

BULLY PREVENTION 101

Cyberbullying

Computer social networking sites such as My Space and Facebook, blogs, chat rooms, cell phones and cell phone cameras have made bullying opportunities much easier. Worse, the bullying can continue 24/7, even without the victim's awareness. Cyberbullying (willful psychological distress inflicted on a victim through the use of computers, cell phones, or other electronic means) has been linked to teen suicide, according to a nationally-reported story in 2008. A cyberbully can hide behind fictitious identities or impersonate someone else, so the bullying can cause even more significant fear and distress. A cyberbully can instantly reach a very wide audience (the world!) through written messages, pictures of a victim, or even video clips. Thus, cyberbullies may feel empowered to say and do things to a victim that they would not ordinarily dare to do if their identities were known. Victims are no longer safe from bullies even in the sanctuary of their own bedrooms.

Cyberbullies can bombard a victim with demeaning messages, such as "You are a loser," they can create anonymous websites that humiliate victims, such as a listing of "Gay Students at _____ High School," and they can even pretend to be the victim and send fake messages that spread gossip and slander others. A cyberbully can take indiscreet photos or video clips of victims and send them world-wide instantly. Since electronic messages and pictures can float in cyberspace for months, thousands of people around the world can participate in the bullying.

About 43 percent of middle- and high-school students polled in a 2006 National Crime Prevention Council survey said they'd experienced at least one incident of cyberbullying in the previous year (www.ncpc.org). That survey, which included more than 800 thirteen through seventeen-year-olds, found that cyberbullying was more common in females than males, and was most common among fifteen and sixteen-year-olds in the sample. Twenty-three percent of the victims did not know the identity of the cyberbully. Over half of the victims felt angry, a third of them felt hurt and embarrassed, and about 10% of them felt scared.

Some signs that your child may be the victim of cyberbullying can include negative moods such as anger, worry or frustration, especially right after using a computer. You might notice a change in frequency of computer use (either not using the computer or using it excessively), a decline in grades, avoidance of school, or withdrawal from family or friends. Your child may become secretive about computer activities.

Talk regularly to your son or daughter about on-line activities, including a specific conversation about cyberbullying. Periodic news stories about cyberbullying will make it easy to broach this topic with your child. Think about placing the computer your children use in an easily viewable place in your house, not in a child's bedroom. Don't forget that if you have a wireless router and a laptop, your child can access the internet in secret.

Because of shame and embarrassment, your son or daughter might not admit being a victim of cyberbullying. Young people often fear that parents will restrict their online access as a way to "solve" the problem.

If you think that your son or daughter may be the victim of cyberbullying:

You have a right to review the sites that your children have been using, as well as their e-mail communication. **Your child's safety is more important than their privacy.** Save any on-line evidence you find. Block the sender's address if you can. If the cyberbully attends the same school as your child, alert that child's parents as well as school officials. Reassure your child that this is the right way to fight back against a cyberbully, and make sure that your child will notify you of retaliation in any form.

If you cannot determine the identity of the cyberbully, you (**not** your child) should send back a message warning that if the harassment does not stop immediately, you will notify authorities. Block that sender's address from your computer's accounts. Consider sending the cyberbullying evidence to the internet service provider, who may decide the sender has violated their on-line policies and terminate the cyberbully's account.

Consult your school psychologist or other mental health provider for short-term counseling. Even though your child is not at fault, the damage to self-esteem and confidence should be assessed.

If you think your son or daughter might be a cyberbully:

Tell them what you have heard about their behavior and listen to what they have to say. You have a right to review their on-line activities to confirm or disconfirm what you have heard. If the facts confirm your suspicion, provide immediate consequences, including loss of private computer and cell phone use. Consult your school psychologist or other mental health provider for an assessment of your child.

Cyberbullying may be the worst way to bully someone, since it never stops. And because cyberbullying can be anonymous, the bounds of decency can be easily flouted.

It's everyone's job to stop bullying.

Additional Resources

<http://www.nasponline.org/resources/cyberbullying/index.aspx>

<http://www.stopcyberbullying.org/prevention/index.html>

<http://www.ncpc.org/cyberbullying>

<http://www.education.com/reference/article/signs-child-bullied-online/>

<http://www.childresearch.net/RESOURCE/RESEARCH/2004/MEMBER35.HTM>

A Resource for Schools:

Cybersmart! Cyberbullying Awareness Kit

<http://cybersmartcurriculum.org/cyberbullying/NASP/>