

Parent Guide to Cyberbullying and Cyberthreats

Young people have fully embraced the Internet as both an environment and a tool for socializing. Via the Internet and other technologies, they send e-mail, create their own Web sites, post intimate personal news in blogs (online interactive journals), send text messages and images via cell phone, contact each other through IMs (instant messages), chat in chat rooms, post to discussion boards, and seek out new friends in teen sites.

Unfortunately, there are increasing reports of teenagers (and sometimes younger children) using these technologies to post damaging text or images to bully their peers or engage in other aggressive behavior. There are also increasing reports of teens posting material that raises concerns that they are considering an act of violence toward others or themselves.

This guide provides parents with insight into these concerns and guidelines to prevent your child from being victimized by or engaging in online harmful behavior. It also provides guidance on things you can do in either case.

CYBERBULLYING

Cyberbullying is being cruel to others by sending or posting harmful material or engaging in other forms of social aggression using the Internet or other digital technologies. Cyberbullying can take different forms:

- Flaming—Online fights using electronic messages with angry and vulgar language.

Joe and Alec’s online exchange got angrier and angrier. Insults were flying. Joe warned Alec to watch his back in school the next day.

- Harassment—Repeatedly sending nasty, mean, and insulting messages.

Sara reported to the principal that Kayla was bullying another student. When Sara got home, she had 35 angry messages in her e-mail box. The anonymous cruel messages kept coming—some from strangers.

- Denigration—“Dissing” someone online. Sending or posting gossip or rumors about a person to damage his or her reputation or friendships.

Some boys created a “We Hate Joe” Web site where they posted jokes, cartoons, gossip, and rumors, all dissing Joe.

- Impersonation—Pretending to be someone else and sending or posting material to get that person in trouble or danger or to damage that person’s reputation or friendships.

Laura watched closely as Emma logged on to her account and discovered her password. Later, Laura logged on to Emma’s account and sent a hurtful message to Emma’s boyfriend, Adam.

- Outing—Sharing someone’s secrets or embarrassing information or images online.

Greg, an obese high school student, was changing in the locker room after gym class. Matt took a picture of him with his cell phone camera. Within seconds, the picture was flying around the phones at school.

- Trickery—Talking someone into revealing secrets or embarrassing information, then sharing it online.

Katie sent a message to Jessica pretending to be her friend and asking lots of questions. Jessica responded, sharing really personal information. Katie forwarded the message to lots of other people with her own comment, “Jessica is a loser.”

- Exclusion—Intentionally and cruelly excluding someone from an online group.

Millie tries hard to fit in with a group of girls at school. She recently got on the “outs” with a leader in this group. Now

Millie has been blocked from the friendship links of all of the girls.

- **Cyberstalking**—Repeated, intense harassment and denigration that includes threats or creates significant fear.

When Annie broke up with Sam, he sent her many angry, threatening, pleading messages. He spread nasty rumors about her to her friends and posted a sexually suggestive picture she had given him in a sex-oriented discussion group, along with her e-mail address and cell phone number.

CYBERTHREATS

Cyberthreats are either threats or “distressing material”—general statements that make it sound like the writer is emotionally upset and may be considering harming someone else, harming himself or herself, or committing suicide.

Jeff wrote in his blog: “I’m a retarded [expletive] for ever believing that things would change. I’m starting to regret sticking around. It takes courage to turn the gun on your self, takes courage to face death.” Jeff was also sharing his plans for an attack with a friend via e-mail.

Celia met Andrew in a chat room. Andrew wrote: “bring a gun to school, ur on the front of every. . . . i cant imagine going through life without killing a few people. . . . people can be kissing my shotgun straight out of doom. . . . if i dont like the way u look at me, u die. . . . i choose who lives and who dies”

Greg set up an anonymous IM account and sent a threatening message to his older sister suggesting that she would be killed the next day at school.

Sometimes when teens post what appears to be a threat, they are just joking. Other times, the threat could be very real. There are two very important things that your child must understand about online threats:

- *Don’t make threats online.* If you post a threat online, adults may not be able to tell whether the threat is real. There are criminal laws against making threats. If you make a cyberthreat, even if you are just joking, you could be suspended, expelled, or even arrested.

- *Report threats or distressing material.* If you see a threat or distressing material posted online, it could be very real. It is extremely important to report this to an adult. If the threat is real, someone could be seriously injured.

Just in case you are wondering—these are all true stories. Jeff killed nine people and then killed himself. Celia reported her online conversation to her father, who contacted the police. The police found that Andrew had many weapons, including an AK-47. He is now in prison. Greg’s sister told her parents, her parents told the school, and the school went into “lock-down.” Greg was identified easily—and arrested for making a threat.

