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Elem: Social media biggest threat to teens

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New report from Elem NGO reveals sharp increase in number of teens experiencing attacks via the Internet.

There has been a sharp increase over the past year in the number of teens experiencing physical, sexual and verbal attacks via the Internet and social networking sites, according to the annual report released Tuesday by the nonprofit organization Elem, which helps youths at risk through a variety of outreach programs.

Based on interviews with more than 30,000 youths who were counseled or assisted by the organization in 2011 and on the eyewitness testimonies of thousands of volunteers that operate the charity's outreach programs in 40 cities and towns countrywide, the annual report pointed to two alarming phenomena: the increase in cyber-bullying and the falling age of teens turning to the organization for assistance.

Elem's executive director Efrat Shaprut said that due to new processes of social interactions using new technology, children have no choice but to grow up faster than ever before.

"Youths experience exposure to problems and issues that, in the past, used to only happen to older teenagers and this means that boys and girls find themselves in situations without the right tools to cope, intensifying their sense of distress," she explained.

According to the report, which was presented directly to President Shimon Peres on Wednesday night, there was an 18-percent rise in reports of verbal, sexual and physical abuse caused via interactions on social networking sites. The organization noted that this, in part, was due to the wider-than-ever availability of mobile devices allowing for access to the Internet, even for youth at risk out wandering the streets.

"This trend brings together a variety of old and new problems that now take place together in cyberspace," said Shaprut, adding that because online interactions happen in a closed arena, parents are often excluded from the actions.

The report also noted a 50% rise in the number of children under 14 being counseled by the charity. In 2011, youths under 14 seen by Elem constituted 12% of the total number of teenagers that received assistance.

In addition, the report showed that in 2011 some 328 youths under the age of 12 also sought support or treatment from the charity, compared to only 76 in 2010.

YELEM, the organization's online portal, showed that 14% of all the requests for advice or assistance came from those aged 12-14.

Elem's president Navah Barak said that social networking forums posed a dangerous threat to teenagers, especially youth at risk who are not typically able to confide in the adults in their lives.

"We are witnessing a dangerous phenomena, which in the past was expressed only on the street, becoming much more common because of the Internet and is putting more youths at risk," said Barak, pointing out that because of such online forums, problems such social boycotting, bullying, verbal and sexual abuse, suicidal tendencies, gambling and prostitution are more intense.
