Cyberbullying

Bullies and mean girls have been around forever, but technology now gives them a whole new platform for their actions. The old "sticks and stones" saying is no longer true — both real-world and online name-calling can have serious emotional consequences for our kids and teens.

It's not always easy to know how and when to step in as a parent. For starters, most kids use technology differently than we do. They're playing games online and sending texts on their phones at an early age, and most teens have devices that keep them constantly connected to the Internet. Many are logged on to Facebook or Tumblr and chatting or texting all day. Even sending email or leaving a voicemail can seem old-school to them. Their knowledge of the digital world can be intimidating to parents.

But staying involved in kids' cyber world, just as in their real world, can help parents protect them from its dangers. As awareness of **cyberbullying** has grown, parents have learned more about how to deal with it. Here are some suggestions on what to do if this modern type of bullying has become part of your child's life.

What Is Cyberbullying?

Cyberbullying is the use of technology to harass, threaten, embarrass, or target another person. By definition, it occurs among young people. When an adult is involved, it may meet the definition of **cyber-harassment** or **cyberstalking**, a crime that can have legal consequences and involve jail time.

Sometimes cyberbullying can be easy to spot — for example, if your child shows you a text, tweet, or response to a status update on Facebook that is harsh, mean, or cruel. Other acts are less obvious, like impersonating a victim online or posting personal information, photos, or videos designed to hurt or embarrass another person. Some kids report that a fake account, webpage, or online persona has been created with the sole intention to harass and bully.

Cyberbullying also can happen accidentally. The impersonal nature of text messages, IMs, and emails make it very hard to detect the sender's tone — one person's joke could be another's hurtful insult. Nevertheless, a repeated pattern of emails, texts, and online posts is rarely accidental.

Because many kids are reluctant to report being bullied, even to their parents, it's impossible to know just how many are affected. But recent studies about cyberbullying rates have found that about 1 in 4 teens have been the victims of cyberbullying, and about 1 in 6 admit to having cyberbullied someone. In some studies, more than half of the teens surveyed said that they've experienced abuse through social and digital media.

Effects of Cyberbullying

No longer limited to schoolyards or street corners, modern-day bullying can happen at home as well as at school — essentially 24 hours a day. Picked-on kids can feel like they're getting

blasted nonstop and that there is no escape. As long as kids have access to a phone, computer, or other device (including tablets), they are at risk.

Severe, long-term, or frequent cyberbullying can leave both victims and bullies at greater risk for anxiety, depression, and other stress-related disorders. In some rare but highly publicized cases, some kids have turned to suicide. Experts say that kids who are bullied — and the bullies themselves — are at a higher risk for suicidal thoughts, attempts, and completed suicides.

The punishment for cyberbullies can include being suspended from school or kicked off of sports teams. Certain types of cyberbullying can be considered crimes.

Signs of Cyberbullying

Many kids and teens who are cyberbullied don't want to tell a teacher or parent, often because they feel ashamed of the social stigma or fear that their computer privileges will be taken away at home.

Signs of cyberbullying vary, but may include:

- being emotionally upset during or after using the Internet or the phone
- being very secretive or protective of one's digital life
- withdrawal from family members, friends, and activities
- avoiding school or group gatherings
- slipping grades and "acting out" in anger at home
- changes in mood, behavior, sleep, or appetite
- wanting to stop using the computer or cellphone
- being nervous or jumpy when getting an instant message, text, or email
- avoiding discussions about computer or cellphone activities

How Parents Can Help

If you discover that your child is being cyberbullied, offer comfort and support. Talking about any bullying experiences you had in your childhood might help your child feel less alone.

Let your child know that it's not his or her fault, and that bullying says more about the bully than the victim. Praise your child for doing the right thing by talking to you about it. Remind your child that he or she isn't alone — a lot of people get bullied at some point. Reassure your child that you will figure out what to do about it together.

Let someone at school (the principal, school nurse, or a counselor or teacher) know about the situation.Many schools, school districts, and after-school clubs have protocols for responding to cyberbullying; these vary by district and state. But before reporting the problem, let your child know that you plan to do so, so that you can work out a plan that makes you both feel comfortable.

Encourage your child not to respond to cyberbullying, because doing so just fuels the fire and makes the situation worse. But do keep the threatening messages, pictures, and texts, as these can be used as evidence with the bully's parents, school, employer, or even the police. You may want to take, save, and print screenshots of these to have for the future.

Other measures to try:

- **Block the bully.** Most devices have settings that allow you to electronically block emails, IMs, or texts from specific people.

- **Limit access to technology.** Although it's hurtful, many kids who are bullied can't resist the temptation to check websites or phones to see if there are new messages. Keep the computer in a public place in the house (no laptops in children's bedrooms, for example) and put limits on the use of cellphones and games. Some companies allow you to turn off text messaging services during certain hours. And most websites and smartphones include parental control options that give parents access to their kids' messages and online life.

- **Know your kids' online world.** Ask to "friend" or "follow" your child on social media sites, but do not abuse this privilege by commenting or posting anything to your child's profile. Check their postings and the sites kids visit, and be aware of how they spend their time online. Talk to them about the importance of privacy and why it's a bad idea to share personal information online, even with friends. Write up cellphone and social media contracts that you are willing to enforce.

- **Learn about ways to keep your kids safe online.** Encourage them to safeguard passwords and to never post their address or whereabouts when out and about.

If your son or daughter agrees, you may also arrange for mediation with a therapist or counselor at school who can work with your child and/or the bully.

When Your Child Is the Bully
Finding out that your kid is the one who is behaving badly can be upsetting and heartbreaking. It's important to address the problem head on and not wait for it to go away.

Talk to your child firmly about his or her actions and explain the negative impact it has on others. Joking and teasing might seem harmless to one person, but it can be hurtful to another. Bullying — in any form — is unacceptable; there can be serious (and sometimes permanent) consequences at home, school, and in the community if it continues.

Remind your child that the use of cellphones and computers is a privilege. Sometimes it helps to restrict the use of these devices until behavior improves. If you feel your child should have a cellphone for safety reasons, make sure it is a phone that can be used only for emergencies. Set strict parental controls on all devices.

To get to the heart of the matter, talking to teachers, guidance counselors, and other school officials can help identify situations that lead a kid to bully others. If your child has trouble managing anger, talk to a therapist about helping your son or daughter learn to cope with anger, hurt, frustration, and other strong emotions in a healthy way. Professional counseling also can help improve kids' confidence and social skills, which in turn can reduce the risk of bullying.

And don't forget to set a good example yourself — model good online habits to help your kids understand the benefits and the dangers of life in the digital world.

Reviewed by: Larissa Hirsch, MD
Date reviewed: June 2014