

Bullying Prevention Resource Guide

FOR SCHOOLS, FAMILIES AND COMMUNITY PARTNERS

TIPS AND TOPICS FOR BULLYING PREVENTION SUCCESS

BULLYING IN CYBERSPACE

What is Cyberbullying?

Cyberbullying can be described as bullying or harassment that is done via the computer or other electronic device. It is formally defined as the “willful use of computers or computerized machines as tools to intentionally and repeatedly cause harm or discomfort through verbal or relational aggression that targets a specific person or group of persons” (Cook, Williams, Guerra, & Tuthill, 2007). Cyberbullying includes such things as:

- Creating a website meant to humiliate a victim
- Forwarding private emails without permission
- Taking an embarrassing photo with a camera phone and posting it online
- Setting up online polls to vote on who is the ugliest, fattest, etc. kid in school
- Along with many other forms of electronic harassment.

How Common Is It?

Cyberbullying occurs among youth of all ages. Children as young as 9 or 10 are bullying or being cyberbullied. In a study of over 3,000 students, Williams and Guerra (2007) reported that 4.5 percent of 5th graders, 13 percent of 8th graders and 10 percent of 11th grade students indicated that they had bullied other students via the Internet. Anytime that a person has an online presence they are at risk of cyberbullying, which includes youth and adults. Cyberbullying is able to go unnoticed by many, because there is little supervision from adults and oftentimes adults simply do not understand the cyber world that youth are growing up in. Online social networks such as MySpace and Facebook have only become a common part of most teens lives in the last 3 to 5 years. Cell phones have become a normal part of a teen’s life and instant messaging is a normal way of communicating. With these new means of communication that adults have rarely experienced, teens are able to say and do things under anonymity and with little to no adult awareness.

Research conducted by the Pew Internet and American Life Project (2007) found that:

- One in three online (32%) teens have experienced online harassment.
- Girls are more likely to be victims 38 percent of online girls report being bullies versus 26 percent of online boys.
- Teens between the ages of 15 and 17 are most likely to experience some form of cyberbullying.
- Nearly 4 in 10 (39%) social network users (Facebook, Myspace) have been cyberbullied in someway, compared with 22 percent of online teens who do not use social networks.
- Teens who share their identities and thoughts online are more likely to be targets than are those who lead less active online lives.

Cyberbullying and Relational Aggression

Relational aggression is intertwined with cyberbullying, particularly among girls. Relational aggression is the use of relationships to harm another person; for example starting rumors, spreading gossip, teasing, creating or joining cliques, and deliberately excluding another person. This type of behavior, which is common among teenage girls, is very common in cyberspace where they do not have to directly look at their target. There are two reasons that relational aggression may be so common among teenage girls, the perceived need to avoid conflict and the need to gain and maintain power. They often use passive aggressive and covert behaviors that allow teen girls to avoid conflict and to gain power or popularity. Using electronic communications are particularly appealing to these teens, because they are able to engage in those behaviors even more anonymously.

How Can Youth Protect Themselves?

Cyberbullying isn't the only threat online. There is the risk of online predators who seek out and take advantage of young girls and boys, identity thieves who steal names, social security numbers, or bank account information, and hackers who can peruse your personal information including email. These are all reasons to take precautions when using the Internet. Below is some information that is relevant to all types of cyber safety, including cyberbullying:

- Be careful about posting personal information, such as email address, phone numbers or photos. Anything that is listed online is public for anyone to view.
- When using a social networking site (MySpace, Facebook) allow only the people you know to view your profile.
- On email or social networking sites, share the password with a parent or guardian but NEVER reveal a password to another person, even to a close friend. If a friendship suddenly goes sour, the former friend can use the password to hack into the account.
- The more open you are online, such as on blogs or MySpace, the more vulnerable you are to attack. Monitor what you say and do.
- Talk to a trusted adult if any type of bullying or harassment occurs online or in person. This includes such things as rumors, pictures posted online, hacking into accounts, or threats.
- Walk away from the computer if harassment or bullying begins. Don't get caught up in the relational aggression that occurs online, it will often escalate and both sides will say things they would never say in person.
- If you receive a message or email that makes you upset, do not reply or even read it.
- Do not reply to messages or emails from people that you do not know.
- Be VERY aware that anything that is posted, sent, emailed, or IM'd can be sent on to others, copied, handed out, and spread very easily. Nothing done online should be considered private.
- Realize that even though you are sitting in front of a computer or cell phone that there IS a person on the receiving end who will be hurt from any bullying comments that you make. If you avoid sending hurtful messages then it is more likely that you won't receive them.

What Can Schools Do?

It is important that schools create a policy that directly addresses the consequences of cyberbullying and to have students sign a contract that states they will not engage in cyberbullying or other unsafe Internet behaviors. Schools differ in the responsibility they hold to protect students against cyberbullying when it is perpetrated off school grounds. However, some schools have included in their policy that any online harassment that interferes with student learning can and will have negative consequences for students engaged in those activities, regardless if it is from home or school. Prevention and in-school policy are very significant in reducing cyberbullying.

