Protecting Kids from Cyber Bullying

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What is Cyber Bullying?

As more children use Internet technologies to communicate with their friends and network for new friends, more opportunities become available for Cyber Bullying.

Cyber Bullying is the use of communication technologies to express and support deliberate hostile behavior to cause harm to others. Cyber Bullying can be done through e-mail, pagers, cell phones, instant messaging, chat rooms, online voting polls and personal websites.

How Often Does this Occur?

The related question is, how often does your child use these Internet technologies each day? Consider your answer to that question as you review these statistics from an I-SAFE survey from 2004 of 1,500 students grades 4-8.

- 42 percent of kids have been bullied while online
- 35 percent of kids have been threatened online
- 21 percent of kids have received mean or threatening e-mail or other messages
- 58 percent of kids admit someone has said mean or hurtful things to them online
- 58 percent of kids have not told their parents or an adult about something mean or hurtful that happened to them online
- 53 percent of kids admit having said something mean or hurtful to another person online

What are examples of Cyber Bullying?

- Sending cruel and sometimes threatening messages or taunting questions via email, IM, or text messaging.
- Creating web sites that have stories, cartoons, pictures, and jokes ridiculing or smearing others.
- Sharing private and personal messages with others via email or text messaging
- Posting pictures of classmates online and asking students to rate them with online polls.
- Hacking into an e-mail account and sending embarrassing personal material to others.
- Initiating an IM (instant messaging) while hiding behind a screen name, then tricking that person into revealing sensitive information, and forwarding that information to others.
- Using a digital phone camera to take an embarrassing or private picture of a person and sending that picture to others.
- Taking an innocent picture and using photo editing software to turn a picture into a pornographic or embarrassing image that is then posted online or sent to others.

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What methods are used by Cyber Bullies?

Instant Messaging (IM)

Instant messaging, or IM - the instantaneous chats that have a lingo of their own and are a constant presence on most kids' computers. Since IM's only use screen names, bullies can hide while sending a mean or threatening message to your child. You can block that screen name, but the Cyber Bully can chooser another and keep blasting away with more messages. There are several competing instant messaging systems such as ICQ, AOL Messenger, MSN Messenger, and Yahoo! Messenger.

Prevention:

When you are signing up for an IM account, set it up with your child so that you also have complete access to the account and you do not provide too much private information when setting up the account. Next, work with your child to create a buddy list of only people you know and trust well.

Chat Rooms, Forums and Blogs

Online forums or chatrooms are usually set up by online communities, similar interests or location. Blogs are frequently set up by individuals as part of their personal website. Once a chat has been initiated, either user can enter text by typing on the keyboard and the entered text will appear instantaneously on the other user's computer. Most ISP's, online communities and social networking websites offer a chat feature. Chat Rooms, online forums or blogs may have completely public viewing of all postings or you have to be a registered member to view and post comments or messages.

Prevention:

Teach your child that people are not always who they appear to be or who they say they are in chat rooms or forums. Chat rooms or forums can be places where some online strangers may try to "befriend" others, especially young people. Since your child may not know the person, it is possible with a posting may unintentionally offend someone or be misunderstood. This could create a hostile situation that may cause a Cyber Bullying situation. The Cyber Bully may attempt to lure them into meeting in person. Young people should NEVER exchange emails or arrange to meet someone in person whom they have been in contact with online.

Moderate your young child's access and postings in chat rooms, forums and blogs. Either sit there next to the computer or purchase monitoring software. Older kids should be only in moderated chat rooms and even moderated chat rooms can lead to compromising, embarrassing and harassing situations.

Voting / Polling Websites

Online polling websites such as www.freevote.com, offer users the opportunity to quickly create online polls and broadcast the new poll to ask for instant votes. Cyber bullies can use these websites to set up polls that allow others to vote online for "The Ugliest, Dumbest etc. Boy/Girl at School". While most of these websites have specific Terms of Use that may forbid this type of Cyber Bullying, very few of these websites have active monitors to catch these quickly.

Prevention:

Be aware of polling sites that your child visits online. View the company's Terms of Use and Abuse Policies. There should be contact information to report abuses of the online polls.

