

How to Talk With Your Child About Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying can be defined as “willful and repeated harm inflicted through the medium of electronic text.” This generally occurs through the use of computers and the Internet, as bullies can send harassing e-mails or instant messages; post obscene, insulting, and slanderous messages to online bulletin boards or social networking sites (like MySpace, Friendster, Orkut, and Facebook); or develop websites to promote and disseminate defamatory content. Harassing text messages also can be sent to a victim via cellular phones.

In terms of proactive and reactive responses, the Internet is replete with safety tips to instruct parents whose children frequently are online. In addition, software is available for adults to install on home computers to filter web content for adolescent users. Neither of these measures, however, is completely successful in protecting youth from online victimization, nor are they as effective as parents’ supervision of (or involvement in) their children’s online activities.

Recommendations

Here are some simple recommendations to help parents in preventing or addressing cyberbullying:

- 1** Establish that all rules for interacting with people in “real life” also apply for interacting online or through cell phones. Convey that cyberbullying inflicts harm and causes pain in the real world as well as in cyberspace.
- 2** Make sure your child’s school has Internet Safety educational programming in place. This should not solely cover the threat of sexual predators, but also how to prevent and respond to online peer harassment, interact wisely through social networking sites, and engage in responsible and ethical online communications.
- 3** Educate your children about appropriate Internet-based behaviors. Explain to them the problems that can be created when technology is misused (e.g., damaging their reputation, getting in trouble at school or with the police).
- 4** Model appropriate technology usage. Don’t harass or joke about others while online, especially around your children. Don’t text while driving. Your kids are watching and learning.
- 5** Monitor your child’s activities while they are online. This can be done informally (through active participation in, and supervision of, your child’s online experience) and formally (through software). Use discretion when covertly spying on your kids. This could cause more harm than good if your child feels their privacy has been violated.
- 6** Look for warning signs that something abnormal is going on with respect to their technology usage. If your child becomes withdrawn or their Internet use becomes obsessive, they could either be a victim or a perpetrator of cyberbullying.
- 7** Cultivate and maintain an open, candid line of communication with your children. Research has identified the importance of ongoing discussions between parents, caregivers, or teachers and children about online interactions. Parents can start a dialogue about cyberbullying by asking a few simple questions, like the following:

- Are other kids picking on you online? Is it via email, or chat, or instant message, or on MySpace or similar sites?
- Do you get concerned that people will read what others have written about you online and think it's true?
- Have you ever been threatened for your physical or personal safety on the Internet?
- Did you know that physical and personal threats online are against the law and are a crime, just like offline threats?
- Has any online argument also popped up offline, maybe at school or when you're hanging out with your friends?
- Has anyone said anything sexually offensive to you over the Internet? Like what? How do you deal with it?
- How can I help you make it stop, without embarrassing you?

Source: This handout was excerpted from a resource on the website of The Cyberbullying Research Center, which is dedicated to providing up-to-date information about the nature, extent, causes, and consequences of cyberbullying among adolescents. For more information, visit <http://www.cyberbullying.us>. © 2009 Cyberbullying Research Center; Sameer Hinduja and Justin W. Patchin.

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