

CHAPTER 3



Online Bullying

Children and teens often face online cruelty (as well as cruelty in the real world). For younger kids, instant messaging and texting can become platforms for teasing and meanness. Teens often turn to social networking sites and blogs to detail conflicts or just to lash out.

Kids who bully online typically don't fit the stereotype of a playground bully. Children who have been identified as cyberbullies often have good, positive relationships with adults; they often perform well academically and have fine reputations. More often than not, they're some of the "good kids," and parents and teachers are left wondering why a good kid would behave in a cruel and hurtful way online.

Children and teens often use mean and harassing language online simply because they can. The anonymity that people feel behind a computer screen and the typical inability to see someone’s face and hear their voice produces a phenomenon that psychologists call disinhibition. From the relative safety and isolation of a screen, lonely or bored children can strike out at others with little concern for the consequences. Without the social cues of face-to-face contact, it can be hard for children to really understand that they have hurt another person. The reduced social inhibition that comes with communicating through a screen empowers some kids to say or do things they would never say or do in person.

How to Keep Your Child from Being a Bully Online

Talk with your child about responsible behavior online. Undoubtedly you’ve already had many conversations with your child about how she should act in public places or with other people present, but she may not understand that she should apply that same wisdom to the online world. Talk to her about kindness, respect, and treating others as she would want to be treated herself—in the “real world” as well as online.

Be sure that your child understands that words that are read can hurt as deeply as words that are heard. Before she types something into a keyboard, she should ask herself if she would say the same thing if she were in the same room and looking the recipient in the eye.

Remind your child that anything she puts into any sort of electronic message can be forwarded (accidentally or on purpose) to anyone or everyone. Remind her that people other than the intended recipient may see the electronic message. Remind her that these messages can resurface and continue to hurt feelings and reflect badly on the sender, long after an angry or careless moment has passed.

Discourage your child from going online as part of a group. Often bullying happens during sleepovers, when kids feed off each other and may do things they wouldn't do while alone. Children and teens have an amazing capacity to talk each other into doing things that they later regret.

Do not allow children younger than 11 years old to have private email accounts, texting, or access to instant messaging. Young children are not developmentally ready for the language issues and split-second social decisions that typically arise with instant forms of text communication.

Look at the games your child plays on Xbox, PlayStation, or a web browser. Many games today can be played online with strangers from around the world, and they include the ability to chat with those strangers. If you permit your child to chat on gaming sites, you have a responsibility to make sure that he treats others with respect. These are competitive environments where the participants often use screen names that don't reveal their real-world identities, making the risk of disinhibition and rude behavior particularly high. (Note: You might not know that the average age of video gamers is 34. Consider carefully whether gaming sites are appropriate environments for your child or teen.)

How to Keep Your Child from Being Bullied Online

Bullying has been a part of many people's youth since long before the Internet was developed. In fact, many instances of online bullying are outgrowths of real-world bullying. So far, nobody has found a way to stop bullying altogether, but here are some simple, common-sense steps that you and your child can take to reduce the chance that she will be the target of an online bully.

You cannot look over your child's shoulder all the time, especially as she gets older, but it is vital that you be watchful for possible bullying that targets your child. Talk frequently with your child about her online activities. Stopbullying.gov, a government website managed by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, recommends that you set up a daily time

to check in with your child. During your daily talks, you should be alert to any concerns your child might have about the things happening in her online world. Cover online harassing and bullying behaviors specifically, and encourage your child to tell you immediately if she sees someone being bullied or if she experiences bullying herself.

Recent studies have found that as few as 20% of cyberbullying victims ever tell adults about their experiences online. Given the number of kids who have experienced disrespect, meanness, or bullying, this statistic is disconcerting. When talking with your child about online bullying, keep in mind that the number-one thing that prevents most children from being honest with their parents is the fear that their parents will “pull the plug” on the technology. By having frequent conversations with your child about her online activity, you can begin to chip away at that reluctance to tell you about her online world. Reassure her that you want to help, not punish, if she experiences bullying or meanness online.

Know what websites and technologies your child uses when she goes online. Be familiar with those activities, and develop and enforce reasonable rules for your child’s online time. As we discussed in Chapter 2, “Important Conversations,” lay out your expectations for their online behavior, explain the rules you’ve established to ensure those expectations are met, describe how you will monitor their compliance with the rules, and be clear and specific about what will happen if the rules are broken.

It is important for you to have the passwords for your child’s online accounts. Having routine access to online accounts *and checking them regularly* can help prevent a prolonged harassing conversation or event. We recommend having the passwords for all accounts of children under the age of 16. (Understand that having a password to a child’s Facebook account is not the same as being “friended” by them. Just being a “friend” can greatly limit what you may be allowed to see.)

Your child should *think twice before posting or saying anything online*. That is one of those pieces of advice that is much easier to offer than it is to put into practice, especially for children and teens. But controlling impulses is a valuable skill to develop, online or off, and impulsive behavior online can have

widespread and lasting consequences. Your child should be especially careful not to share secrets, gossip, post photos, or do anything else that could be used to embarrass her in a different context. Remind her that she has no control over how that information is used once it is in somebody else's hands. An awkward photo shared privately with a best friend one day can be posted widely the next day if the friend becomes angry or careless. Remind your child that her online language also helps establish her reputation.

