

Cyberbullying Prevention Guide for Parents

When students venture onto the Web, they wander well out of their neighborhoods. When they text on their cell phones, they have nonstop access to a broad network of friends, friends of friends, and others. Digital technology offers unprecedented social, collaborative, and learning opportunities, but it also carries risks. Students' best resources for staying safe are their parents and themselves. By being an informed and communicative parent, you enable your child to experience the benefits of digital communication while staying safe. A growing risk for middle school and high school students is online bullying, or cyberbullying.

What is Cyberbullying?

As a parent, you are most likely familiar with traditional bullying tactics such as name calling and ongoing harassment in neighborhoods, school yards, and buses. Cyberbullying is bullying that happens online or on cell phones. It involves recurring threatening or offensive digital communications sent or posted online to or about a person. While any age group is vulnerable, teenagers and young adults are most commonly targeted. Cyberbullying can take the form of:

- Sending or posting embarrassing or cruel rumors or threats online or via text messages
- Instigating ongoing online harassment
- Intentionally excluding someone from online groups
- Sending or posting negative, mean, or vulgar comments, embarrassing digital photographs (real or digitally altered), or personal secrets or information
- Stealing a username and password or cell phone, and then impersonating the individual to harm his or her reputation or cause trouble
- Recording phone conversations secretly, and then posting the calls online
- Creating confrontational or mean-spirited online polls
- Stalking

Where Does Cyberbullying Occur?

Cyberbullying can occur on any type of digital communication tool, including blogs, chat rooms, email, forums, gaming web sites, instant messages, mobile phone calls, online gaming systems, picture/video clips, social networking sites, text messages, websites. The variety of platforms on which cyberbullying can occur sometimes makes cyberbullying nearly impossible to escape while online. Nearly all students have cell phones and some form of Internet access.

Why is Cyberbullying a Problem?

Today's students view technology as a part of life – they are digital natives; digital technology has existed for their entire lives. As digital natives, students often readily communicate with their network of friends through computers, cell phones, and gaming systems.

Technology intuitively expands communication channels for positive social development, successful collaboration, increased learning opportunities, and friendships, but it also increases the reach of those who are engaged in traditional bullying, and can amplify and escalate online harassment into real world conflict. Most people know the person who is targeting them.

People who cyberbully often mistakenly believe that they are anonymous online. They believe their intimidations are impossible to trace. Other perpetrators of cyberbullying may not realize that they are bullying others because they do not see the effects of their actions or how their words and actions might be harming someone online. This lack of interpersonal knowledge – feeling safely anonymous or not seeing the effects of their actions – can lower inhibitions and result in bullying that might not take place in a face-to-face setting. According to the National Crime Prevention Council (www.ncpc.org/cyberbullying), 81 percent of teens said that they think people who cyberbully do not take it seriously and think it is funny. The teens surveyed also believe people who cyberbully:

- Do not think it is a big deal
- Do not think about the consequences
- Are encouraged by friends
- Think everybody cyber bullies
- Think they will not get caught

Cyberbullying can potentially be much more devastating than offline bullying. Cyberbullying can take place 24/7 and can become very public, very quickly. Text messages, email messages, blog posts, photographs, and other digital content can be posted online or forwarded in mass emails, reaching a large audience quickly and possibly causing severe short-term and long-term damage to the targeted person.

How Prevalent is Cyberbullying?

Various Web sites, such as the NoBullying.com (<http://nobullying.com/cyber-bullying-statistics-2014>), cite “warning sign” statistics about the growing threat and repercussions of cyberbullying. Documented findings include:

- Of the young people who reported cyber bullying incidents against them, one-third (33 percent) of them reported that their bullies issued online threats.
- Over half (55 percent) of all teens who use social media have witnessed outright bullying via that medium.
- An astounding 95 percent of teens who witnessed bullying on social media report that others, like them, have ignored the behavior.

How Do Youth Who are Cyberbullied Feel?

As in any confrontational situation, students react differently to cyberbullying depending on the persons involved and the events surrounding the online bullying. According to the Pew Research Center (www.pewinternet.org), some research suggests that while significant portions of teens are not bothered by online harassment or bullying, fully one-third (34 percent) are distressed by online harassment. In the study, “distressed” equated to “extremely or very upset or afraid.”

Students who face stressful levels of cyberbullying experience strong feelings that can carry over into their offline lives. Cyberbullying can make your child act uncharacteristically, and signs of distress that might indicate your child is experiencing online harassment include:

- Avoiding the computer, cell phone, and other digital communication devices
- Appearing upset or stressed when receiving email, instant messages, or text messages
- Withdrawing from family and friends
- Declining grades
- Displaying excessive negative feelings, such as sadness, anger, frustration, impatience, and intolerance
- Crying for no apparent reason
- Having trouble sleeping
- Displaying uncharacteristic levels of maladies, such as stomach pains, headaches, or lack of appetite
- Showing signs of suicidal thoughts

In addition, bullying of all types can result in the following short- and long-term effects (summarized from *What happens over time to those who bully and those who are victimized?* by Patricia McDougall, Ph.D, Tracy Vaillancourt, Ph.D, and Shelley Hymel, Ph.D, retrieved from www.education.com/reference/article/Ref_What_Happens_Over):

Possible Short-Term Effects

- Anxiety and/or Depression
- Loneliness
- Low self-esteem
- Poor social self-competence
- Psychosomatic symptoms
- Social withdrawal
- School refusal and absenteeism
- Poor academic performance
- Physical health complaints
- Running away from home
- Alcohol and drug use
- Suicide

Possible Long-Term Effects

- High rates of depression
- Social anxiety
- Pathological perfectionism
- Greater neuroticism in adulthood

How Can Parents Help Prevent and Protect Against Cyberbullying?

