Common Sense on Digital Harassment Tips

What Is Digital Harassment?

Digital harassment is when kids and teens use cell phones, social networks, and other communications devices to bully, threaten, and aggressively badger someone. While it's a form of cyberbullying, "digital harassment" is a bit different because it usually takes place between two people in a romantic relationship.

Certainly, lots of young people conduct healthy relationships and use their online and mobile lives to stay connected to each other. But not all relationships are balanced—especially with teens, whose emotional lives run at peak speeds.

Some relationships can become manipulative and controlling, and teens uyse the digital devices at their disposal to act out. A few texts a day can turn into a few hundred. Relentless and unreasonable demands escalate. The abuser presses for things like the other person's passwords (so they can check up on them) and sexy photos, and forces their significant other to unfriend people whom the abuser doesn't like. They may spread lies, impersonate someone, or even resort to blackmail.

Some facts

50% of people ages 14-24 have experienced digitally abusive behavior.

Nearly half of young people (45%) report that they see people being mean to each other on social networking sites.

61% of those who have sent a naked photo or video of themselves have been pressured by someone else to do so at least once.

Roughly 7 in 10 (69%) teens say that digital abuse is a serious problem for society that should be addressed, while 76% say that it's a serious problem for people their age.

(All of the above are from the 2009 MTV Digital Abuse study)

Why it matters

Digital harassment has real consequences for those who've been targeted. A 2009 poll conducted by MTV and the Associated Press found that targets of this kind of abuse are more likely to consider dropping out of school, engage in risky behavior, and even think about suicide.

The poll also found that kids and teens who discover digital harassment among their friends aren't inclined to come forward and report it.

Fortunately, large public-awareness campaigns—most notably MTV's A Thin Line and The Family Violence Prevention Fund's That's Not Cool—are helping teens recognize when staying connected crosses the line into digital harassment. These campaigns use kids' idols—like Justin Bieber—and entertaining videos to give teens the language they need to identify and end digital harassment.

Parents can support their teens by understanding that relationships these days are often played out both online and in public—and kids need their parents' guidance in establishing appropriate boundaries for healthy relationships. Young love is complicated enough without the added pressure of constant access and public scrutiny. The tips below can help you help your kids navigate these murky waters so they can avoid digital drama for themselves and their friends.

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Advice for Parents

If you suspect your kid is being harassed:

Start a discussion. Your teen may not tell you if it's happening directly to him or her. But you can bring it up when you talk about online safety and responsible behavior. Tell kids about resources like That's Not Cool and the National Teen Dating Abuse Helpline (1-866-331-9474 (1-866-331-8453 TTY).

Let them know you are always there for them. Remind teens often that you're always available to talk to. While you're at it, put in a plug for the school counselor, a teacher, or even a friend's parent—knowing that they have a trusted adult to talk to may encourage teens to open up.

Help them set boundaries. Tell teens never to do anything that's outside their comfort zone—like sharing passwords or sending sexual photos. (It never hurts to reiterate that anything you send can travel far and wide.)

If you suspect your kid may be harassing someone:

Check their Facebook page. See what kind of comments your teen sending—and whether other kids are telling your kid to back off.

Check their cell phone. What kind of texts is your kid sending—and how many?

Check in with other parents. The parents of your kid's friends may know something you don't.

Help your kid. Find a counselor or an organization that's equipped to help. That'sNotCool is a great place to start.

Tips for all parents:

Check your teens' texts, IMs, and status updates. Be aware of who your kids are talking to, what they're saying, and how they're saying it. If your teens won't share their messages, look at your bill to see the quantity of texts.

Have a zero-tolerance policy. No sexting, no hate speech, no stalkerish behavior.

Teach teens to respect their devices. Explain what responsible ownership—and behavior—entails.

Teach kids to be upstanders, not bystanders. If teens see their friends getting harassed, they should report it to a teacher, a counselor, or another responsible, trustworthy adult.

Talk about the pressure to broadcast. Kids in abusive relationships are often coerced into sending scantily clad or naked pictures of themselves to "prove" their love. If this happens to your kid, that's a big red flag.

Talk about what's private. Kids differ from their parents in their take on what's "private" and what's OK to share. Explain to them the consequences of posting or sending intimate stuff. It can be copied, forwarded, and sent to thousands of kids in an instant.

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