

A Parents' Guide to Cyberbullying: Addressing Online Social Cruelty

Young people have fully embraced the Internet as both an environment and a tool for socializing. They create their own Web sites, post intimate personal news in blogs (online interactive diaries), send IMs (instant messages) and emails, chat in chatrooms, seek out new friends in dating sites, and even have their looks ranked in rating sites – sometimes all of the above simultaneously!

There are increasing instances of teenagers using the Net to send or post harmful or cruel text or images to bully their peers. Reports in the news media about cyberbullying are on the increase, reports of teenagers...

- Posting unflattering pictures of peers on the Web.
- Sending cruel or threatening anonymous emails to peers.
- Breaking into peers' email or IM accounts, posing as a peer and sending cruel or embarrassing messages to make the person "look bad."
- Doctoring pornographic photos by adding a peer's face to an image and sending it to porn sites or posting it in a blog.

- Ridiculing or spreading malicious rumors about peers in blogs and online journals.
- Tricking a peer into revealing sensitive personal information, then forwarding it around to others.
- Criticizing or defaming parents, teachers, and administrators in Web sites.

This Guide provides parents, and others concerned about the well-being of youth, with an essential overview about the concerns of cyberbullying, including ...

- Cyberbullying – online social cruelty
- Conditions that foster online social cruelty
- The roles: bully, victim, bystander
- Staying involved with your child's online experiences
- Preventing your child from being a cyberbully
- Preventing your child from becoming a victim of cyberbullying
- Encourage your child to be a bystander who is part of the solution
- Signs of cyberbullying victimization
- Responding to cyberbullying.

Cyberbullying – online social cruelty

Cyberbullying is online social cruelty that involves sending or posting harmful or cruel text or images using the Internet or other communications devices. Its various forms are:

- **Flaming** – sending angry, rude, or obscene messages directed at a person or persons privately or to an online group.
- **Harassment** – repeatedly sending a person offensive messages.
- **Cyberstalking** – harassment that includes threats of harm or is highly intimidating.
- **Denigration** – sending or posting harmful, untrue statements about a person to other people.
- **Impersonation** – pretending to be someone else and sending or posting material that makes that person look bad or places that person in potential danger.
- **Outing and trickery** – sending or posting material about a person that contains sensitive, private, or embarrassing information, including forwarding private messages or images; engaging in tricks to solicit embarrassing information that is made public.
- **Exclusion** – actions that specifically and intentionally exclude a person from an online group.

Cyberbullying messages and images may be posted on personal Web sites or blogs or transmitted via email, discussion groups, chat, IM, and text and picture phones. A cyberbully may be a person whom the victim knows or doesn't know. Sometimes the victim creates the opportunity for cyberbullying by providing others with sensitive personal information or sending others sexual pictures. Cyberbullying appears to be a problem that emerges in the teenage years, although there are some reports of children as young as 8 or 9 engaging in this activity. [Since the highest level of activity is among teens, the term "teenager" is used in this document.]

Closely related concerns. Two closely related concerns are:

- **Cyberthreats** –online material that either generally or specifically raises concerns that the creator may intend to inflict violence or harm to others or self.
- **Risky online sexual behavior** – engaging in sexually related online activities, including seeking for sexual partners and providing sexually explicit images.

Why adults are out of the loop. There's an unwritten rule in the teen online social scene: "What happens online, stays online." This very strong social norm prohibits disclosure of online activities to any adult because of the perceived risk among teenagers of losing Internet privileges, i.e. their "social lifeline," or other intrusive reactions. Teens know that if they tell they are at great risk of severe online retaliation. This is why many adults are clueless about what is going on.

The impact. It is widely known that face-to-face bullying can result in long-term psychological harm to victims, leading to low self-esteem, depression, anxiety, anger, school failure, school avoidance, and in some cases, school violence or suicide. It is possible that the harm caused by cyberbullying may be even greater than harm caused by traditional bullying because...

