

Tips for Parents: Cyberbullying

A second at the keypad can cause long-lasting damage. As more and more kids discover new ways to share information, they have unfortunately found more and more ways to harm each other. Just as nasty comments on a playground can cause a lot of pain, cyberbullying can really hurt our kids.

What Is Cyberbullying?

It happens when kids use their phones or the Internet to create and send harassing or humiliating messages and images. Nasty comments, lies, and embarrassing photos, videos, and polls can be spread widely through instant messaging (IM) or phone texting and by posts on social networking sites. It can happen anytime—at school or home—and can involve large groups of kids. The combination of the boldness created by being anonymous and the desire to be seen as “cool” can cause a kid who normally wouldn’t say anything mean face-to-face to show off for other kids.

Why It Matters

Nothing crushes kids’ self-confidence faster than humiliation. And just imagine a public humiliation sent instantly to everyone they know. Sadly, hurtful information posted on the Internet is extremely difficult to prevent or remove, and millions of people can see it. Most cyberbullying happens when adults aren’t around, so parents and teachers often see only the depression or anxiety that results from being hurt or bullied. This emotional damage can last a lifetime.

Parent Tips for All Kids

- Give them a code of conduct. Tell them that if they wouldn’t say something to someone’s face, they shouldn’t text it, IM it, or post it.

- Ask your kids if they know someone who has been cyberbullied. Sometimes they will open up about others’ pain before admitting their own.

Parent Tips for Elementary School Kids

- Keep online socializing to a minimum. Let them use sites like Webkinz or Club Penguin where chat is prescribed or prescreened.

- Explain the basics of correct cyber behavior.

Tell your kids that things like lying, telling secrets, and being mean still hurt in cyberspace.

- Tell kids not to share passwords with their friends.

Parent Tips for Middle School Kids

- Monitor their use. See what they’re posting; check their mobile messages.

- Tell your kids what to do if they’re harassed. They shouldn’t respond or retaliate; they should block bullies immediately, and they should tell you or an adult they trust. They shouldn’t delete the messages because, in persistent cases, the content should be reported to a cell or Internet service provider.

- If your kid is doing the bullying, establish strict consequences and stick to them. That goes for mean or sexual comments about teachers, friends, and relatives.

- Remind them that all private information can be made public. Posts on friends’ walls, private IMs, intimate photos, little “in” jokes can all be cut, pasted, and sent around. If they don’t want the world to see it, they’d better not post or send it.

- Don’t start what you don’t want to finish. Game chat can get ugly fast. Make sure your kids are respectful because hurtful retaliation happens all the time.

Parent Tips for High School Kids

- Tell kids to think before they reveal. At this age, kids experiment with all sorts of activities, many of which should not be made public. Remind your teens that anything they post can be misused by someone else.

- Remind them they aren’t too old to ask for your help. There are things some kids can handle on their own, but, sometimes, they just need help. Coming to their parents isn’t babyish; it’s safe.

Source: Common Sense Media, www.commonsensemedia.org/.