HOW, WHO, AND WHY

- Cyberbullying or cyberthreat material—text or images—may be posted on personal Web sites or blogs or transmitted via e-mail, discussion groups, message boards, chat, IM, or cell phones.
- A cyberbully may be a person whom the target knows or an online stranger. Or the cyberbully may be anonymous, so it is not possible to tell. A cyberbully may solicit involvement of other people who do not know the target—cyberbullying by proxy.

Sue was really angry at Kelsey, who she thought stole her boyfriend. Sue convinced Marilyn to post anonymous comments on a discussion board slamming Kelsey. Marilyn was eager to win Sue’s approval and fit into her group of friends, so she did as Sue requested.

- Cyberbullying and cyberthreats may be related to in-school bullying. Sometimes, the student who is victimized at school is also being bullied online. But other times, the person who is victimized at school becomes a cyberbully and retaliates online. Still other times, the student who is victimized will share his or her anger or depression online as distressing material.

Brad’s blog is filled with racist profanity. Frequently, he targets black and Latino student leaders, as well as minority teachers, in his angry verbal assaults.

- Cyberbullying may involve relationships. If a relationship breaks up, one person may start to cyberbully the other person.

Other times, teens may get into online fights about relationships.

- Cyberbullying may be based on hate or bias—bullying others because of race, religion, physical appearance (including obesity), or sexual orientation.
- Teens may think that cyberbullying is entertaining—a game to hurt other people.

Sitting around the computer with her friends, Judy asked, “Who can we mess with?” Judy started IM-ing with Brittany, asking her many personal questions. The next day, the girls were passing around Brittany’s IM at school.

- Teens may have no one to talk with about how bad they are feeling and how horrible their life is, so they describe their feelings online. They might think that if they post this material online, they will meet someone who cares about them. Unfortunately, they may meet a dangerous stranger who will do them harm or other hurt teens, who only reinforce their bad feelings.

IMPACT OF CYBERBULLYING

It is widely known that face-to-face bullying can result in long-term psychological harm to targets. This harm includes low self-esteem, depression, 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 . . .

- Online communications can be extremely vicious.
- There is no escape for those who are being cyberbullied—victimization is ongoing, 24/7.
- Cyberbullying material can be distributed worldwide and is often irretrievable.
- Cyberbullies can be anonymous and can solicit the involvement of unknown “friends.”

Teens may be reluctant to tell adults what is happening online or through their cell phones because they are emotionally traumatized, think it is their fault, fear greater retribution, or fear online activities or cell phone use will be restricted.

A group of girls at Alan's school had been taunting him through instant messaging, teasing him about his small size, daring him to do things he couldn't do, suggesting that the world would be a better place if he committed suicide. One day, he shot himself. His last online message was "Sometimes the only way to get the respect you deserve is to die."

BULLY, TARGET, AND 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:

- *Bullies:* "Put-downers" who harass and demean others, especially those they think are different or inferior, or "get-backers," who have been bullied by others and are using the Internet to retaliate or vent their anger.
- *Targets:* The targets of the cyberbully.
- *Harmful bystanders:* Those who encourage and support the bully or watch the bullying from the sidelines, but do nothing to intervene or help the target.
- *Helpful bystanders:* Those who seek to stop the bullying, protest against it, provide support to the target, or tell an adult. We need more of this kind of bystander!

RELATED ONLINE RISKY BEHAVIOR

There are other concerns about youth online behavior that parents should be aware of. Teens who do not have strong real-world connections appear to be the ones most attracted to these risky behaviors.

- *Disclosing personal information:* Young people are disclosing personal contact information and massive amounts of sensitive personal information in public online sites or through personal communications. Teens seem to be unaware of the public and permanent nature of these disclosures and the ability of others to send the material they place in electronic form to anyone, anywhere.
- *Internet addiction:* Internet addiction is defined as an excessive amount of time spent using the Internet, resulting in lack of healthy engagement in other areas of life. The Internet offers

a time-warped, 24/7 place where children and teens can get away from their real-world concerns.