- There is no escape for those who are being cyberbullied – victimization is ongoing, 24/7.
- Cyberbullying material and images can be globally distributed and are often irretrievable.
- Cyberbullies can be anonymous.
- Many teenagers are reluctant to tell parents because they are too emotionally traumatized, they think it is their fault, or they fear greater retribution if they tell.
- If the bully finds out the victim has told, this might escalate the ostracizing or bullying.

Conditions that foster online social cruelty

The "tell all" phenomenon. For teens especially, the Internet has become a vehicle for massive self-disclosure of personal and sensitive information. Visit any teen community or blogging site (Blurty.com, Xanga.com, LiveJournal.com, DeadJournal.com, Diaryland.com, StudentCenter.org, Bolt.com, HotorNot.com, Alloy.com, eCrush.com, etc.), and you can read discussion-group or blog entries where teenagers are publicly reporting on their sexual experiences, sexual abuse, pregnancy, suicidal intentions, desires of all kinds, etc. The more outlandish the information provided, the more attention the poster receives – which is often the desired goal. These sites also allow teens to post pictures of themselves – the sexier the better – and then offer the opportunity for other teens to rate the pictures.

The teen community and blogger sites encourage such online disclosure because, while it may not be good for kids, it is definitely good for business. A large part of the income of these sites is generated from market research firms who are reviewing all youth entries to determine how best to push consumption of products to this very attractive demographic.

Distorted free-speech right. One online social norm that has developed among teens goes something like this: "My free-speech rights are superior to all other rights. On the Internet, I have the right to say anything I want about others regardless of whether I am causing harm by disclosing personal secrets or saying mean things."

Disinhibition. Researchers use the term "disinhibition" to describe online behavior that appears to be less inhibited by offline social standards. The reasons appear to include:

- The sense of anonymity the Internet affords – "I'm invisible. I can't get caught. So I can do anything and it must not be wrong."
- The lack of tangible feedback (e.g., body language) in online communications, which can dehumanize and reduce empathy – "I haven't really hurt anyone."
- Teens who try out different personalities/roles online – "It wasn't me. It was my persona."
- Social norms that support cyberbullying – "Everyone does it."

The roles: bully, victim, bystander

If your child has been actively socializing online it is probable that he or she has been involved in cyberbullying in one or more of the following roles:

- **Entitlements bullies** – "put-downers" who think they are superior and have the right to harass and demean others, especially those they think are different or inferior.
- **Victims of entitlement bullies** – kids who get picked on because bullies think they are different or inferior.
- **Retaliators** – "get-backers" who have been bullied by others and are using the Internet to retaliate.
- **Victims of retaliators** – most often, kids who have been bullying, but are now receiving the cruelty.
- **Bystanders who are part of the problem** – those who encourage and support the bully or watch the bullying from the sidelines but do nothing to intervene or help the victim.
- **Bystanders who are part of the solution** – those who seek to stop the bullying, protest it, provide support to the victim, or tell an adult.

Staying involved with your child's online experiences

Make it your business to know what your child is doing online and who your child's online friends are. Teenagers are likely to take the position that their online activities are their business. But parents have a moral, as well as legal, obligation to ensure that their children are engaged in safe and responsible behavior – including online behavior.

Keep the computer in a public place in the house. Periodically check on what your child is doing. Periodically discuss the kinds of Internet activities your child enjoys. Watch out for secretive behavior if you approach the computer, such as rapidly switching screens. If your child types POS on the screen in a chat or IM environment, this is a clue to others that there is a "Parent Over Shoulder."

Be up front with your child that you will be periodically investigating the files on the computer and your child's public online activities. Also tell your child that you may have to review private communication activities if you have strong reason to believe you will find unsafe or irresponsible behavior. Attempts to defeat your ability to conduct these investigations should lead to restrictions on computer access.

To investigate the files on your computer...

- Conduct a file search for image files ending in .jpg and .gif.
- Periodically check the history file in your browser after your child has been online to see what sites are regularly accessed. [If you find the history file empty on a regular basis, this may indicate your child is "covering tracks," by erasing evidence of use. A frequently erased history file is a reason for concern and should lead to further investigations, discussion, and limitations placed on Internet use.]