While the statistics are distressing, parents, schools, and safety organizations can play a key role in helping children cope with cyberbullying. As a parent, you can take actions to help prevent and protect your child from cyberbullying by keeping the lines of communication open.

Get Tech Savvy

Before you can protect your child, you need to educate yourself. You must become technologically savvy and gain first-hand experience with online applications and digital communication tools. To learn about technology:

- Spend time online and learn the Internet's capabilities.
- Engage your child by asking for demonstrations on how to use the Internet or to share what they do online with you. (Be patient and let your child take the lead. Not only will you learn about the Internet but you may gain insight into how they often use online resources.)
- Sign up for classes, either in person or online.
- Talk with other parents about digital communication and technology used by their children.
- Ask teachers for suggestions on how to learn more about technology.
- Search online for help.
- Set up your own social networking page and have your child add you as a friend.
- Join the chat rooms your child visits.
- Send and receive text messages with your child.
- Take time to have your child teach you how to play an online game, either on the computer or a gaming system.

Computer Location

One of the best ways to keep tabs on cyberbullying is to keep home computers in highly visible areas. All computers in your home (yours included) should be kept in a high-traffic or centrally located room that is frequented by parents, and screens should be easily viewable. You might have to forfeit your ideal home décor or deal with reduced living area, but the tradeoff will be well worth it. By keeping home computers in a central location, you can:

- Naturally encourage a togetherness that is lost when computers are stored off in bedrooms or basements.
- Model good computer habits and practices, such as avoiding online scams, deleting suspicious emails without opening them, and avoiding malware.
- Walk by, see what's going on, ask questions, and intervene when necessary.
- Be readily available when your child wants to share a Web site or what a friend is chatting about.

Talk Talk Talk

Parents who have the greatest impact on keeping their children safe online establish and maintain open lines of communication. Let your child know that he can come to you whenever he has a question or concern about behaviors online. Encourage your child to tell you immediately whenever he suspects cyberbullying is taking place, regardless of whether the cyberbullying is happening to him or others online.

As a parent, be proactive – do not wait for your child to come to you with a problem. Start a dialogue at home, making sure your child understands what constitutes cyberbullying. Ask your child discussion-prompting questions, such as:

- Why do you think people cyberbully others?
- How would cyberbullying make you feel? Have you ever felt that way?
- Have you ever sent a mean email, text, or IM or posted mean things to others when gaming online?
- How would you react if your friend sent you a text message that included an embarrassing picture of another student?
- How can you protect yourself from cyberbullying?
- What can you do if you experience cyberbullying?
- What can you do if you know someone who is being cyberbullied?
- What do you think are the possible effects of cyberbullying?

Preventive Action

As a parent, you walk a fine line between respecting your child's privacy and keeping your child safe. Ideally, open communication will resolve many issues, but at times safety concerns may override privacy. Therefore, before cyberbullying occurs, take some preventive action and discuss your family's plan with your child. Some preventive actions you might implement include:

- Tell your child that you may review online communications, including email, social networking sites, text messages, and chat logs. Reviewing works on two levels.
- Consider using your browser's parental control features or installing parental control software to help control which sites your child can visit. Some sites to visit for more information are Get Net Wise (kids.getnetwise.org/tools) and KidSites (www.kidsites.com). This works well for younger children, but many teens know "work-arounds" so do not rely on these.
- Recruit other adults as allies, including other parents, the school media center specialist, librarians, teachers, counselors, and even pediatricians.
- Review the setup and profile of each tool your child uses to communicate online –social networking sites, blogs, online gaming systems, and so forth – and make sure you limit who can see the information and what information is provided.
- Set clear rules for computer use by designating which sites are acceptable, how long your child can use the computer, and what tasks are allowed. Encourage a dialogue so your child can suggest sites and contribute opinions regarding which sites are deemed acceptable.
- Restrict the people who can send communications by helping your child create safe friends lists, using the Block feature when necessary, and controlling profiles on social networking sites.
- Restrict others from adding your child to their buddy list. This feature is usually found in the privacy settings or parental controls of a communications program.
- "Google" your child to make sure others are not posting attacks online. Keeping an eye on your child's screen name, nick names, full name, address, telephone and cell numbers, and Web sites, can help you catch early signs of cyberbullying.
- Discuss how to respond when cyberbullying occurs. By knowing what to do before an attack occurs, your child will be able to respond appropriately instead of emotionally.
- Establish a cyberbullying communication process with your child before you need one.