- *Suicide and self-harm communities:* Depressed young people are interacting with sites and groups that provide information on suicide and self-harm methods (for example, cutting, anorexia, fainting) and encouragement for such activities.
- *Hate group recruitment and gangs:* Sites and groups that foster hatred against “others” are actively recruiting angry, disconnected youth. Some youth informally use the Internet to coordinate troublesome and dangerous activities.
- *Risky sexual behavior:* Young people are using Internet communities and matching services to make connections with others for sexual activities, ranging from online discussions about sex to “hook-ups.” They may post or provide sexually suggestive or explicit pictures or videos.
- *Violent gaming:* Violent gaming frequently involves sexual or other bias-based aggression. Young people often engage in online simulation games, which reinforce the perception that all interactions online, including violent ones, are “just a game.”

YOU CAN'T SEE ME—I CAN'T SEE YOU

Why is it that when people use the Internet or other technologies, they sometimes do things that they would never do in the real world? Here are some of the reasons:

- *You can't see me:* When people use the Internet, they perceive that they are invisible. The perception can be enhanced by creating anonymous accounts. People are not really invisible—online activities can be traced. But if you think you are invisible, this removes concerns about detection, disapproval, or punishment.
- *I can't see you:* When people use the Internet they do not receive tangible feedback about the consequences of their actions, including actions that have hurt someone. Lack of feedback interferes with empathy and leads to the misperception that no harm has resulted.
- *Everybody does it:* The perception of invisibility and lack of tangible feedback support risky or irresponsible online social norms, including these:

“Life online is just a game.” Allows teens to ignore the harmful real-world consequences of online actions and creates the expectation that others will simply ignore or dismiss any online harm.

“Look at me—I’m a star.” Supports excessive disclosure of intimate information and personal attacks on others, generally done for the purpose of attracting attention.

“It’s not me. It’s my online persona.” Allows teens to deny responsibility for actions taken by one of their online identities.

“What happens online stays online.” Supports the idea that one should not bring issues related to what has happened online into the outside world and should not disclose online activity to adults.

“On the Internet, I have the free-speech right to write or post anything I want regardless of the harm it might cause to another.” Supports harmful speech and cruel behavior as a free-speech right.

STAY INVOLVED

Many parents think that if their children are home using a computer they are safe and not getting into trouble. Nothing could be further from the truth. Your child could be the target of cyberbullying or be causing harm to others from your own family room.

Some parents think they have protected their children because they have installed filtering software. Filtering software provides a false sense of security. Not only can youth still access material parents don’t want them to access, filtering cannot prevent cyberbullying or address other concerns.

Make it your business to know what your child is doing online. 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. Here are some ways to stay involved:

- Keep the computer in a public place in the house. Periodically check on what your child is doing. Discuss the kinds of Internet activities your child enjoys. Find out who your child’s online friends are.

- Help your child distinguish between three kinds of personal information:

Personal contact information: Name, address, phone number, and any other information that could allow someone to make contact in the real world. This information should be shared only in secure environments, when absolutely necessary, and with your permission.

Intimate personal information: Private and personal information that should only be discussed with a relative, close friend, or professional. This information should never be shared in public online communities or through public communications such as chat or discussion groups. Disclosures in private communications with trustworthy friends or in professional online support environments may be appropriate.

Personal interest information: Non-intimate information about interests and activities. This kind of information can generally be safely shared on public community sites or communication environments, including blogs, personal Web pages, chat, and discussion groups.

- Increase your child’s online “stranger danger” awareness. Anyone your child meets online should be considered potentially dangerous until it is possible to determine from independent real-world sources who this person is and that this person has a background that provides assurances of safety.
- Be sure you know the online communities your child participates in and your child’s usernames in these communities. Review your child’s public postings, including your child’s profiles, Web pages, and blogs. Discourage active involvement in the kinds of environments that promote excessive self-disclosure of intimate information and rude behavior. Your child may object and claim that these postings should be considered private. A child who makes this argument simply does not understand. The material posted on these sites is not private—anyone can read it. If your child is uncomfortable about your review of the material, then this is a good clue that the material should not be posted.
- Be up front with your child that you will periodically investigate the files on the computer, the browser history files and buddy lists, and your child’s public online activities. Tell your child that you may review his or her private communication activities if

you have reason to believe that you will find evidence of unsafe or irresponsible behavior.

- Watch out for secretive behavior. It's a danger sign if your child rapidly switches screens as you approach the computer or attempts to hide online behavior by emptying the history file.
- You can install keystroke monitoring software that will record all of your child's online activities. The use of such software raises trust concerns. The best way to use such software is as deterrence. Tell your child monitoring software has been installed but not yet activated and explain what actions on his or her part could lead to your investigation. These actions could include not being willing to talk about online activities, late night use, extensive use, decline in grades, evidence your child is seeking to cover his or her online tracks, report of inappropriate activity, appearing really upset after Internet use, and the like. If your child has engaged in unsafe or inappropriate behavior, the most appropriate consequence is the use of monitoring software and consistent review of all public and private online activity.