To investigate the online public presence of your child...

- Use a search engine such as Google.com. Search for your child's full name and screen names in quotes ("jane doe"), your child's screen names or personas and the name of your child's school plus full name, first name, and screen name. Check the overall search engine ("Web"), as well as "Images" and "Groups."
- If your child is regularly participating in a teen community or has a Web site or blog, visit these sites and investigate what's being posted by or about your child.

If you have a strong reason to believe that your child may be engaged in unsafe or irresponsible behavior or is being victimized by others and is unwilling to talk about it, investigate his or her online communications.

If you find material that is very disturbing, you might have a discussion with a counselor before confronting your child. An emotional overreaction on your part is very unlikely to help resolve the problem. [If you find any evidence your child is interacting with a possible sexual predator do not confront your child. Your child could warn the predator. Call your local police and ask for a youth or computer crimes expert.]

Preventing your child from being a cyberbully

Values and ethical behavior. There is no better place to start. Talk with your child about the value of treating others with kindness and respect. Discuss your expectation that your child will act in accord with these values at all times, including when using the Internet on a computer, cell phone, or any other digital. Ask your child to spend some time thinking about personal standards for online communication and how well those standards reflect the values that are important in life.

Repercussions discussion. In a discussion with your child...

- Emphasize how important it is to be kind and respectful, online or off.
- Make it clear that if you become aware of involvement in irresponsible online behavior, you will impose an undesirable consequence.
- Talk about the implications of severe cyberbullying that could lead to criminal arrest or civil litigation (see below).

Questions teenagers can ask themselves. Help your child develop self-awareness, empathy, and effective decision-making strategies by learning to ask themselves these questions:

- Am I being kind and demonstrating respect for others?
- How would I feel if someone did the same thing to me or to my best friend?
- What would a trusted adult, who is important in my life, think?
- Is this action in violation of any agreements, rules, or laws?

- How would I feel if my actions were reported on the front page of a newspaper?
- What would happen if everybody did this?
- Would it be OK if I did this in person, or in the real/offline world?
- How would this action reflect on me?

Important: Cyberbullies may have been victims. In some cases, cyberbullies are "retaliators." If your child is victimizing others online, it's possible that she has been bullied herself online or at school. Help your child understand that retaliating is not a smart move. Retaliating only escalates the problem. It never solves the problem. Further, your child could be mistaken as the source of the problem. Ask the school counselor for resources to help you bully-proof your child and assistance to stop any bullying that is occurring at school.

Preventing your child from becoming a victim of cyberbullying

Combat the "tell all" phenomenon. Help your child cultivate the value of protecting privacy and personal information. Your child should understand how risky it is to reveal personal information online, in a searchable public forum. Discourage involvement in the kinds of environments that promote excessive self-disclosure. Point out how such disclosure is being covertly promoted to build audience and to support market research activities.

Take a tour together. Most teen community and blogging sites have policies preventing children under the age of 13 from registering. If your child is approaching the age of 13, visit some teen sites, such as those noted above, together. Look at some information and images being disclosed by teens on these sites. As you visit them, talk about the potential downsides of such public disclosure, including that of someone using such information as cyberbullying fuel. Ask your child to come up with a personal statement of standards for protecting privacy and personal information – the types of information and material your child will and will not disclose online.

Online relationships. Teenagers like to make new "friends" on the Internet, as well as communicate with the "real world" friends they already have. Teenagers need to be reminded that friendships can cool or break up. Ending online relationships in a respectful manner can help to avoid negative repercussions.

Some teenagers are using the Internet to find and develop personal relationships that sometimes lead to sexual discussions and "hookups" (sex with no commitments). Sexually oriented kinds of relationships are fraught with potential dangers. As difficult as healthy relationships are to maintain in the real world, they are more difficult online.

