

Cyber bullying—Anti-social behavior online

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Introduction

Technology gives today's kids more ways to connect, socialize and communicate than ever before, that is the good news. The bad news is that some kids are abusing the technology. One way they abuse it is by **cyber bullying**. Essentially the new high tech version of the schoolyard bully. Cyber bullying is cruel anti-social behavior perpetrated either online or via cell phones, often anonymously, mostly by tweens and teens, and sometimes by troubled adults.

Bullies on cell phones and online

Cyber bullies use text messages on cell phones, or email, instant messages, social networking blogs, or Web pages to harass, embarrass, and intimidate other kids. The bullying takes many forms, from spreading false rumors and posting embarrassing pictures of others to sending offensive messages, repeated harassment (sometimes sexual), stalking, threats, and even extortion. There are two big differences between schoolyard bullying and cyber bullying. The cyber bully can use technology to spread his or her offensive messages to many more people very quickly. For instance, an embarrassing photo taken with a cell phone can be sent to dozens of classmates in minutes. Also, cell phones, PCs and the Internet, tend to give the cyber bully a sense of anonymity, which emboldens him or her to make their offensive behavior more vicious.

Parenting in a connected world

We teach our children the difference between right and wrong, and between ethical and unethical behavior, but we don't always take the time to remind them that the same rules apply online and on cell phones. We should remind them. Similarly, we nurture and protect our children in real life. We usually know where they are, with whom, and what they're doing. When they're on the cell phone or online, we know what they're doing, but we don't really know with whom, what is being said, text messaged, instant messaged or emailed. We should know. It's our responsibility as parents to make sure that our children are neither victims or bullies. We have to talk to our children and make sure they know "the golden rule" and understand that it applies to their use of the cell phone and the PC, too. We have to monitor their use of technology. If they join social networking Web sites, ask to see any profile or Web page they create. If they are bullies or victims, it will be clear to you.

Is your child a victim?

If your child is a victim of this type of online harassment, they may not tell you about it. Often they are embarrassed, or they fear you will over react, or they fear

that you will restrict or curtail their cell phone or online activities to protect them. If they don't tell you of their own accord, here are some warning signs you should watch for –

- Your child seems to be upset, sad or angry after using the cell phone or PC.
- Your child withdraws from friends or activities that they usually enjoy.
- Your child's school grades decline, or he or she expresses anger or dissatisfaction with school or a specific class.
- Your child shows unusual signs of depression or sadness.

Responding to cyber bullying

If you see any of those warning signs, a gentle probing discussion will usually reveal the problem. Express your concern for their welfare. Let them know that you don't intend to restrict their activities or lifestyle, that you simply want to help them. If the discussion reveals cyber bullying, ask them to show it to you, then take the appropriate steps –

- Save or print any evidence of cyber bullying.
- Identify the cyber bully or bullies. Often more than one person participates or goes along with a cyber bully.
- File a formal complaint with the cyber bully's cell phone or Internet provider.
- Tell the cyber bully to stop.
- Contact the parents of the cyber bully either by phone or, better yet, certified letter. Tell them what has happened. Present the evidence. Demand that the bullying cease. If necessary, warn them that you will take legal action if it does not cease.
- Contact your child's school. If the cyber bullying occurred at school, teachers and administrators can take protective or disciplinary measures to stop the bullying.
- If cyber bullying includes threats of violence or the advances of a sexual predator, call the police.

Is your child a cyber bully?

The best way to ensure that your child is not the one doing the cyber bullying is to make sure they understand that the rules of good behavior apply to their use of their cell phone and the Internet, and to proactively monitor how they use both.

- Ask your child to see the Web sites he or she visits and the social networking sites they join. You can also do a search on your child's name to find their Web sites.

- Take a look at the cell phone call logs, and the pictures and text messages stored on their cell phones.
- Older teens may feel these measures are an invasion of privacy, but remind them that it is your responsibility as a parent to look out for their welfare.
- If problems persist, consider curtailing or suspending of your child's cell phone or PC privileges.

Get the benefits of technology, not its side effects

Cell phones, PCs, email and the Internet give us and our children great information and communication advantages. Most of the time they use those advantages wisely, keeping us informed of their whereabouts, socializing with friends, doing homework, and so on. With conscientious parenting, we can make sure our children get all the great benefits of today's technology and not its unfortunate side effects.

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