October is National Bullying Prevention Month and we have tips, tools, and even entertainment to spark kindness and compassion in kids.

Parents' Top 10 Cyberbullying Questions

Advice, guidance, and solutions for families battling bullies.

Caroline Knorr • October 2, 2013 •   Categories: Cyberbullying

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With the statistics piling up, it has become increasingly clear that the cruelties inflicted by cyberbullying have become a devastating reality for many tweens and teens.

While bullying is nothing new, when it takes place in the digital world, the public humiliation can shatter young lives. Photos, cruel comments, taunts, and threats travel in an instant, and can be seen, revisited, reposted, linked to, and shared by a huge audience.

We're all responsible for making the digital world a decent place. Below are some of the top concerns we've heard from parents trying to make sense of kids' online behavior.

- What is cyberbullying?
- Because kids use technology so differently from parents, it's important to agree on a basic definition of cyberbullying.
    - A. Cyberbullying is using digital communications (like the Internet and cell phones) to make another person feel angry, sad, or scared, usually again and again.
    - Many experts agree that intent and context are important, too. If the behavior was intentional, that's clearly cyberbullying and there should be consequences. But if a kid inadvertently hurts another kid, then he or she may just need to learn better online behavior.
    - Either way, if your kid feels bad as a result of someone else's online actions, then they may have been targeted and you should take it seriously. Kids' conversations can be rowdy and rude. But if they're not deliberately (and repeatedly) designed to inflict cruelty, and no one feels wronged, then chalk it up to juvenile antics. But keep an eye on it.

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- What's the difference between bullying and cyberbullying?
- Teaching kids the differences between cyberbullying and in-person bullying helps them recognize situations and learn to better deal with them.

All bullying is extremely hurtful to the target and can make kids feel uncomfortable, embarrassed, helpless, sad, and angry. But cyberbullying is a particular form of bullying that often spreads faster and further to more people and can occur at any time of day or night. Online messages can be more confusing or scarier than in-person communication because there are no face-to-face cues to help you understand people's intentions. Helping kids recognize bullying will help them learn to better deal with it.

- **Kids may use more hurtful and extreme language online than offline.** It's not uncommon for cyberbullies to say things like "I wish you would die," "You're ugly," and "Everybody hates you." If a kid said these things out loud in public, a teacher, a parent, or even another kid would probably overhear and intervene.
- **Cyberbullying can happen anytime, whereas regular bullying generally stops when kids go home.** Your kid could get a text, an email, or see a post -- or posts -- on Facebook at any moment.
- **Cyberbullying can be very public.** Posts can spread rapidly to a large, invisible audience because of the nature of how information travels online.
- **Cyberbullies sometimes act anonymously, whereas, with traditional bullying, it's often clear who the bully is.** Anonymity is a cloak that bullies hide behind. Not only does it encourage the bully to be more brazen, it makes him or her hard to trace.
- **In-person bullying can cause both physical and emotional harm.** Cyberbullying causes "only" emotional harm (though it can lead to physical bullying, as well).

- What are some examples of cyberbulling?
- Kids should be able to recognize all of the different types of cyberbullying to be able to handle it if it happens.

Q. Someone took a photo of my kid, wrote a silly caption, and texted it to the entire school. Does that count as cyberbullying -- and what are some other types of cyberbullying?

A. Usually, cyberbullying is characterized by repeated cruelty. Whether this was a thoughtless, one-time prank or a more deliberate act of cruelty, it sounds as if your kid was humiliated over and overas every kid saw the picture. That's what matters most. Hopefully, the kids' parents were notified and your kid recovered.

Here are some other examples of behavior that could cross the line into cyberbullying:

- sending a mean email or IM to someone
- posting mean things about someone on a website
- making fun of someone in an online chat
- doing mean things to someone's character in an online world
- creating a hostile environment in an online world or game
- impersonating someone online -- including creating a fake online profile
- repeatedly texting someone to the point of harassment
- directly threatening or intimidating someone online or in a text
- starting rumors or spreading gossip online
- stealing someone's password and logging into someone else's account
- taking a photo or video and sharing it without the subject's consent, knowing it might be embarrassing