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Email
Very often Cyber Bullies will hide beyond anonymous email addresses to send harassing email messages directly to the victim or spread vicious message about the victim to others using email. Do not respond to the taunting messages.

Prevention:
If the harasser has a direct email address through an ISP, save the offensive messages and send them to the ISP. Frequently ISP's will cancel the harasser's email account. If the email address is through an email service such as Hotmail or Yahoo Mail, you can still report the abuse. The Cyber Bully may respond by just starting another account somewhere else. Your email software may have blocking or filtering features that you can set up so the offensive emails don't get through. There is also email tracking software available.

Websites
Cyber Bullies can create websites that mock, torment and harass others or set up websites pretending to be the victim and including vicious and false information. If these are published on a local/regional Internet Service Provider (ISP), you should copy and print out these Web sites and then contact the ISP. Give them a chance to respond and address the situation. For most responsible ISP's this is most likely a violation of the Terms of Use for the company. If that is the case, the ISP may remove the offensive website and block that user from setting up future websites on their servers.

Prevention:
Teach your child acceptable online behavior and review with them the Terms of Use for the websites they set up or visit. Find out what websites they visit or post to by using parental monitoring software. Ask your child to share some of their favorite websites with you. Be present with them if you choose to allow them to set up their own website. For details, refer to the section below about MySpace.

Social Network Websites like Myspace and Cyber Bullying

MySpace registered its 100 millionth user in August of 2005 and according to Hitbox, is one of the most popular websites on the Internet. The popularity of MySpace makes it a prime target for Cyber bullies and offers many methods for the person plotting hurtful tactics. Cyber Bullies can spread vicious messages on their own MySpace website, post harassing messages on the victims website, spread rumors by postings on friend's websites, or set up faux websites pretending to be the victim and including defamatory and false information about the victim.

MySpace offers many opportunities for users to add personal information about themselves when setting up websites. This makes the experience personal and unique for your child, but providing too much personal information and pictures can be dangerous and potentially embarrassing. The more extremely personal information they reveal, the more access the Cyber Bully has to personal information that can be twisted around in a vicious way. Review these restrictions with your child.

As the parent of an underage child, you can contact MySpace directly to remove your child's website, but it is not recommended you try to remove a Cyber Bully's website. Instead, reach out to the other parents to work through the Cyber Bullying situation, letting them know that their child has a webpage at Myspace.com. Many parents supervise their child's website activity and would not appreciate your intrusion into their family situation.

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Review MySpace.com's safety tips and recommendations for contacting them about Cyber Bullying and related abuses on the website. The company is making strides to improve the safety of the online community, but the parents are still the front line for keeping children safe on the Internet.

Warning Signs your child may be a victim of a Cyber Bully

- Spending long hours on the computer
- Closes windows or browsers on their computer when you enter room
- Won't share with you what they are doing online
- Is secretive about Internet activities
- Behavioral changes – acts nervous, becomes quiet or depressed
- Drop in school grades
- Sudden changes in immediate circle of friends
- Is always doing "homework" on the Internet, but in reality is always in chat groups or online gaming sites and getting behind with school work
- May find unexplained long distance telephone call charges
- Won't say who they are talking to
- May find unexplained pictures on computer
- Trouble sleeping
- Complaints of new kinds of ailments such as headaches
- Lack of appetite, nervous stomach
- Complains of illness before school or community events often
- Frequent visits to the school nurse complaining of feeling sick - wants to call parents to return home
- Lowered self-esteem
- A distinctive change in attitude, dress or personal habits
- Unexplained broken personal possessions, loss of money or personal items
- Stories that don't seem to make sense
- Acting out aggression at home with siblings
- Missing or incomplete school work
- Fear of going out of the house or to school
- Heightened emotions - crying for no apparent reason
- Lack of interest at social events that include other students
- Extreme change in outside interest and hobbies
- Increased hushed and private communications between their close friends that the child will not discuss with parents

How to Protect your Child from Cyber Bullies

Know their technology
Have your child review all of their communication gadgets and become familiar with them.

Know their language
The online world has a unique lingo. View our download for online lingo and acronyms.

