

CYBERBULLYING

In recent years, technology has given children and youth a new means of bullying each other. Cyberbullying, which is sometimes referred to as online social cruelty or electronic bullying, has been defined as an aggressive, intentional act carried out by a group or individual, using electronic forms of contact, repeatedly and over time against a victim who cannot easily defend him or herself.

Cyberbullying can involve:

- Sending mean, vulgar, or threatening messages or images
- Posting sensitive, private information and/or lies about another person
- Pretending to be someone else in order to make that person look bad
- Intentionally excluding someone from an online group

Children and youth can cyberbully each other through:

- Emails
- Instant messaging
- Text or digital imaging messages sent on cell phones
- Social networking sites
- Web pages
- Blogs
- Chat rooms or discussion groups
- Other cyber technologies

How Common Is Cyberbullying?

Research studies have produced different answers to this question. However, a 2009 Cox Communications survey of 13-18 year-olds who were asked how often they had ever been involved in cyberbullying reveals:

- 15% said they had been cyberbullied online
- 10% had been cyberbullied by cell phone
- 7% said they had cyberbullied another person online
- 5% had cyberbullied another person by cell phone

Who Is Involved in Cyberbullying?

Although some studies have found that girls are more involved in cyberbullying than boys, others have found similar rates among boys and girls. Also, children and youth who are involved in cyberbullying are also quite likely to be involved in "traditional" forms of bullying.

How Does Cyberbullying Affect Children?

Little research has explored the possible effects of cyberbullying on children. When students are asked how they believe cyberbullying affected them, they indicate that it made them sad and unwilling to attend school (Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2007).

A survey of middle and high school students found that children who were cyber "bully/victims" (had cyberbullied others and also had been cyberbullied) had the highest rates of anxiety, depression and school absences compared to cyber "bullies", cyber "victims" and children who weren't involved in cyberbullying. By contrast, children not at all involved in cyberbullying had the highest self-esteem and grades and the fewest symptoms of health problems (Kowalski & Limber, under review).

What Can Adults Do To Prevent and Address Cyberbullying?

Adults may not always be present in the online environments of children and youth. Therefore, it is extremely important that adults pay close attention to cyberbullying and the activities of children and youth when using these newer technologies.

Suggestions for Parents: Tips To Help Prevent Cyberbullying:

- Make an agreement with your children to keep all internet capable devices out of children's bedrooms.
- Talk regularly with your child about online activities that he or she is involved in.
- Talk specifically about cyberbullying and encourage your child to tell you immediately if he or she is the victim of cyberbullying, cyberstalking, or other illegal or troublesome online behavior. Explain that you will not take away their technology if they confide in you about a problem they are having.
- Encourage your child to tell you if he or she is aware of others who may be the victims of cyberbullying.
- Explain that cyberbullying is harmful and unacceptable behavior. Outline your expectations for responsible online behavior and make it clear that there will be consequences for inappropriate behavior. Explain that treating others well online may also protect them from being harassed or cyberbullied.

Tips For Dealing With Cyberbullying:

Because cyberbullying can range from rude comments to lies, impersonations, and threats, your responses may depend on the nature and severity of the cyberbullying. Here are some actions that you may want to take after-the-fact.

- Strongly encourage your child not to respond to the cyberbullying.
- Do not erase the messages or pictures. Save them as evidence.
- Try to identify the individual doing the cyberbullying. Even if the cyberbully is anonymous (e.g., is using a fake name or someone else's identity) there may be a way to track them through your Internet Service Provider.

If the cyberbullying is criminal (or if you suspect that it may be), contact the police and ask them to do the tracking. Jurisdictions and states differ in their definitions of what constitutes criminal behavior, but the following may constitute a crime:

- Threats of violence

- Extortion
 - Obscene or harassing phone calls or text messages
 - Harassment, stalking, or hate crimes
 - Child pornography
 - Sexual exploitation
 - Taking a photo image of someone in a place where he or she would expect privacy
- Sending inappropriate language may violate the "Terms and Conditions" of email services, Internet Service Providers, Web sites, and cell phone companies. Consider contacting these providers and filing a complaint.
 - If the cyberbullying is coming through email or a cell phone, it may be possible to block future contact from the cyberbully. Of course, the cyberbully may assume a different identity and continue the cyberbullying.
 - Contact your school. If the cyberbullying is occurring through your school district's Internet system, school administrators have an obligation to intervene. Even if the cyberbullying is occurring off campus, make the school administrators aware of the problem. They may be able to help you resolve the cyberbullying or be watchful for face-to-face bullying.
 - Consider contacting the cyberbully's parents. These parents may be very concerned to learn that their child has been cyberbullying others, and they may effectively put a stop to the bullying. On the other hand, these parents may react negatively to your contacting them. So, proceed cautiously. If you decide to contact a cyberbully's parents, communicate with them in writing — not face-to-face. Present proof of the cyberbullying (e.g., copies of an email message) and ask them to make sure the cyberbullying stops.
 - Consider contacting an attorney in cases of serious cyberbullying. In some circumstances, civil law permits victims to sue a bully or his or her parents in order to recover damages.
 - Contact the police if cyberbullying involves acts such as:
 - Threats of violence
 - Extortion
 - Obscene or harassing phone calls or text messages
 - Harassment, stalking, or hate crimes
 - Child pornography
 - Sexual exploitation
 - Taking a photo image of someone in a place where he or she would expect privacy

If you are uncertain if cyberbullying violates your jurisdiction's criminal laws, contact your local police, who will advise you.