Important Note

If ever you find any evidence that your child is interacting with a sexual predator, do not confront your child. Your child could warn or run off with the predator. Call your local police and ask for a youth or computer crimes expert. If you suspect this kind of activity, consider installing or activating monitoring software but not telling your child.

PREVENT YOUR CHILD FROM BEING A CYBERBULLY

- Talk with your child about the value of treating others with kindness and your expectation that your child will act in accord with this value online.
- Make it clear that if your child engages in irresponsible online behavior, you will restrict Internet access, activate monitoring software, and review all online activity. Talk about the implications of cyberbullying that could lead to criminal arrest or civil litigation. Also, discuss the point that if your child misuses e-mail or a cell phone that is on a family account, the entire account may be terminated.

- Help your child develop self-awareness, empathy, and effective decision making by asking these questions:

Am I being kind and showing respect for others and myself?

How would I feel if someone did the same thing to me or to my best friend?

How do I feel inside?

What would a trusted adult, someone who is important in my life, think?

Is this action in violation of any agreements, rules, or laws?

How would I feel if others could see me?

Would it be okay if I did this in my home or at school?

How does this action reflect on me?

- Warn against online retaliation. Some teens who engage in cyberbullying are retaliating against teens who are bullying them face-to-face. Help your child understand that retaliating is not smart because when targets lose their cool, it allows the bullies to justify their behavior. 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.

IF YOUR CHILD IS CYBERBULLYING

If you become aware that your child is engaged in cyberbullying through your own investigation or through a report from the school or another parent, it is essential that you respond in a firm and responsible manner.

If you're like most parents, you will be motivated by a desire to stop your child from harming another. But you should also be aware that if you know your child is cyberbullying and fail to take action that stops your child from engaging in such harmful behavior—and that ensures the removal of material already posted—there is a significantly increased potential that you can be held financially liable for the harm caused by your child!

Useful actions to take are as follows:

- Establish very clear prohibitions about behaving in this manner.

- Warn against taking any action in retaliation or asking anyone else to engage in retaliation.
- Immediately install monitoring software, if you have not yet done so. Tell your child that all Internet activities will be monitored.
- Direct your child not to access the Internet anywhere but at school or at home, and advise that evidence of access from other locations will lead to further loss of privileges.

PREVENT YOUR CHILD FROM BECOMING A TARGET

It is important to bully-proof your child by building his or her self-confidence and resilience. Pay special attention if your child has traits that can lead to victimization, including obesity or the perception that your child is gay or lesbian. Your child may also be at risk if he or she is an alternative thinker, unwilling to play social games, and either wants desperately to be one of the “in crowd” or is inclined to reject association with them.

Ask your child whether he or she has been a target of cyberbullying or has witnessed it and what happened. Assure your child that you trust him or her to handle many of these kinds of situations, but that if a situation ever emerges that causes concerns, you are there to help. Make it clear that you will not respond by unilaterally restricting all Internet activities.

SIGNS OF VICTIMIZATION

If you are concerned that your child may be a target, try to engage your child in a conversation about bullying and cyberbullying and pay closer attention to what he or she is doing online. The following indicate that your child may be the target of cyberbullying:

- Signs of depression, sadness, anxiety, anger, or fear, especially if nothing apparent could be causing this upset or if your child seems especially upset after using the Internet or cell phone.
- Avoidance of friends, school, and activities, or a decline in grades, or both.
- Subtle comments that reflect emotional distress or disturbed online or in-person relationships.

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. You may need the assistance of someone with greater technical expertise to help investigate.

ENCOURAGE YOUR CHILD TO BE A HELPFUL BYSTANDER

Cyberbullying is occurring in online environments where responsible adults are generally not present. Youth are also posting material that provides clues they are considering committing an act of violence against others or themselves in these online environments. Usually, the only people who know someone is being victimized or is depressed and considering violence or suicide are other teenagers. Increased teen intervention and reporting is essential!

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

- Help your child gain a sense of responsibility for the well-being of others and the willingness to go out of the way to help another.
- Stress the importance of speaking out against bullies, or, if this is not safe, providing private help to the target or reporting such actions to you or another responsible adult.
- Make sure your child knows how important it is to report any direct threats or distressing material he or she may witness online to you, the school, a school violence or suicide hotline, or the police.