Teenagers will frequently share sensitive information and sometimes even intimate pictures of themselves – thus handing a potential cyberbully material that, if disseminated further, could create significant harm. These relationships frequently break up in ways that result in hurt feelings and disappointment. This can lead to harassment, cyberstalking, or harmful and dangerous dissemination of personal information or images. [Note: Any sexually explicit image of a minor, even if produced by that minor, is illegal child pornography in most countries.]

Ask your child about personal guidelines for having and ending online relationships. Talk about the risks involved. You can find guidelines for "safe cyberdating" by conducting a Web search.

Email precaution. For many reasons – personal safety and spam protection, as well as cyberbullying – Internet users should maintain a personal email address that is shared only with family and very trusted real world friends. For all other communications and registrations on sites, teenagers should establish a "throw-away" email address. This is an email account that can be cancelled if the in-box gets too full of spam, if personal safety has been jeopardized, or if it is necessary to get away from a cyberbully.

Discuss cyberbullying with your child. Take the time to discuss cyberbullying with your child.

- Download news articles that provide "real life" examples of cyberbullying.
- Discuss the very real harm kids are experiencing because of online social cruelty.
- Discuss how some of the prevention and intervention strategies suggested in this document could have been used to prevent or resolve these situations.
- Ask your child whether he or she has been a victim of cyberbullying or has witnessed it and what happened.
- Wrap up the discussion with the assurance that you trust that your child has a sense of how to handle many of these kinds of situations, but that if a situation ever emerges that causes concerns, you are there to help.

Encourage your child to be a bystander who is part of the solution

Your child may think, "If I am just watching and am not part of the activity, then how could I be doing something wrong?" Good question. Easy answer: "Bullies crave an audience. By paying attention to their bullying, you are encouraging their behavior. You are part of the problem."

Empower your child to become a bystander who is part of the solution. Cyberbullying is occurring in online environments where responsible adults are generally not present. Usually the only people who know someone is being victimized are other teenagers. Increased teen intervention and reporting is essential. There are news reports of kids committing suicide or killing a classmate because of cyberbullying.

Kids who report cyberbullying may be saving someone's life!

Responsibility and positive action. Bystanders who are part of the solution not only demonstrate kindness and respect, they embrace something more: a sense of responsibility for the well-being of others and the willingness to go out of their way to help another. Empower your child to become a bystander who is part of the solution by...

- Stressing the importance of speaking out against bullies, or, if this is not safe under the circumstances, providing private help to the victim or reporting such actions to you or another responsible adult.

- Discussing the intervention strategies that are presented in this document so your child feels empowered to offer help to victims.
- Working together to respond to incidents of cyberbullying by supporting the victim or downloading material and reporting the incident to school or to the victim's parents, if appropriate.
- Your child may have other suggestions. Because this is their online world, it's important to listen to teenagers' ideas!

Important: Your child should also know to promptly report to you or the school if he or she sees communications in which another teenager is threatening violence or suicide.

Signs of cyberbullying victimization

The following are important signs that your child may be the victim of cyberbullying:

- Emotional upset – depression, sadness, anxiety, anger, or fear, especially if there is nothing readily apparent that could be causing this upset, or if your child seems especially upset after using the Internet. [Big hint: You're unlikely to be able to tell if your child is emotionally upset after using the Internet if the computer is hidden in a bedroom!]
- Avoidance of friends, school, or other activities.
- Decline in grades.
- Subtle comments that reflect emotional distress or disturbed online or in-person relationships.

Engage your child in a conversation about bullying and cyberbullying...

- "I am worried about you because you don't seem happy. Are there kids at school or online who are picking on you?"
- Sometimes kids who are being picked on or bullied by others are afraid to tell a parent. "Do you feel ok about telling me if someone is picking on you or bullying you?"
- "Sometimes you seem very upset when you use the computer. Is someone saying mean things to you online?"
- Download a news story about cyberbullying and use the story as a conversation starter. "I found this story about cyberbullying. Has anything like this ever happened to you?"

