Cyberbullying:
What Parents Can Do to
Protect Their Children

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As Technology Evolves, So Do the Ways to Bully

Imagine the "note," a piece of paper ripped from a notebook, then scrawled with insults and passed from classmate to classmate, with students snickering as they read it. Eventually the note is intercepted by a teacher and torn into pieces.

Now imagine the same note typed as a text message and sent from one classmate to another. Students post it to their social media accounts where their friends read it and share it with even more people. The "note" cannot be torn and thrown away, but instead quickly moves through social networking sites to an audience of hundreds or even thousands.

The Internet has become a place for children to post mean and inappropriate comments about their peers.

If the word "bullying" makes you think of one child picking on another in the schoolyard, it is time to update your image of how students bully. While the face-to-face harassment certainly still exists, new ways of bullying have emerged. With the easy access to cell phones, instant messaging, mobile devices, social networking websites, and other technologies, bullying has found its way into cyberspace. The Internet has become a place for some children to post mean and inappropriate comments about their peers.

Cyberbullying may already have happened to your child. In recent studies, 20 to 43 percent of middle and high school students have said they have been the victims of this form of bullying (CRC, 2010; NCPC, 2007). In another recent survey, 88 percent of teens reported seeing people being mean or cruel on a social networking site (Lenhart et al., 2011).

Cyberbullying: What It Is and How It Works

Cyberbullying is the use of technology to harass, hurt, embarrass, humiliate, and intimidate another person. Students using technology to bully, just like those who bully face-to-face, often look for targets who are vulnerable, socially isolated, or who may not understand social norms.

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.

Cyberbullying can take place in many ways. For example, some young people have created websites or blogs to bully another child, posting embarrassing pictures, private instant messages (IMs), or threatening messages. Such websites can be a powerful tool for students to encourage their peers to "gang up" on another child. Students who do not understand social cues or who are trying to become part of a peer group may mistake this attention for friendship, when it's in fact the opposite.

Where cyberbullying happens:

- Social media

- E-mail

- Text messaging

- Website message boards

- Instant messaging

A Three-Step Plan to Address Cyberbullying with Your Child

Today's children are the first generation to use technology to bully each other. Today's parents are the first who have needed to learn how to address this issue with their children. The following steps are a guide for exploring this topic with your child.

1. **Have the "cyberbullying" conversation.**

Now that you know bullying online is a real possibility, initiate a conversation with your child. Bullying can be hard for children to talk about with their parents for many reasons. They might be embarrassed by what is happening, afraid that the bullying will increase if they tell, or think it is their own problem. Cyberbullying can add additional complications. Many students might not interpret the mean and hurtful behavior that happens on their computer or cell phone as bullying. Children may also worry that they will lose access to their technology if they tell their parents about cyberbullying.

As you open the subject for discussion, let your child know that it's fine to use phones and computers and to be online with friends, but that you also want him or her to be safe from cyberbullying. Explain that if something hurtful is communicated online, it counts as bullying, and that it is important that you know about it.

If your child does not use social networking sites or other technology, but you are worried that he or she may be a target of cyberbullying, consider seeking help from your child's peers. Ask a neighbor or someone you trust to watch out for any hurtful messages posted about your child so that you will be aware if cyberbullying is occurring.

2. Set cyber safety rules.

You set safety rules for your child in the physical world. Do the same in your child's cyberworld. 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, but because they cannot see that person, they should always proceed with caution in their exchanges.

With that in mind, two good guidelines are:
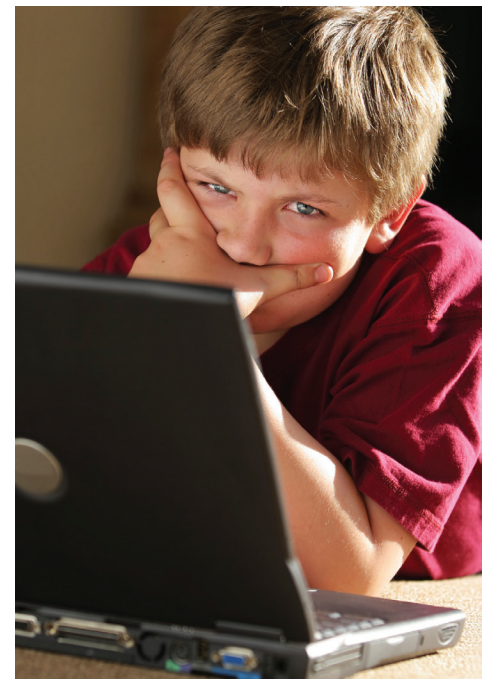
1) Don't do or say anything online that you wouldn't do or say in person.
2) Don't reveal anything that you wouldn't tell a stranger.

Specific advice for your child might include:

- Never share 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 sensitive 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. A cyberbully with your password can sign on, pretend to be you, and behave inappropriately with others to embarrass and humiliate you.

Remind your children frequently about these rules.

> You set safety rules for your child in the physcial world. Do the same in your child's cyberworld.

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. Establish rules about your access to your children's cell phones, text history, social networking sites, and other computer accounts that they may use for posting information. Make decisions about passwords, how often you will check the accounts, and how inappropriate information will be handled.

Keep your child's computer in an open spot, such as the family room, where you can supervise your child's online activity. Decide if there will be limits on access to using technology to communicate with peers, such as no computer or texting after 9 p.m., during mealtimes, or until homework is done.

