CYBER BULLYING – WHAT IS IT AND HOW CAN WE HELP OUR KIDS

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Bullying is aggressive behavior that is intentional and involves an imbalance of power or strength. Usually, it is repeated over time. Traditionally, bullying has involved actions such as: hitting or punching (physical bullying), teasing or name-calling (verbal bullying), or intimidation through gestures or social exclusion. In recent years, technology has given children and youth a new means of bullying each other.

Cyber bullying, which is sometimes referred to as online social cruelty or electronic bullying, can involve:

- Sending mean, vulgar, or threatening messages or images;
- Posting sensitive, private information about another person;
- Pretending to be someone else in order to make that person look bad;
- Intentionally excluding someone from an online group (Willard, 2005).

Children and youth can cyberbully each other through:

- E-mails,
- Instant messaging,
- Text or digital imaging messages sent on cell phones,
- Web pages,
- Web logs (blogs),
- Chat rooms or discussion groups, and
- Other information communication technologies.

How common is cyber bullying?

Although little research has been conducted on cyber bullying, recent studies have found that:

- 18% of students in grades 6-8 said they had been cyberbullied at least once in the last couple of months; and 6% said it had happened to them 2 or more times
- 11% of students in grades 6-8 said they had cyberbullied another person at least once in the last couple of months, and 2% said they had done it two or more times

- 19% of regular Internet users between the ages of 10 and 17 reported being involved in online aggression; 15% had been aggressors, and 7% had been targets (3% were both aggressors and targets)
- 17% of 6-11 year-olds and 36% of 12-17-year-olds reported that someone said threatening or embarrassing things about them through e-mail, instant messages, web sites, chat rooms, or text messages
- Cyber bullying has increased in recent years. In nationally representative surveys of 10-17 year-olds, twice as many children and youth indicated that they had been victims and perpetrators of online harassment in 2005 compared with 1999/2000

Who are the victims and perpetrators of cyber bullying?

In a recent study (Journal of Counseling Psychology 2006) of students in grades 6-8:

- Girls were about twice as likely as boys to be victims and perpetrators of cyber bullying.
- Of those students who had been cyberbullied relatively frequently (at least twice in the last couple of months):
  - 62% said that they had been cyberbullied by another student at school, and 46% had been cyberbullied by a friend.
  - 55% didn't know who had cyberbullied them.
- Of those students who admitted cyber bullying others relatively frequently:
  - 60% had cyberbullied another student at school, and 56% had cyberbullied a friend.

What are the most common methods of cyber bullying?

In this recent study of middle and high school students, the most common way that children and youth reported being cyberbullied was through instant messaging.

Somewhat less common ways involved the use of chat rooms, e-mails, and messages posted on web sites. This study also examined younger children and it showed that they were most often bullied through e-mail, comments on a web site, or in a chat room.

Where are children and youth cyber bullied?

In a recent telephone survey of preteens (6-11 year-olds) and teens (12-17 year-olds):

- 45% of preteens and 30% of teens who had been cyber bullied received the messages while at school;
- 44% of preteens and 70% of teens who had been cyber bullied received the messages at home; and

- 34% of preteens and 25% of teens who had been cyber bullied received the messages while at a friend's house.

Do children tell others if they are cyber bullied?

According to research involving preteens and teens:

- 51% of preteens but only 35% of teens who had been cyber bullied had told their parents about their experience;
- 27% of preteens and only 9% of teens who had been cyber bullied had told a teacher;
- 44% of preteens and 72% of teens who had been cyber bullied had told a friend;
- 31% of preteens and 35% of teens who had been cyber bullied had told a brother or sister; and
- 16% of preteens and teens who had been cyber bullied had told no one.

How does cyber bullying differ from other traditional forms of bullying?

Although there is little research yet on cyber bullying among children and youth, available research and experience suggest that cyber bullying may differ from more "traditional" forms of bullying in a number of ways including:

- Cyber bullying can occur any time of the day or night;
- Cyber bullying messages and images can be distributed quickly to a very wide audience;
- Children and youth can be anonymous when cyber bullying, which makes it difficult (and sometimes impossible) to trace them;

What can adults do to prevent and address cyber bullying?

Adults seldom are present in the online environments frequented by children and youth. Therefore, it is extremely important that adults pay close attention to the cyber bullying and the activities of children and youth when using these new technologies.

Suggestions for parents:
Tips to help prevent cyber bullying:

- Keep your home computer(s) in easily viewable places , such as a family room or kitchen.
- Talk regularly with your child about on-line activities he or she is involved in.

- Talk specifically about cyber bullying and encourage your child to tell you immediately if he or she is the victim of cyber bullying, cyberstalking, or other illegal or troublesome on-line behavior.
- Encourage your child to tell you if he or she is aware of others who may be the victims of such behavior.
- Explain that cyber bullying is harmful and unacceptable behavior. Outline your expectations for responsible online behavior and make it clear that there will be consequences for inappropriate behavior.
- Although adults must respect the privacy of children and youth, concerns for your child's safety may sometimes override these privacy concerns. Tell your child that you may review his or her on-line communications if you think there is reason for concern.
- Consider installing parental control filtering software and/or tracking programs, but don't rely solely on these tools.

Tips for dealing with cyber bullying that your child has experienced:

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

- Strongly encourage your child not to respond to the cyber bullying.
- Do not erase the messages or pictures. Save these as evidence.
- Try to identify the individual doing the cyber bullying. 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 cyber bullying is criminal (or if you suspect that it may be), contact the police and ask them to do the tracking.
- Sending inappropriate language may violate the "Terms and Conditions" of e-mail services, Internet Service Providers, web sites, and cell phone companies. Consider contacting these providers and filing a complaint.
- If the cyber bullying is coming through e-mail 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 bullying.
- Contact your school. If the cyber bullying is occurring through your school district's Internet system, school administrators have an obligation to intervene. Even if the cyber bullying is occurring off campus, make your school administrators aware of the problem. They may be able to help you resolve the cyber bullying 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 cyber bullying others, and they may effectively put a stop to the bullying. On the other hand, these parents may react very badly 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 cyber bullying (e.g., copies of an e-mail message) and ask them to make sure the cyber bullying stops.
- Consider contacting an attorney in cases of serious cyber bullying. 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 cyber bullying involves acts such as:
    - Threats of violence
    - Extortion
    - Obscene or harassing phone calls or text messages
    - Harassment, stalking, or hate crimes
    - Child pornography
    - If you are uncertain if cyber bullying violates your jurisdiction's criminal laws, contact your local police, who will advise you.