides a common language for discussing negative interactions, but it can also limit how those interactions are understood.

Labeling behavior as “just bullying” often simplifies complex patterns into isolated incidents. A message is addressed. A comment is noted. A single report is reviewed. While this approach can be appropriate in many situations, it may not fully capture experiences that develop over time.

Digital interactions do not always occur as one-time events. They are often continuous, layered, and interconnected. When behavior is evaluated only at the level of individual incidents, patterns of repetition or targeting may be less visible.

Several factors contribute to this type of misclassification:

- Focus on Individual Incidents

Responses are often based on what is immediately visible, rather than on how interactions may connect across time.

- Familiar Terminology

The term “bullying” is widely understood and commonly used, which can lead to broader behaviors being grouped under a single label.

- Perception of Normal Peer Conflict

Some digital interactions are interpreted as typical disagreements or social dynamics, even when they occur repeatedly.

- Limited Visibility

Much of children’s online communication takes place in private or semi-private spaces, making it difficult to observe the full context.

- Gradual Development of Behavior

Patterns may emerge slowly, without a clear starting point, making them harder to recognize early on.

This does not suggest that all behavior labeled as bullying is misclassified. Rather, it highlights that certain patterns may extend beyond how that term is typically applied.

> When interactions are viewed only as isolated moments, the broader pattern may remain unrecognized.

This is where a pattern-based perspective becomes useful.

By considering how behaviors connect—across time, platforms, and interactions—it becomes easier to distinguish between:

- One-time conflict
- Repeated interaction
- Targeted or evolving behavior

The goal is not to replace existing language, but to expand understanding. Recognizing when behavior may extend beyond a single incident allows for more thoughtful and informed responses.

In this way, moving beyond the phrase “just bullying” is not about redefining every interaction. It is about ensuring that patterns, when they exist, are not overlooked.

Section VI — Why This Understanding Matters

Understanding how Technology-Facilitated Harassment and Stalking (TFHS) can appear in youth environments is not about redefining every digital interaction. It is about improving how those interactions are recognized and interpreted.

When behaviors are viewed only as isolated incidents, responses are often limited to the moment in front of us. A message is addressed. A situation is resolved. Attention moves on.

However, when patterns are considered, a different perspective becomes possible.

> Looking at how behaviors connect over time allows for a more complete understanding of a child's experience.

This shift in perspective supports more thoughtful and informed responses from parents, educators, and communities.

For parents, this may mean paying closer attention to changes in behavior, communication, or comfort with digital spaces—not just the content on a screen.

For educators, it may involve recognizing that digital interactions, even those occurring outside of school hours, can still influence a child's sense of safety and belonging within the school environment.

For communities, it highlights the importance of creating spaces where concerns can be shared, understood, and evaluated with consideration of context—not just individual events.

This approach does not require assuming that all behavior is harmful. It does not require replacing existing systems or terminology. Instead, it encourages a broader lens—one that allows for both individual incidents and patterns to be considered together.

The Puzzle Effect provides a simple but meaningful way to apply this perspective:

> Individual interactions may represent only part of the picture. Understanding the full picture requires looking at how those interactions connect.

By recognizing this, responses can move beyond reacting to single moments and toward understanding the overall experience.

This distinction is especially important for children, whose digital and social environments are closely connected. Supporting them effectively means not only addressing what is visible, but also being aware of what may be developing over time.

The goal is not to create concern where it does not exist. It is to ensure that when patterns do exist, they are more easily recognized and more thoughtfully addressed.