If you do discover that your child is being cyberbullied, document it by printing the e-mails or webpages, saving electronic copies, and contacting your child's school.

Steps to Take if Your Child is Being Bullied Online

The solution is not to remove access to technology but rather to plan ahead to ensure your child is safe.

If you discover that your child is being cyberbullied:

- Save the URLs of the location where the bullying occurred.
- Document it by printing the e-mails or webpages. This is helpful as sometimes the information is deleted.
- Determine your point of contact at the school for reporting cyberbullying.
- Provide copies of the URLs or printouts to your child's school.
- Document your correspondence with the school and record the response.
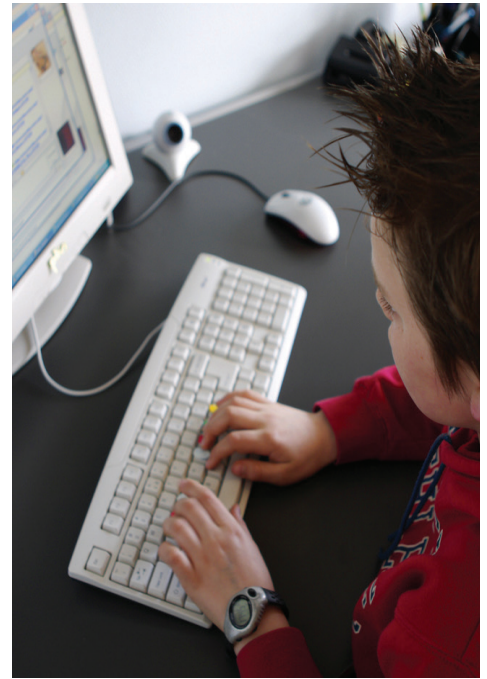
For situations that aren't resolved with these steps:

- Ask for the school's bullying prevention policy.
- Research the bullying prevention laws in your state.
- Ask for a meeting with school authorities.
- Contact PACER or a local advocacy organization.

Cyberlife by the Numbers — A New World for Many Parents

Cyberbullying

- 43% of teens reported that they have experienced cyberbullying (NCPC, 2007)
- 20% of students admitted to cyberbullying others (CRC, 2010)
- Only 23% of teens reported being cyberbullied by someone they did not know (NCPC, 2007)

Parent Perspective

- 45% of teens say that parents should tell their kids that cyberbullying is wrong
- 27% of teens report that their parents have no idea what they are doing online (NCPC, 2007)

Students Online

- 75% of teens (ages 12-17) have a cell phone (including 58% of 12-year olds) (Lenhart et al., 2010)
- 27% of teens with cell phones use them to go online (Lenhart et al., 2010)
- 95% of teens go online (Lenhart et al., 2011)
- 80% of teens who go online use social networking websites (Lenhart et al., 2011)

References

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Cyberbullying & Internet Safety

Cyberbullying Research Center: http://www.cyberbullying.us/index.php

Facebook Safety: https://www.facebook.com/fbsafety | Provides users with updates to help keep themselves and their families safe while using Facebook or surfing the Internet.

Family Online Safety Institute (FOSI): http://www.fosi.org/ | FOSI Works to make the online world safer for children and their families by identifying and promoting best practices, tools, and methods of online safety that also respect free expression.

U.S. Department of Health & Human Services Bullying Prevention Website: StopBullying.gov

Wired Kids: http://wiredkids.org/ | Offers information about cyberbullying and cyberstalking for children, tweens, teens, parents, educators, and law enforcement.

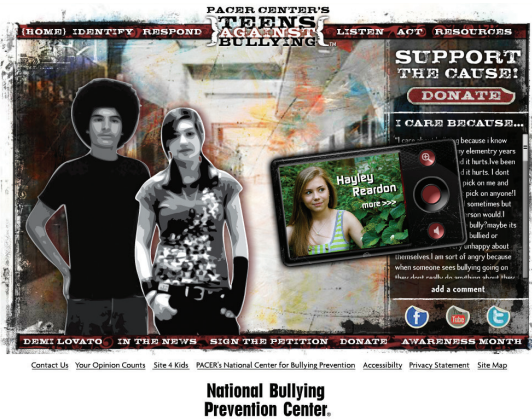## PACER.org/Bullying

This is the portal for parents and educators to access bullying resources, including educational toolkits, awareness toolkits, contest ideas, promotional products, and more.

PACERTeensAgainstBullying.org

Created by and for teens, this website is a place for students in middle school and high school to find ways to address bullying, take action, be heard, and "own" an important social cause.
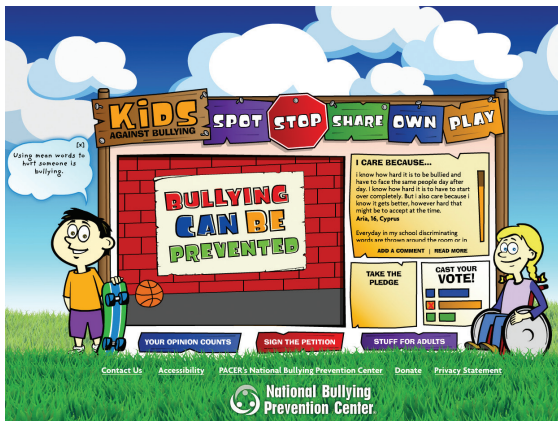
PACERKidsAgainstBullying.org

A creative, innovative, and educational website designed for elementary school students to learn about bullying prevention, engage in activities, and be inspired to take action.