Your child should check (again) all of the privacy settings and friends lists on her accounts, to be certain that she is sharing information only with people she knows and trusts. Even so, it won't hurt to remind her that once she shares information, she will have no control over how it is used in the future. It's a good idea for her to check privacy settings once a month and to pay attention to changes made to the privacy policies of any websites or services that she uses.

Signs of Bullying

The following signs can be evidence of bullying at school or online (they can also be indications of a variety of issues, ranging from normal adolescence to depression or other mental health troubles). If you see any of these signs in your child, get to the root of the problem. Your child may need your help and guidance, or may need help from professionals or school officials.

Is Your Child Being Bullied?

- Clothing or other belongings (electronics, jewelry, books, etc.) are missing or damaged
- Comes home with unexplained (or badly explained) injuries
- Seems to have not eaten lunch at school
- Seems angry, nervous, irritable, or depressed (especially right after school or being online)

Continued

- Appears to be afraid to go to school or wants to avoid specific places or activities
- Has recurrent bad dreams or other difficulty sleeping
- Frequently complains about headaches or stomachaches
- Loses interest in friends or has fewer friends
- Exhibits unexplained changes in eating habits
- Loses interest in school or scholastic performance drops
- Appears to feel helpless or unworthy
- Blames himself for problems outside of his control
- Cuts or otherwise hurts herself
- Talks about suicide

Is Your Child Bullying Others?

- Sometimes behaves violently
- Is repeatedly disciplined at school
- Has new possessions or money that she can't explain
- Frequently gets into verbal fights
- Needs to win or be the best at everything he does
- Won't take responsibility for her actions
- Is quick to blame others when issues develop
- Has friends or other family members who are bullies

What Should Your Child Do If Bullied?

If your child is being bullied or knows of someone being bullied online, he has the power to stop it. Share with your child the following list of things that he or she can do:

- **Do not respond to cyberbullying, and do not pass along or respond to any message or post that might be hurtful or embarrassing to you or others.** Many people who call names or who text or post offensive messages are simply hoping for a reaction—this is called *trolling*. Don't feed the trolls. Don't provide the reaction that they so desperately want. (This is *the* most important thing to say to your child!)
- **Tell your mom or dad or another adult you trust what is going on.** Nearly every adult has experience dealing with bullies. Talk with them about what you are going through and work with them to find ways to approach the problem.
- **Keep evidence of the bullying.** Make a log with the times, dates, and descriptions of every instance of cyberbullying. Save and print emails, text messages, and screenshots to support your log. Many states have enacted laws that specifically address cyberstalking and cyberharrassment. Cyberbully.us provides a brief review of state cyberbullying laws across the United States: www.cyberbullying.us/Bullying_and_Cyberbullying_Laws.pdf
- **Consider filing a complaint with the bully's service provider.** Often, everyone using a service has to agree to the terms of service, and those agreements often prohibit the harassment of other users.
- **If the bully is (or might be) from your school, report the cyberbullying to school authorities.** They can watch for face-to-face bullying that might follow your online encounter. The new laws in several states actually require school authorities to act on your behalf.

- **Block the bully.** Phone companies and many web services allow you to prevent specific people from contacting you through their systems.
- **Ask for help.** Sometimes bullying really hurts, and talking with a counselor can help you feel better. It can be an effective way to deal with the very real emotional pain that cyberbullying can produce.

What You Can Do If Your Child Is Being Bullied Online

We have seen the grave consequences of bullying on Facebook and other social networking sites played out in the news, including the suicides of teens who were subjected to extreme online and offline cruelty. What usually isn't talked about in the press are the less tragic, but still serious consequences of bullying online, such as loss of friendships, lowered self-esteem, feelings of shame, resentment, anger, and lower grades in school.

If you know or suspect that your child is being bullied, act quickly. Make the time to talk with your child. There is too much at stake to hope that the problem will go away by itself. Sympathize with your child and show that you understand and share her unease. Assure your child that she does not deserve to be treated this way and thank her for being brave in coming to you. Do not ask questions like, "Did you do something to annoy the bully?" That implies that your child provoked the bully and that the bully may have an excuse for his offensive behavior.

Tell your child not to respond in any way to a cyberbully. Responding directly to online bullying never solves the problem and, in fact, can make the situation worse. Bullies sometimes say hurtful things because the response they provoke makes them feel powerful. Warn your child to not take the bait.

Contact your child's school counselor or the school administration. Raise their awareness of the problem and see if they are able to help. Bullies are often known to their victims, and school authorities may be able to respond

in ways to halt the bullying immediately. When adults get involved in incidences of bullying, the bullying tends to decrease or stop altogether. In whatever venue the online bullying has taken place (e.g., Facebook or a gaming community), insist that your child take a break from it to remove herself from the bullying.

Your primary job as a parent is to keep your child safe. If the bullying is criminal in nature or if you feel your child could be in danger, contact a law enforcement agency. Any of the following might be crimes:

- Threats of violence or implied violence
- Stalking or harassment
- Obscene phone calls or text messages
- Hate crimes (crimes based on the victim's membership in a social group, such as racial identity, religion, or gender)
- Photos or video taken in a place where the subject would expect privacy
- Sexual exploitation, child pornography, and sexting
- Extortion
- Impersonation

Be sure to follow up. Talk daily with your child to be certain that the bullying has ended. If it continues, you may need to start over again and try different approaches. At some point, you may even need to speak with an attorney to explore your options within the legal system.