If Your Child is Cyberbullied

Even with safeguards and preventive measures in place, cyberbullying can occur. If it does, remind your child to ignore the attack, report the attack to the site administrator or moderator, and tell a trusted adult.

- *Ignore:* The first action to take seems like no action – ignore – but this is the most effective action your child can take when your child first experiences a cyberbullying attack. Responding to an attack will only encourage the person who is cyberbullying to continue. In addition, responding will make it harder to determine who instigated the attack later.
- *Report:* Reporting an attack to a site administrator or moderator helps because the attack will then be “on the record.” If no administrators or moderators are available, such as in email or text messages, save the communication and print it if possible. If the attack is on your computer, take a picture of your screen and save or print it. (Tip: To easily take a picture of a computer screen, use the “Print Screen” button on the keyboard and then paste the picture into a graphics program.)
- *Tell:* Telling a trusted adult allows your child to talk about the incident in a safe environment and have someone to turn to for help if the cyberbullying continues. If cyberbullying escalates, legal actions may need to be taken.

A concise outline of steps you and your child should follow when cyberbullying occurs appears on the Teenangels Web site (www.teenangels.org/parents/cyberbullying_guide.html). The Teenangels offer “The Escalating Levels of Response to a Cyberbullying Incident” guide, which includes some of the recommendations shown here:

- Avoid making the situation worse. Do not respond to hostility.
- Document cyberbullying. Keep a record of emails, Web pages, instant messages, text messages, or other forms of cyberbullying, including relevant dates and times.
- Block the sender. You and your child can and should block aggressive or annoying contacts.
- Report cyberbullying to the attacker’s ISP/email host/cell phone company. Most cyberbullying and harassment violate ISPs’ and cell phone companies’ terms of service. Many companies will close an account if someone is cyberbullying (which will also close the parents’ household account in most cases).
- Report cyberbullying to your school, even though school officials may not be able to do anything since most cases of cyberbullying occur off campus and after hours. While school officials may not be able to legally act on a specific cyberbullying event, they can keep an eye on the situation at school, since many cyberbullying attacks are accompanied by offline bullying as well. The school counselor or administrator may also be able to alert the parents of the parties involved in order to request their help in stopping the cyberbullying.
- Report cyberbullying to the police when it involves threats of violence, extortion, obscenities, hate crimes, or child pornography, or if the person is posting details about your child’s offline contact information. If you ever feel like your child or someone you know is in danger, contact the police immediately and cut off contact with the attacker, staying offline if necessary. Also, keep your computer settings intact to aid in any investigations.
- Take legal action when cyberbullying continues after taking the preceding actions. While cyberbullying may come close to violating the law, many times it may not cross the line enough to be deemed a crime. In extreme cases, though, the threat of legal action may be necessary to stop attacks or find who is behind an attack.

When Your Child is Cyberbullying Others

As hard as it may be to admit, some parents must face the possibility that their child may be cyberbullying others. Some common signs to look for if you are concerned that your child might be bullying others include:

- Your child has been involved in bullying incidents at school, or has been the target of bullying.
- Your child switches windows, closes programs, or hides his or her cell phone when you enter the room.
- Your child uses multiple online accounts, or another person's account.
- Your child gets excessively upset when he or she is denied access to the computer or cell phone.

While the preceding signs may be indicative of other issues, consider the activities as “warning signs” that something may be going on that needs your attention. To begin intervening in questionable activity and protecting your child from repercussions of cyberbullying others, you can:

- Increase your supervision of your child's computer, gaming, and cell phone activity.
- Spend more time with your child and learn about your child's friends, activities, and interactions at school.
- Develop clear rules and enforce them consistently. Praise family members when they adhere to rules and follow through with nonviolent, consistent consequences when the rules are broken.
- Become more technologically savvy. Online resources are widely available online. In addition, your Internet and cell phone service providers likely offer helpful information.
- Tell your child that cyberbullying is not acceptable. Immediately intervene if you see signs of aggression online. Firmly explain that cyberbullying is a serious matter that you will not tolerate.
- Look at the offline behaviors and actions in the home. Sometimes, online aggression may stem from frustration or painful situations that occur offline.
- Treat others well, including your child. If you model with respect, kindness, patience, and empathy, your child will learn from your example.
- Share your concerns with your child's teacher, counselor, principal, or other respected adult. Work together to send a clear message to your child that all bullying must stop.
- If necessary, talk with a school counselor or mental health professional.
- Explain to your child that cyberbullying and online aggression can potentially have long-lasting consequences at the school district, state, federal, and civil levels, including getting sent home from school, expelled from school, charged with a crime, arrested by a policeman, or even sued by another family.

Ultimately, a parent's greatest tool is communication – whether your concern is to prevent, protect, or eliminate cyberbullying in your household. Stay aware and informed, and most of all, communicate with your child – you both have much to gain.

Resources for Parents

Cyberbullying Research Center: www.cyberbullying.us

Cyberbullying.org: www.cyberbullying.org

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services: www.stopbullying.gov/cyberbullying

Wikipedia: Cyberbullying: www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cyberbullying