STOP cyberbullying

www.stopcyberbullying.org

What is cyberbullying, exactly?

"Cyberbullying" is when a child, preteen or teen is tormented, threatened, harassed, humiliated, embarrassed or otherwise targeted by another child, preteen or teen using the Internet, interactive and digital technologies or mobile phones. It has to have a minor on both sides, or at least have been instigated by a minor against another minor. Once adults become involved, it is plain and simple cyberharassment or cyberstalking. Adult cyber-harassment or cyberstalking is NEVER called cyberbullying.

It isn't when adult are trying to lure children into offline meetings, that is called sexual exploitation or luring by a sexual predator. But sometimes when a minor starts a cyberbullying campaign it involves sexual predators who are intrigued by the sexual harassment or even ads posted by the cyberbullying offering up the victim for sex.

The methods used are limited only by the child's imagination and access to technology. And the cyberbully one moment may become the victim the next. The kids often change roles, going from victim to bully and back again.

Children have killed each other and committed suicide after having been involved in a cyberbullying incident.

Cyberbullying is usually not a one time communication, unless it involves a death threat or a credible threat of serious bodily harm. Kids usually know it when they see it, while parents may be more worried about the lewd language used by the kids than the hurtful effect of rude and embarrassing posts.

Cyberbullying may arise to the level of a misdemeanor cyberharassment charge, or if the child is young enough may result in the charge of juvenile delinquency. Most of the time the cyberbullying does not go that far, although parents often try and pursue criminal charges. It typically can result in a child losing their ISP or IM accounts as a terms of service violation. And in some cases, if hacking or password and identity theft is involved, can be a serious criminal matter under state and federal law.

When schools try and get involved by disciplining the student for cyberbullying actions that took place off-campus and outside of school hours, they are often sued for exceeding their authority and violating the student's free speech right. They also, often lose. Schools can be very effective brokers in working with the parents to stop and remedy cyberbullying situations. They can also educate the students on cyberethics and the law. If schools are creative, they can sometimes avoid the claim that their actions exceeded their legal authority for off-campus cyberbullying actions. We recommend that a provision is added to the school's acceptable use policy reserving the right to discipline the student for actions taken off-campus if they are intended to have an effect on a student or they adversely affect the safety and well-being of student while in school. This makes it a contractual, not a constitutional, issue.
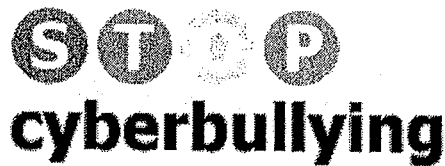
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Is my child at risk?

Maybe. There are a few things you can check. Has their behavior changed recently? Are they spending dramatically more or less time online? Are your cell phone bills through the roof suddenly? The first place to start is by talking to your child. Being open with them, and not spying on them helps. Be worthy of their trust. We have developed a few family chat pointers that may help you get the talk going. Feel free to develop your own and if they work, share them with us here at Stop Cyberbullying or at WiredSafety.org. We're all in this together.

We also have a self-evaluation quiz on whether you are supervising your children enough online. We have some family projects and activities you may want to try too. But we need to understand that most kids after the age of eight or nine are possible targets. But don't panic. Keep things in perspective .Unless we lock them in the closet until they are 21, they face risks every single day. It's our job to try and eliminate and reduce those risks and to try and teach them how to handle the ones we can't avoid. It's called "growing up."

The rest involves a combination of hope, prayers and anything you can evoke to keep your children safe where ever they go and whatever they do. And being there for them when things go wrong, without judging them unfairly or being part of the problem. Ultimately, our job is to make sure that we help develop the "filter between their ears." And we need to remember that we must upload to that filter often, with our values and life lessons and ways our children can be productive and good people.

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What's the Parents' Role in This?

Parents need to be the one trusted place kids can go when things go wrong online and offline. Yet they often are the one place kids avoid when things go wrong online. Why? Parents tend to overreact. Most children will avoid telling their parents about a cyberbullying incident fearing they will only make things worse. (Calling the other parents, the school, blaming the victim or taking away Internet privileges.) Unfortunately, they also sometimes under react, and rarely get it "just right."(You can read more about this in "Not Too Hot, Not Too Cold! Goldilocks and the CyberParents")

Parents need to be supportive of your child during this time. You may be tempted to give the "stick and stones may break your bones, but words will never hurt you" lecture, but words and cyberattacks can wound a child easily and have a lasting effect. These attacks follow them into your otherwise safe home and wherever they go online. And when up to 700 million accomplices can be recruited to help target or humiliate your child, the risk of emotional pain is very real, and very serious. Don't brush it off.

Let the school know so the guidance counselor can keep an eye out for in-school bullying and for how your child is handling things. You may want to notify your pediatrician, family counselor or clergy for support if things progress. It is crucial that you are there to provide the necessary support and love. Make them feel secure. Children have committed suicide after having been cyberbullied, and in Japan one young girl killed another after a cyberbullying incident. Take it seriously.

Parents also need to understand that a child is just as likely to be a cyberbully as a victim of cyberbullying and often go back and forth between the two roles during one incident. They may not even realize that they are seen as a cyberbully. (You can learn more about this under the "Inadvertent Cyberbully" profile of a cyberbully.)

We have a quick guide to what to do if your child is being cyberbullied: Your actions have to escalate as the threat and hurt to your child does. But there are two things you must consider before anything else. Is your child at risk of physical harm or assault? And how are they handling the attacks emotionally?

If there is any indication that personal contact information has been posted online, or any threats are made to your child, you must run.do not walk, to your local law enforcement agency (not the FBI). Take a print-out of all instances of cyberbullying to show them, but note that a print-out is not sufficient to prove a case of cyber-harassment or cyberbullying. You'll need electronic evidence and live data for that. (You may want to answer the questions on our checklist for helping spot the difference between annoying communications and potentially dangerous ones. But remember, if in doubt, report it.)