Common Sense on Cyberbullying

Hurting someone with a simple click

Spreading rumors and bullying is nothing new. Kids have always found ways to be cruel to one another. But today's kids are dealing with something much more sinister: cyberbullying. Kids are now using their cell phones and computers to hurt, humiliate, and harass each other. And it's reaching epidemic proportions. They're not just receiving nasty comments, but also getting demeaning text messages, embarrassing photos, and snide opinion polls. This type of bullying is especially disturbing because it is constant, pervasive, and very, very public.

Some facts

The most commonly experienced form of cyberbullying is when someone takes a private email, IM, or text message and forwards it to someone else or posts the communication publicly.

38% of girls online report being bullied, compared with 26% of online boys.

Nearly 4 in 10 social network users (39%) have been cyberbullied, compared with 22% of online teens who do not use social networks (*all from Pew, 2007*).

What is cyberbullying?

Whether it's creating a fake Facebook or MySpace page to impersonate a fellow student, repeatedly sending hurtful text messages and images, or posting cruel comments on the Internet, cyberbullying can have a devastating effect. Nasty comments, lies, embarrassing photos and videos, and snide polls can be spread widely through instant messaging (IM) or phone texting, and by posts on social networking sites. It can happen anytime — at school or home — and can involve large groups of kids. The combination of the boldness created by being anonymous and the desire to be seen as "cool" can cause a kid who normally wouldn't say anything mean face-to-face to show off for other kids. Because it's happening in cyberspace, it can be completely undetectable by parents and teachers.

Why it matters

Nothing crushes kids' self-confidence faster than humiliation. And just imagine a public humiliation sent instantly to everyone they know. Sadly, hurtful information posted on the Internet is extremely difficult to prevent or remove, and millions of people can see it. Most cyberbullying happens when adults aren't around, so parents and teachers often see only the depression or anxiety that results from being hurt or bullied. This emotional damage can last a lifetime.

Parent tips for all kids

» **Give them a code of conduct.** Tell them that if they wouldn't say something to someone's face, they shouldn't text it, IM it, or post it.

» **Ask your kids if they know someone who has been cyberbullied.** Sometimes they will open up about others' pain before admitting their own.

» **Establish consequences for bullying behavior.** If your children contribute to degrading and humiliating people, tell them their phone and computer privileges will be taken away.

Parent tips for elementary school kids

» **Keep online socializing to a minimum.** Let your kids use sites like Webkinz or Club Penguin where chat is pre-scripted or pre-screened.

» **Explain the basics of correct cyber behavior.** Tell your kids that things like lying, telling secrets, and being mean still hurt in cyberspace.

» **Tell your kids not to share passwords with their friends.** A common form of cyberbullying is when kids log in to another child's email or social networking account and send fake messages or post embarrassing comments. Kids can protect themselves from this by learning early on that passwords are private and should only be shared with their parents.

Parent tips for middle school kids

» **Monitor their use.** See what they're posting, check their mobile messages, and let them know you're keeping an eye on their activities.

» **Tell your kids what to do if they're harassed.** They shouldn't respond or retaliate, they should block bullies immediately, and they should tell you or an adult they trust. They shouldn't delete the messages because in persistent cases, the content should be reported to a cell or Internet Service Provider.

» **If your kid is doing the bullying, establish strict consequences and stick to them.** That goes for cruel or sexual comments about teachers, friends, and relatives.

» **Remind them that all private information can be made public.** Posts on friends' walls, private IMs, intimate photos, little in-jokes can all be cut, pasted, and sent around. If they don't want the world to see it, they'd better not post or send it.

» **Don't start what you don't want to finish.** Chat in online games and virtual worlds can get ugly fast. Make sure your kids are respectful because hurtful retaliation happens all the time.

Parent tips for high school kids

» **Tell kids to think before they reveal.** At this age, kids experiment with all sorts of activities, many of which should not be made public. Remind your teens that anything they post can be misused by someone else.

» **Remind them they aren't too old to ask for your help.** There are things some kids can handle on their own, but sometimes, they just need help. Coming to their parents isn't baby-ish; it's safe.

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