If your child is showing the above signs, you may want to investigate what is happening online prior to talking with your child (see "Stay involved" above). If your child is highly depressed, appears to be suicidal, or has made a suicide attempt, it is critically important to find out what is happening to your child online (as well as offline). You may need the assistance of someone with greater technical and Internet expertise to help investigate. Do not delay! Reports of teenagers committing suicide in response to cyberbullying are emerging.

Responding to cyberbullying

When it's clear that cyberbullying is going on, the steps parents or victims can take depend on the severity of the situation. Cyberbullying activities may range from rude, unkind comments, to ongoing cruel harassment, to lies and impersonation, to outright physical threats. But there are protective actions you can take in any case.

Save the evidence. The first step is extremely important: Save all evidence of the cyberbullying – any email files, instant messaging or chat sessions, blog or Web pages.

Identify the cyberbully, if this can be done easily. Most likely the cyberbully is someone your child knows from school. If the bully is trying to be anonymous, there are ways to trace him or her. Your Internet Service Provider may be able to help. There are a number of companies that specialize in email or web tracing services – do a web search for "email tracing" to find these companies. If the bullying is severe enough to justify contacting the police or an attorney (see below), leave the identification job to them. But beware. Remember that sometimes a teenager may invade the account of another and send out damaging material for the purpose of getting that other teenager into trouble.

Response Options. The following response options range from the minor incidents to major concerns.

Ignore the cyberbully

In some cases, ignoring the cyberbully is the best option. Teenagers should know that if someone starts to flame or harass them in an online communication environment, the best thing to do is to simply leave. Arguing with or trying to convince a bully not to engage in angry or harassing communications merely encourages the bully to continue. Advise your child not to respond. There are two ways to ignore a cyberbully:

- Simply leave the communications environment (chat, IM, email, etc.).

Block all further communications. Use the block function for instant messaging and mobile phones (go to "Options" or "Preferences" and block the cyberbully's screen name). With email, set the email filter to direct all mail from the cyberbully into a specific folder. This way, it is saved as evidence if needed in the future but is not in your child's regular in-box.

Stop or remove the material

If the cyberbullying is less severe, but persistent and ongoing, there are a variety of things you or your child can try to stop the communications or get the offending material removed. It is important to know that sending or posting inappropriate language is generally a violation of the "Terms and Conditions" of most web sites, Internet service providers, email services, and mobile phone providers. Most will respond to complaints promptly. Here are possible steps:

- Send one message to the cyberbully stating clearly: "Do not communicate with me again or I will contact the appropriate authorities." Save the message you have sent.
- Contact the Internet service provider of the cyberbully (you can determine the ISP from the email address),

forward the messages that have been received, and request that the account be terminated. You can send the message to abuse@<domain name of provider> or visit the web site of the service provider and look for a page on complaint procedures.

- If the cyberbully's comments appear on a third-party Web site, such as a teen community or web host (e.g. <http://www.webhostname.com/~kid'sname.html>) go to site's home page (e.g. <http://www.webhostname.com>) and look for words like "Terms and Conditions" to find out the complaint procedure. Provide the troubling material, indicate how it violates the site's Terms and Conditions, and request prompt removal.
- If the offending comments are on a web site with its own domain name (e.g. http://www.xyzkid.com), you can usually find the owner of the site and the company that hosts the site by going to Whois (http://www.whois.net) and typing in the domain name. This will usually tell you the hosting company's web site. Then go to the hosting company's site, find the Terms and Conditions and complaint procedure, and file a complaint.
- If the cyberbully's comments are coming through text on a mobile phone, trace the number and contact the phone company.
- Change your child's email address and/or screen name, and possibly email provider.
- Change the phone number the cyberbully has been using.

Contact the cyberbully's parents

The parents of the cyberbully may be totally unaware, concerned to find that their child has engaged in this kind of activity, and respond very effectively. Or the parents could be very defensive. Providing the evidence that has been downloaded is an essential step. In some cases it may be wise to avoid direct confrontation and send parents a letter, including the downloaded material, and request that the behavior cease.

