

Cyberbullying—What is it, What Harm Does it Do and What Can Adults Do to Help? (Part Two)

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Cyberbullying is using the Internet, cell phones, and social networking sites to send texts or pictures that are intended to embarrass, hurt, or destroy the privacy or reputation of another person. The definition is similar to school bullying. It must be hurtful, repetitive, and have an imbalance of power. The difference is that cyberbullying is with you twenty-four-hours a day, it spreads immediately after being posted, and can be viewed by thousands within minutes. Unlike school or playground bullying, you cannot walk away from cyberbullying. It is more insidious because often it is difficult to find the source and impossible to erase or retract what has already been written and posted.

What harm does cyberbullying do?

Children who are cyberbullied are

- Likely to be sad, angry, frustrated
- Report feeling sick
- Often afraid or embarrassed to go to school
- Experiencing low self-esteem and family problems
- Involved in school violence
- Demonstrating delinquent behavior

How is cyberbullying accomplished?

- Instant messaging, emailing, or text messaging something that is threatening or pejorative
- Influencing someone into revealing personal information on line by claiming friendship or by threat and then forwarding that information to everyone on the cyberbully's list including mutual classmates, neighbors, or friends
- Creating a "slam" web site and inviting everyone to write hurtful comments
- Having contests on web sites to rate the most ugly, smelliest, least likely to have a boy/girl friend, etc.

What should parents, teachers, and other caring adults do?

Teach the children and teens to follow these safety rules

- Never give out passwords, PIN numbers, or personal information

- Do not open messages unless you know who they are from
- Do not post pictures of yourself or family pictures
- Understand that people use false identities on line. Someone may say, for example, that he is a sixteen-year-old boy, but in truth he might be a 45-year-old man.
- Do not respond to insulting messages
- Be careful of sending angry messages. You cannot take it back.
- Never arrange to meet someone whom you met online unless your parents are with you
- If it is threatening, call the police

Educators can request that children sign an agreement saying they will not bully, establish use of cyberbullying policies in school, and tell parents to establish safety guidelines at home.

Police can stay up to date, understand the technology, and learn how to contact social networking sites to get cyberbullying comments removed.

Community leaders can organize community meetings informing the public about cyberbullying prevention. This can also be an opportunity to publicize the legal implications for cyberbullying.

Parents need to be vigilant

Sometimes when boys and girls reach adolescence they become more private, communicate less than usual, stay in their rooms, are moody, or just seem different. Parents tend to chalk it up to them being “at that age.” Some changes are normal, but in a world where we have an epidemic of bullying and cyberbullying, it is important to talk to your adolescent to learn what is going on. Is it just “that age” or are they victims of bullying or cyberbullying? Sometimes it’s difficult to make that call because the adolescent is reluctant to reveal what has happened. Often they feel embarrassed or ashamed. Be patient and calm when you are discussing possible bullying or cyberbullying with your son or daughter. Depending on the type of bullying, your child can be vulnerable for depression, truancy, and even suicide.

Parents should be aware of the behavior they see at home. What example do you set for your children? You might not be a bully, but maybe someone in the family is bullying. It starts small—sometimes with simple teasing, but it can escalate into bullying or cyberbullying activity.

Caution—It is also important to note that some teachers or coaches seem to take on a bullying role with a child or adolescent, so parents must be alert to this type of bullying too.

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