Review the two cyberthreat examples presented earlier:

Celia saved and reported the chat session. Andrew’s intentions were found to be real, and he is now in prison. Many people knew Jeff was suicidal and planning an attack at his school. No one reported it. Jeff killed nine people and himself.

RESPONDING TO CYBERBULLYING

Help your child to . . .

- Develop personal guidelines for online involvement.

- Make a realistic evaluation of the quality of an online community and the benefits of remaining or leaving.
- Recognize the need to leave an online situation that has gotten out of control.
- Conduct a self-assessment of his or her behavior or communications that may be contributing to victimization.
- Learn how to respond to any harmful communications. Your child should know that if he or she is attacked online it is absolutely critical not to respond in anger. Anger shows weakness, which will encourage more bullying. Because Internet communications can be delayed, your child can take the time to calm down and prepare a response that is strong and assertive.
- Know when and how to gain assistance from an adult. Tell your child you expect that he or she can handle many incidents but that it is important to contact an adult if:

He or she is really upset and not sure what to do.

The cyberbullying could be a crime.

Any cyberbullying is (or might be) occurring through the district Internet system or via a cell phone at school.

He or she is being bullied by the same person at school.

The cyberbully is anonymous.

The cyberbully is bullying other teens who may be more vulnerable and too afraid to get help.

CYBERBULLYING RESPONSE OPTIONS

Save the Evidence

Save all e-mail and text messages, as well as records of chat or IM sessions. Download all Web pages. This should be done in all cases.

Identify the Cyberbully

Identification could require some detective work. Look for clues wherever the cyberbully is posting. Remember, a cyberbully may impersonate someone else or could be a proxy cyberbully. You may not need to know the identity of the cyberbully to take action.

- Ask your Internet service (ISP) provider to identify the source or contact a company that traces the identity of people online.
- If you can demonstrate that a student may be involved, have the district technology director search district Internet use records.
- If you intend to file a lawsuit, consider having an attorney help identify the cyberbully.
- If a crime has occurred, ask the police to identify the cyberbully.

Tell the Cyberbully to Stop

Your child can send the cyberbully a nonemotional, assertive message telling the cyberbully to stop.

Ignore the Cyberbully

Help your child block or filter all communications through his or her e-mail and IM contact list. Your child can also avoid going to the site or group where he or she has been attacked or change his or her e-mail address, account, username, or phone number.

File a Complaint

Cyberbullying is a violation of the terms of use of most Web sites, ISPs, and cell phone companies. File a complaint by providing the harmful messages or a link to the harmful material and ask that the account be terminated and any harmful material removed. Make sure you keep all communications. Here are the steps:

- If the cyberbully is using e-mail, contact the ISP of the cyberbully (you can determine the ISP from the e-mail address), contact the company at support@<ISP>, or look on the ISP's site for "Contact Us."
- If the material appears on a third-party Web site (with a URL such as www.webhostname.com/~kid'sname.html) go to the site's home page and file a complaint through "Contact Us."
- If the material is on a Web site with its own domain name (www.xyzkid.com), go to Whois (www.whois.net) to find the owner of the site and the host company. Go to the host company's Web site and file a complaint through "Contact Us."
- If the cyberbully is using a cell phone, trace the number and contact the company.

Contact Your School

Your school may not be able to discipline a student for totally off-campus actions because of free-speech protections. But if the cyberbully is using the district Internet system or is also bullying your child at school, or if your child's participation in school has been substantially disrupted, the school can intervene with formal discipline. Your school can also contact the parents of the cyberbully to get the cyberbullying to stop.

Contact the Cyberbully's Parents

The cyberbully's parents may be totally unaware that their child has engaged in this kind of activity, concerned about it when they find out, and both willing and able to get the cyberbullying to stop. Or they could become very defensive. Avoid meeting with them face-to-face. Instead, send the cyberbully's parents a certified letter that includes the downloaded material and requests that the cyberbullying stop and all harmful material be removed.

Contact an Attorney

Cyberbullying could meet the standards for defamation, invasion of privacy, or intentional infliction of emotional distress. An attorney can send a letter to the cyberbully's parents demanding that the cyberbullying stop. An attorney can also file a lawsuit against the cyberbully's parents for financial damages (money because your child has been harmed) and an injunction (requirement that the cyberbullying stop and material be removed).

Contact the Police

If the cyberbullying appears to be a crime, contact the police. Criminal cyberbullying involves threats of violence, coercion, obscene or harassing text messages, harassment or stalking, hate or bias crimes, creating or sending sexually explicit pictures, sexual exploitation, or taking a picture of someone in a private place.