Schools can be proactive by creating a policy that directly addresses cyberbullying. This policy should institute a hierarchy of consequences that gives specific consequences that relate to defined actions and behaviors. This should use very specific language that gives concrete acceptable and unacceptable actions. At the start of the school year require that students sign a contract that states they will not send harassing e-mails, they will not send offensive digital pictures, download video footage, or hack into another student's email and they will not instant message at all. Review this policy throughout the year. Some additional actions that can be taken include:

- Monitor computer usage.
- Block social networking sites and disable instant messaging capabilities on school computers.
- Place parameters around cell phone use in the school and enforce this policy.
- Do not allow cell phones in the locker rooms or bathrooms. This eliminates unwarranted pictures taken with cell phones.
- Educate teachers, counselors and other school staff on the seriousness of cyberbullying
- Host an internet safety training with parents to help them better monitor and teach their children safe and unsafe internet activities.
- Integrate bullying and cyber bullying lessons into weekly curriculum.

What Can Adults Do?

Adults can play a very key role in protecting youth from cyberbullying as well as other cyber threats, including predators. The first step is to understand the significance of youth living an online “life.” Parents and other adults often don’t understand the full meaning that MySpace and Facebook have in youths lives. It may sound trivial to adults, but to teens relationships on and offline are often the most important social factor in teens lives. Learn about the sites that youth are visiting and understand what can be done on them. Then do not expect that simply eliminating computer use or banning MySpace will be the answer, boundaries must be set that are reasonable to both parties. Below are some concrete suggestions for making Internet use more safe:

- Move the computer into a shared space such as the living room or a lobby area.
- Encourage youth to come to you if they witness or experience cyberbullying or any other unsafe message. According to a survey by www.isafe.org, 58 percent of kids did not tell their parents when someone was abusive online.
- Do not expect that simply eliminating computer use is the answer, it requires setting boundaries with youth and coming to a shared agreement where both parties understand the reasoning for it.
- Banning social networks such as MySpace or Facebook is not necessarily the answer. This is one of the most important social outlets for teens and taking it away simply means they must hide it. Discuss what is and is not appropriate for online use.
- Establish safe Internet use rules. You will not be around 100 percent of the time to closely monitor behavior, so you need to help the youth make smart and caring decisions.
- Teach empathy. Because cyberspace is largely anonymous, youth often don’t think about their actions have such a hurtful impact on others. They aren’t there to witness the cruelty that is being done.

What Are The Legal Implications?

The legal implications of cyberbullying are not entirely defined as this is a recent dynamic that has become very prevalent. Courts have kept their distance when addressing cyberbullying. Courts and prosecutors have largely agreed that the 1st Amendment covers even the most offensive of speech, including teens saying nasty things on or offline. Rhode Island is considering one of the toughest cyberbullying laws in the country. Under the proposed legislation, students and their parents could be prosecuted if the student is caught sending Internet or text messages that prove disruptive to school.

Serious bullying behavior may violate criminal laws that prohibit causing another person fear of harm to physical or emotional health, safety, or property. A person can also be held liable for publishing photographs or writings that are designed to insult a person or injure his or her reputation by exposing the person to hatred, contempt, or ridicule. A cyberbully may violate various state and local human rights acts if he or she spreads hate or discrimination based on protected categories such as race, national origin, religion, age sex, sexual orientation, marital status, or disability.

Cases that involve threat of injury or death, or harassment that interferes with school or life, and which is believed to be a credible threat, should be reported to law enforcement immediately. It is important to preserve any evidence by printing the blog, email, webpage, etc. Record as much information about the source as possible including the screen name, time and date, and Internet Service Provider. If for any reason you or a youth is uncomfortable calling law enforcement, Safe2Tell will anonymously collect your report and follow up on the situation. The number for Safe2Tell is 1-877-542-7233 or visit www.safe2tell.org for more information.

Notify Internet Service Providers (ISP) of abuse

When messages travel from sender to recipient, information is stamped on the computer network and onto emails, which can be used to tell the Internet Protocol (IP) address and track back to which ISP owns the IP. This information is found in the header of the email but is usually not displayed on default email settings. You must enable the viewing of the header information to identify whether the sender was connected to Yahoo, AOL, Hotmail, etc. Once you identify the ISP, you can send the email, including all header information, to that ISP’s abuse mailboxes, which are typically abuse@hotmail.com, abuse@yahoo.com, etc. Doing this might deter the sender of the message from future abuse.

Resources

- *Fight Crime: Invest in Kids*—www.fightcrime.org/cyberbullying/index.php
- Bill Besley's cyberbullying website—www.cyberbullying.com
- *Stop Cyberbullying*—www.stopcyberbullying.org
- *I-SAFE*—<http://isafe.org>
- Colorado Attorney General—Safe Surfing Initiative—<http://www.ago.state.co.us/InternetSafety/SafeSurfing.cfm>
- www.SafeTeens.com
- Internet lingo and acronyms—www.netlingo.com

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