- What should I say to the parent of a cyberbully?
- Assert yourself, but don't threaten or blame. A mutual goal is the best way to help kids in the long run.
- **Q. How do you have the conversation with another parent about their kid's bullying?**
  - A. If your kid is bullied by someone he or she knows, you should probably talk it over -- face to face -- with the kid's parents. These steps can help you achieve a cooperative conflict resolution that will get everyone working together.
  - **Schedule a meeting.** While your impulse may be to confront the kid's parents immediately, it's better to set a time to meet and discuss the situation in a civilized manner.
  - **Explain that you're there for your kid.** Say that your kid reported the incident and you wanted to follow up. That takes the heat off of the parents and allows you both to discuss your kids' actions.
  - **State your goal.** Yes, you're angry and hurt, but your goal should go beyond blaming. You want to end the bullying and have your kids stop engaging in destructive behavior.
  - **Let the other parent talk.** Hear them out; they may have information that you don't know.
  - **Bring the evidence.** Show printouts or the devices on which the bullying occurred.
  - **Work together.** As much as possible, try to enlist the other parent so you can work as a united front.

- **Talk about next steps.** Create a plan for how to proceed as well as a check-in schedule so you can see how things are progressing. Depending on whether things calm down or escalate, you may need to bring in a neutral party — a teacher, counselor, even a community leader — to deal with the problem and help you all move forward.

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- What if my kid is the bully?
- It's hard to admit that your kid might be hurting others. These signs could indicate a problem.
    - **Q. My kid spends a lot of time on the computer and texting, but I don't have time to look over his shoulder constantly. He's gotten in trouble for bullying and I worry that he could be cyberbullying. What signs should I look for?**
    - A. Kids with a history of face-to-face bullying could also start to cyberbully, so you're right to be concerned. Getting help for your son is important for his own well-being -- and that of others. These are some signs of cyberbullying behavior:
    - **Behavior changes.** Is his behavior especially concerning while he's using digital devices?
    - **Slipping grades.** If schoolwork is suffering, there could be a problem.
    - **Moodiness.** He's only happy when he's texting or on the computer -- or he's only happy when he isn't doing it.
    - **Habitual use.** His phone is constantly buzzing and he's using the computer or texting at all hours.
    - **Secretive or evasive behavior.** He won't let you see anything he does online or on his phone; he switches screens quickly when you walk by.
    - **Multiple accounts.** Having several different online profiles for one social network (each with different user names and email addresses) isn't necessary, so it could be a red flag.

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- Is it cyberbullying, or just kids being kids?
- Messages that make people feel badly cross the line.
    - **Q. The stuff I see on my kids' texts and posts -- like "you're so dumb," or "your taste in music sux" -- sometimes borders on inappropriate for my taste. But they think it's harmless. When does cruel behavior become cyberbullying?**
    - Kids like to go online and use cell phones to email, chat, watch videos, send messages, play games, and do homework. But sometimes their language can get

mean or scary. Because so much communication is done online, it's really important for kids to appreciate that their words can cause unintentional harm.

- A person's intentions, as well as the context of their behavior, are important factors in determining whether cyberbullying occurred. Sometimes meanness is accidental, but when people use tools such as the Internet and cell phones to deliberately upset someone else over and over, that's cyberbullying.
- Help kids develop empathy for others. Explain to your kids that the Internet is a community that only functions well when all of its citizens are responsible and respectful. Teach them to use communication tools responsibly and respectfully, and model good digital behavior yourself.
- No matter what, if someone says something that makes your kid feel bad, he or she should flag the behavior and tell a trusted adult. If your kid hurts a friend, he or she should apologize (in person).

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- When should parents get involved?
- Don't rush in to fix things -- but don't ignore it, either.

Q. At what point should parents get involved if your kid is cyberbullied? And is there an age when kids are too old for their parents to intervene?

A. Many kids don't tell their parents that they were cyberbullied. So if your kid told you, or you found out some other way, it's probably time to get involved.

But proceed with caution. One of the reasons kids don't tell their parents that they were cyberbullied is because they're afraid their parents will intervene and make things worse. Your kid should be able to trust that you won't exacerbate the problem. That's easier with younger kids, whom you should step in and protect immediately. But with older kids, it can backfire if parents take over.

Another reason not to rush to a solution: Research indicates that peers sticking up for each other is a very effective defense against bullies. Bullies work by trying to isolate their victims. When kids rally around the target, it thwarts the bully. Of course you may not be able to wait for that to happen -- but do what you can.

Try this:

- Collect more facts by talking the situation through with your kid.
- Work out a plan of action together.

