

Eight Ways to Deal with Cyberbullies

February 16, 2007

Summary Eight Ways to Deal with Cyberbullies

Introduction

Like so many other facets of your kids' lives, bullying has now gone online too. If you think your kids haven't experienced bullying in the digital schoolyard-think again. Half of all kids have been bullied in cyberspace, and just as many admit to bullying others, according to a 2004 survey by WiredSafety.org, a nonprofit safety and education group.

Cyberbullies tend to use the same tactics as they do in the offline world. They torment and tease other kids from a distance using email, web sites, online games, instant messaging, blogs and community sites like MySpace or American Online chat rooms. Online taunts sting just like they do offline, but on the Internet cyberbullies can often stay anonymous, hiding behind fake email addresses and screen names.

There's no doubt cyberbullying can be devastating. For instance, some bullies harass their targets with a barrage of instant messages, like "Everyone hates you," or "You are a loser." Other cyberbullies create web sites that mock or humiliate other kids, such as setting up online polls with themes like: "Vote for the ten ugliest girls in school." Cyberbullies can also impersonate their target, for example, posting fake online ads soliciting dates on their behalf. Or hacking into the victim's email account and sending hateful messages to their friends. If your child is a victim of online bullying, there are a number of escalating steps you can take, says Nancy E. Willard, author of the book *Cyberbullying and Cyberthreats: Responding to the challenge of online social cruelty, threats, and distress*.

Identify and block

First, ask your child not to respond or retaliate, no matter how tempting it may be to "fight back." If you can identify who's cyberbullying your child, block any further communications. In your instant message program go to People or Friends in the main menu and choose Block User or Remove Friend, for instance. In your email program, add the offending email address to your blacklist. For assistance in online sleuthing, contact WiredSafety.org, whose trained volunteers can also help you try to track down who's behind the **online harassment**.

Set boundaries

You, not your kids, should also contact the bully (or bullies) and demand the offending behavior stop. If you don't know their real identity, send an email or IM.

Warn them that you will contact their parents or school, too, if the behavior continues.

File a complaint

Most cyberbullying behavior-harassment, threats, invasion of privacy, stalking-are violations of a web site or Internet service provider's "terms of service." You can file a complaint with the service and that could lead to the suspension or termination of the cyberbully's (or his or her parents') Internet access.

Contact the school

If you know the bully attends the same school as your child, teachers and administrators might be able to help. Keep in mind, however, that due to free speech rights, schools often have little leverage over what goes on outside the classroom. Some schools are incorporating anti-cyberbullying terms into students' online access agreements, so if the bully contacted your child from a school computer, he or she could be in big trouble. Make sure to report the incident either way.

Send a certified letter

If you've done all you can and the bullying hasn't stopped, send the child's parents a certified "cease and desist" letter. Along with the letter, include computer print-outs of the bullying behavior, such as emails or IM transcripts. Ask the parents to step in and put a stop to the cyberbullying. Willard, who is also a lawyer and director of the Center for Safe and Responsible Internet Use, says certifying the letter proves the parents are aware of their child's behavior and can be held responsible if it still doesn't stop.

Call an attorney

In the worst case scenario, a lawyer can help you consider filing a civil suit against bullies and/or their parents for defamation, harassment or other causes. Sometimes the threat of a suit is enough to dissuade cyberbullies.

Contact the local police

If there's any evidence that the cyberbully's tactics include criminal actions, such as hate crimes, physical threats or talk of brandishing weapons at school, contact your local police immediately. Cyberbullies who post surreptitious locker-room photos of their victims online can also be brought up on charges of child pornography. Make sure to print examples of the offending behavior and pass it on to the police. The police can use your complaint to gather any other admissible evidence from your child's computer, if need be.

Talk with your kids about what's acceptable

Anne Collier, editor of NetFamilyNews.org, an email newsletter about online safety for kids, says to truly stop cyberbullying, however, you have to first know

what's happening when your kids are online. Kids are often reluctant to tell parents about cyberbullying or anything else that goes on online for fear parents will only make things worse. Others feel that what they do on the Internet is "private." Williard says that nothing could be further from the truth: "Kids need to know that the Internet is a public space and need to treat it as such." Willard suggests that you get to know your child's screen names and email addresses and don't hesitate to "Google" (or search) for your kid's online identities. She also says parents should be up front-so tell your kids you'll be checking up on them periodically. And communicate with your kid's friends' parents, she says. Setting expectations not just for your child but everyone else can avoid future problems.

"It takes a digital village to raise a child, these days," she says.

Collier adds that you can draft an "acceptable use policy" or contract for the home computer or other text-messaging devices as well. The policy should address every aspect of venturing into cyberspace, including how long your children will stay online each day. Or what web sites, messaging services and chat rooms are acceptable destinations. Also discuss what personal information they can share online, including photos. "Ask your child, 'What will you do if...?' and then write mutually acceptable answers into the contract," Collier advises. A signed promise to be kind to others online and to report cyberbullying (of themselves or others) could go a long way towards preventing problems before they start.