

Is Your Child Being Bullied In Cyberspace?

By Marcia Kelly

If the word “bullying” makes you think of one child picking on another in the schoolyard, it may be time to update your image of this important problem. While such face-to-face harassment certainly still exists, new ways of bullying have emerged. With the proliferation of cell phones, instant messaging, social networking Web sites such as MySpace, and other technologies, bullying has muscled its way into cyberspace.

Cyberbullying, as this new technological danger is called, may already have happened to your child. According to a study done by wiredsafety.org, 90 percent of middle-school students say they have been the victims of this new form of bullying. Perhaps more sobering, only 15 percent of parents even know what cyberbullying is, according to another study by the group.

Cyberbullying: What it is and how it works

Cyberbullying is the use of technology to harass, hurt, embarrass, humiliate, or intimidate another person. It can be done anonymously, which makes it easy for one child to hurt another and not be held accountable or see the impact of his or her actions. Because this technology reaches a wider audience than just the person who is targeted, its effects can be devastating.

This form of bullying can take place in many ways. For example, some young people have discovered sites where they can create a free Web page—including one intended to bully another child. Embarrassing pictures, private instant messaging (IM) exchanges, and hateful or threatening messages can be posted on these sites. Some young people also post mean comments at legitimate Web sites’ guest books. Others post blogs (short for “Web logs”), information that is instantly published to a Web site. Bullies have found blogging to be a powerful tool when encouraging peers to gang up on another child.

Cyberbullies, like schoolyard bullies, look for targets who are vulnerable, socially isolated, and may not understand social norms. Many children with disabilities have these characteristics, and so they may be especially vulnerable to cyberbullying.

Your 3-step plan to protect your children from cyberbullying

Today’s children are the first generation to experience cyberbullying. Today’s parents are the first to figure out how to respond to the problem.

As you venture into this new territory, here are some tips that you may find helpful, says Julie Hertzog, PACER’s bullying prevention project coordinator.

1. Raise the topic of cyberbullying with your children.

Many children are afraid to initiate such a conversation because they fear that their access to the Web and cell phones will be eliminated; others are scared to admit that they are being bullied. Open the subject for discussion and let your children know that you want them to have some cyber freedom—but that it needs to be safe.

2. Set cyber safety rules.

You set safety rules for your children in the physical world. Do the same in cyberspace. Remind your children that they never really know who is on the other end of cyber communication. It could be the person they think it is, or it could be a predator or a bully. With that in mind, two good guidelines are, “Don’t do or say anything online that you wouldn’t do or say in person. Don’t reveal anything that you wouldn’t tell a stranger.”

Specific advice for your children might include:

- Never give out your e-mail password, a photo, or any personal data, such as a physical description, phone number, or address. A bully could use that information to harass you in many ways.
- Never share too many personal details. For example, if you keep an online diary, someone could use that information to bully or ridicule you.
- Never share your IM account password with anyone, even your best friend. That friend may share it with other people, or the friendship may end—and your private messages could suddenly become very public. Also, a cyberbully with your password can sign on, pretend to be you, and behave inappropriately with others to embarrass and humiliate you.

3. Know what your children are doing online.

Privacy is important, but safety is more important. As a parent, you have a responsibility to know what your children are doing online. Keep your children's computer in an open spot, such as the family room, where you can supervise Web activity. If your children have an account on a social networking site such as MySpace or Facebook, for example, know how to access it so you can monitor the communications. If you do discover that your children are subjected to cyberbullying, document it by printing the e-mails or Web pages, saving electronic copies, and contacting your children's school or the police.

Technology offers your children many advantages and benefits—and, occasionally, some risks. The solution is not to remove their access to technology but rather to manage the risks. You can do that by being aware of your children's cyber activities, learning about new technologies, and adding "cyber parenting" to your list of talents.

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Cyberlife by the numbers—a new world for many parents

Cyberbullying

- 22% of students know someone who has been bullied online.*
- 19% of students admit to saying something hurtful to others online.*
- 12% of students have personally become upset by strangers online.*

* Based on a 2005–06 survey of 13,000 students in grades 5–12.

Kids Online

- 58% of students admit to using the Internet unsafely, inappropriately, or illegally.
- 55% of students report having given out personal information (e.g. name, age, gender, home address) to someone they have only met online.***
- 31% of students have a personal Web page.***

** Based on a 2005–06 survey of 11,900 students in grades 5–12.

*** Based on a 2005–06 survey of 12,000 students in grades 5–12.

Digital Divide

- 93% of parents say they have established rules for their child's Internet activity.*
- 37% of students report being given no rules from their parents on using the Internet.**
- 95% of parents say they know "some" or "a lot" about where their children go or what their children do on the Internet.*
- 41% of students do not share where they go or what they do on the Internet with their parents.**
- 26% of students believe their parents would be concerned if they knew what they did on the Internet.**

* Based on a 2004–05 pre-assessment survey of 1,350 parents.

** Based on a 2005–06 pre-assessment survey of 12,650 students in grades 5–12.

Statistics from the Internet safety organization i-safe and its sister group, Teenangels. Learn more at www.isafe.org and www.teenangels.org.