- Make sure you and your kid agree on what the outcome should be.
- Ramp up your efforts as the situation demands.
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- How can parents empower kids to deal with bullies constructively?
- Help kids learn how to handle any situation they encounter online responsibly so they can keep their experiences positive.

Q. I know it's important for kids to tell a trusted adult if they encounter cyberbullying. But I also want my kid to learn how to solve his own problems as he grows up.

A. You're right that kids should report cyberbullying. But that doesn't mean you should rush in to solve the problem. Develop an action plan together -- one that allows him to take safe, age-appropriate steps to deal with the problem and that keeps you in the loop.

Teach younger kids the rules of STOP:

- **STOP** using the computer.
- **TELL** an adult you trust what happened.
- Get the **OK** by an adult before going back online or returning to the website where it happened.
- **PLAY** with other kids who don't take part in cyberbullying.

Lastly, your kid may want to tell the bully how his actions made her feel, after she gets advice from an adult.

Give older kids a checklist:

- **Don't respond or retaliate.** Cooling down is a good first step when you receive a mean message online. Take a deep breath, count backward from 10, or pause to think about what you'll do next. That'll give you time to think of the best way to handle the situation.
- **Tell a trusted adult.** Don't deal with a cyberbullying situation alone. The person you tell should be someone who wants to hear what you have to say, and will help you work on a solution.
- **Block the bully so that he or she can't send you messages online.** You can also just delete messages from bullies without reading them. When you deprive bullies of the attention they crave, they may lose interest.
- **If the bullying continues, save and print the messages.** These could be important evidence to show your parents or teachers if the bullying does not stop.
- **Talk to a friend.** When someone makes you feel bad, sometimes it can help to talk the situation over with a friend.
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- What if my kid is bullied in an online game?
- Kids who play games online should know how to flag -- and report -- bad behavior.

Q. My kid plays an online game in which the other players use strong language and make threats. What should I do?

A. First, determine if it's real cyberbullying or just heated trash talk. Here are some examples of game bullying that could cross the line into cyberbullying:

- **"Griefing."** Repeatedly harming a player's character or placing the player in harmful situations that make it hard to play the game. Often directed at new players by more experienced players.
- **"Trolling."** Intentionally trying to frustrate, anger, and offend other players. They may pretend to be someone they're not, or say inflammatory things.
- **Invading privacy.** Using personal information (such as address, phone number, or even friends' names) in direct threats.
- **Stalking.** Everywhere your kid goes in a game, the bully is there -- often with private information on his or her targets.
- **Ganging up.** Enlisting other players to surround a player and intimidate and scare him.
- If your kid is the target of hostile online play, he or she should block that player, flag the behavior, and report them. Nearly every reputable online game (and virtual worlds for younger kids) has community reporting tools that you can use to call out behavior that violates the site's terms of service (which bullying does).

Many online gaming sites also employ human moderators that help set the tone for the game experience. Some online monitors act like referees, and they also help new users find their way around a game. Make sure your kid knows the site's rules of behavior and how to use the reporting tools. It's every user's responsibility to make the Internet a good community.

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- How do I monitor my kids without "spying?"
- Focus your efforts more on management than total control.
  - **Q. My kid resists all of my attempts to keep an eye on her online behavior. So, how do I protect her when I don't really know what she's doing?**
  - A. It's tough. Kids consider their online accounts and digital devices to be their own personal property. They can password-protect their phones, download apps you can't access, and refuse to friend you on Facebook.
  - Most kids use this stuff responsibly. And, having grown up in a world with unprecedented access to media and technology, many kids are incredibly sophisticated users. Still, their technical savvy often far exceeds their judgment. As parents, it's our responsibility to set rules, establish consequences for misuse.

- There's no one-size-fits all solution for how to supervise kids' online exploits because every kid is different. When it comes to media and technology, you want to establish a relationship where your kid will come to you if something awkward, inappropriate, or uncomfortable happens online. Talking to her nonjudgmentally -- and getting her to demonstrate -- the apps and sites she loves, will show her that your interest goes beyond policing her activities.
- Mandatory measures — like demanding kids' passwords or insisting they friend you on Facebook — tend to backfire. Kids can get around any crackdowns you impose. If you're really having problems, then look into monitoring programs for their online accounts. And never forget that you're your kids' digital role model, so model the kind of behavior you want them to emulate.

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