Contact your school

On-campus cyberbullying. This is straightforward to most schools. If any cyberbullying between students is occurring through the district's Internet system or via cell phone while the students are on school grounds, school administrators or counselors can and should intervene.

Off-campus cyberbullying. Schools should be informed about cyberbullying incidents among their students, especially if there is the possibility that the cyberbullying could lead a student to commit violence against another, suicide, or other harm.

Public school administrators have difficulties disciplining students for off-campus actions due to constitutional free speech protections. However, if the victim and bully both attend the same school, there is a strong likelihood that cyberbullying is accompanied by face-to-face bullying. Administrators can respond to the on-campus activities. However, some parents of students who are victims of cyberbullying may be chagrined to find that the cyberbullying is in retaliation for face-to-face bullying committed by their child.

School administrators may also help resolve concerns even if the cyberbullying is off-campus – especially in cases where they affect academic performance and socializing on school grounds. Administrators or counselors may be willing to facilitate in some form of counseling or mediation among the students involved or to communicate with the parents of the cyberbully.

[Resources for schools to address cyberbullying are available at <<http://cyberbully.org>>]

Contact an attorney or file a small claims action

Civil law provides for victims to sue a bully or the bully's parents to recover damages. In most states in the US, there are parental liability laws that allow someone who is injured by the intentional tort (wrongdoing) committed by a minor to hold the parents of that minor financially responsible. The following are the commonly accepted legal elements for intentional torts committed in the US. Other countries may have similar laws.

Defamation

- Publication of a false, damaging statement
- The statement identified the victim
- The statement harmed the victim's reputation in the community
- The person publishing the statement did so intentionally or failed to take necessary steps to ensure the statement was not published

Invasion of Privacy

- Public disclosure of private facts, when the result would be highly offensive to a reasonable person; or
- Presenting someone in a false light in the public eye, where the false presentation would be highly offensive to a reasonable person

Intentional infliction of emotional distress

When a person's intentional or reckless actions are

outrageous, intolerable, and have caused extreme distress – the actions must be very outrageous and regarded as utterly intolerable in a civilized community

In cyberbullying incidents that meet these standards, an attorney can send a letter to the bully's parents outlining the possible legal risks and requesting that the material be removed and not reappear. Or, if the damage has been severe and the parents of the victim are incurring expenses in the form of counseling, etc., or if the bullying has resulted in failing grades that are limiting college opportunities, etc., a claim for damages may be justified. Parents of victims may also investigate the possibility of filing an action against the parents through small claims court.

Contact the police

In most countries there are likely to be national-level criminal laws that could be applied to some instances of cyberbullying. There are also criminal laws at the state/provincial or smaller jurisdiction level. All of these laws are different. You should contact your local police if the cyberbullying involves:

- Death threats or threats of other forms of violence to a person or property
- Excessive intimidation or extortion
- Threats or intimidation that involve any form of bias or discrimination based on race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, etc.
- Any evidence of sexual exploitation.

Key point to remember

The Internet holds tremendous promise for creating a better world – a more peaceful and respectful world. This will not occur if online freedom is not balanced with personal responsibility. We have to focus on empowering young people with the values, skills, and motivation to protect themselves, avoid doing harm to others, and take personal responsibility to promote a kind and respectful online world.

Center for Safe and Responsible Internet Use

Web site: <<http://cyberbully.org>> or <<http://csriu.org>>

Written by Nancy Willard, M.S., J.D., Director CSRIU

Edited by Anne Collier, NetFamilyNews.org

© 2004 CSRIU Permission to make one copy for personal use is granted. Please contact CSRIU for additional permissions.

Check out <<http://cyberbully.org>> for more cyberbully prevention resources for parents and educators.

See <<http://cyberbully.org/newsreports.html>> for links to news stories that demonstrate the above activities, as well as other concerns discussed in this document.

Check out NetFamilyNews <<http://netfamilynews.org>> to sign up for a weekly newsletter for parents.