Know their culture
Talk to them about the music, movies and online games they share with friends. It may promote an atmosphere of Cyber Bullying. Consider positive alternatives.

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Know their friends
This includes online and offline friends. Meet them in person and meet their families. Have gatherings at your home with your child's friends to get to know them better.

Know their school activities
Many Cyber Bullying situations arise from school groups or situations.

Know their online activities
Keep the computer in a public space at home. Restrict time online. Use monitoring software. Review their favorite websites and online accounts often.

Share Bullying stories
While Cyber Bullying may not have been a part of your past, regular bullying most likely was at some point. Relate stories about the hurt that occurs due to bullying that goes beyond the websites and emails.

Know the information your child shares on the Internet
Set clear rules with your child about personal information, contact information and pictures they can share online or use to set up accounts for email, websites, games or chatrooms.

Teach discernment when meeting people online
In the online world, you can not believe everything you see or read. Many people misrepresent themselves on the Internet. They may lie about their age or where they live or their interests.

Don't open a message from someone you don't know or recognize
If in doubt about the message or the sender, ask your parents, guardian or another adult.

Use Netiquette
Teach your children to be as polite online as they should be when talking directly to others. If a cyber bully treats you rudely, simply do not respond or the taunting will continue.

Don't send a message to someone else when you are angry
As with verbal communication, wait until you have calmed down and had time to think. Do your best to make sure that your messages are calmly and factually written. Sometimes cyber bullying escalates due to emails that are sent in anger and then possibly misunderstood.

Learn to trust your instincts
If it doesn't look or feel right, it probably isn't –Teach your kids to trust their instincts. While surfing the Internet, if you find something that you don't like, makes you feel uncomfortable or scares you, turn off the computer and tell an adult.

Unplug and go offline
A balanced life is needed at any age. Don't stay online or connected too long. Spend time with your family and friends off line.

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What to do if your Child may be a victim of Cyber Bullying

Your course of action depends upon the method(s) used for the Cyber Bullying behavior. If possible, do not communicate with the Cyber Bully and save all of the offensive communications and then follow the recommendations listed. You may need to delete your current e-mail accounts, cell phone/pager accounts and set up new ones. If your cyber bullying problems persist, I would recommend that you do this as soon as possible, unless you are working with the police and your Telecommunications Provider to keep the account active to try and catch the Cyber Bully.

Here are some examples.

E-mail:
While it is possible to trace which e-mail account the message was sent from, it is more difficult to prove who actually used this e-mail account to send the offending messages. Email messages sent from accounts with local or regional Internet Service Providers (ISPs) can be more easily traced by contacting the ISP directly. If the email messages were sent from large Web-based e-mail accounts such as Hotmail or Yahoo, it may be impossible to trace it. However, you can check the website's term of service and then contact them with your evidence. The Cyber Bully's email and profile could be removed, but it is possible they could set up another account.

Today, most e-mail programs allow you to use filters that will block or automatically delete messages from undesirable senders. This method will work unless the Cyber Bully continually changes email addresses to continue with the offensive messages.

Instant Messaging:
If you are receiving harassing messages from cyber bullies through Instant Messaging (IM) software such as ICQ, MSN Messenger, AOL Instant Messenger etc. such programs usually have a "Block", or "Ban" feature. Use this feature to try and "Block", "Ignore or "Ban" the cyber bullies

Website:
If you are the victim of a cyber bully who has set up and Web site that is defaming, or mocking you, contact the Internet Service Provider and inform them about what is happening, also inform the police.

Is cyber bullying illegal?
To date, nearly every state has some type of cyberstalking or harassment (cyber bullying) law on the books, but at this time there is no U.S. federal cyberstalking or harassment law (except when children under 16 are involved and being targeted for sexual harassment). This would not cover a cyber bullying situation between underage children. Of course if cyber bullying leads to a serious threat, physical violence, law enforcement options should be considered.

If criminal charges can't be filed against the cyber bully, what are the options?
At this time, civil litigation is very often the only recourse for victims of cyber bullying or reporting the cyber bully to their ISP and trying to get their accounts or websites removed. If the cyber bully is using school computers, images, emails or websites, then you should also contact the school. In the recent past, some cyber bullies have been suspended from school.

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