

Cyber Bullying and Internet Safety

As young people embrace the Internet and other mobile communication technologies, bullying has manifested itself in a new and potentially more dangerous way – through cyber bullying. Cyber bullying can generally be defined as sending or posting harmful or malicious messages or images through email, direct messages, cell phones and websites. It is emerging as one of the more challenging issues facing educators, since it has a direct impact on students but often occurs away from school property.

Examples of cyber bullying include

- Sending cruel, vicious and sometimes threatening messages
- Creating posts on social media that contain stories, cartoons, pictures and jokes ridiculing others
- Posting pictures of classmates online with intent to embarrass them
- Breaking into an email or social media account and sending vicious or embarrassing material to others
- Engaging in direct messaging on social media to trick another person into revealing sensitive or personal information and forwarding that information to others
- Taking a picture of a person using a smartphone and sending that picture electronically to others without consent.

Social Networking Sites

Most teenagers visit websites to communicate with friends and meet new people. Facebook is a social networking site, one of many that has become increasingly popular with students. It allows students to create a personal page (for free), post pictures, add comments and meet “online friends.” The page often includes their full name, telephone number, address, school name and a picture. Twitter is a micro-site site where people can write shorter posts, called tweets.

About 2 billion people reportedly use Facebook, and millions more use other social networking sites such as Instagram, Twitter and Snapchat. According to an American study on Facebook, 71 per cent of teens regularly use the site. In the same study, it reports that 92 per cent of teens use it daily.

The danger lies in that the Internet is vast, public and constantly expanding. And, if students have not developed critical thinking skills, are unsupervised or create websites or profiles that are not monitored, they can be at risk of unknowingly communicating with predators, spammers and pornographers.

As such sites proliferate, students should be warned not to post identifying information to the site and never to meet someone in person they have met through the site unless an adult accompanies them. For young children, parents should conduct frequent reviews of the site to ensure that identifying information or pictures have not been posted.

Internet Safety

No action is foolproof, but there are steps students can take to protect themselves online and lessen

the chance of being the victim of unsolicited messages.

- Never give out personal information, passwords, P.I.N. numbers etc.
- Remember that personal information includes your name, age, e-mail address, the names of friends or family, your home address, phone number or school name.
- Choose a user name that your friends will recognize but strangers won't (such as a nickname used at school). This will help you to identify yourself to friends and lets you know who is trying to communicate with you.
- Passwords are secrets. Never tell anyone your password except your parents or guardian.
- Do not respond to "spam" or unsolicited emails or messages.
- Set up email and social media accounts with your parents' permission and supervision.
- Do not respond to, or engage in, cyber abuse.

If you are the victim of a cyber bully

- Don't reply to messages from cyber bullies.
- Tell an adult you know and trust. Just as with any other kind of bullying, ignoring it often leads to escalation.
- Direct messages (e.g. on Twitter, Instagram or Facebook) are best handled by blocking messages from certain senders.
- Bullies are likely to register for an anonymous email or social media account using a fake name. If you receive threatening email or direct messages, block messages from that address. Then inform your Internet Service Provider (ISP).
- If physical threats are made or the bullying escalates, inform your local police.
- Do not erase or delete messages from cyber bullies. You don't have to read them, but keep them as evidence. You may get similar messages from other accounts. The police, your ISP and/or your telephone company can use these messages to help you.
- If necessary, get a new phone number, account or email address and give it out to only one person at a time.

Suggestions for Parents

- Make sure your children understand how vast and public the Internet is. Remind them that anything they post or send in a message is virtually available to be seen or read by anyone in the world.
- Talk to your children about cyber bullying. Make sure they understand what it is. Let them know that cyber bullying is no less serious and unacceptable than other forms of bullying.
- Set up the family computer in an open, common area so that you can monitor what your child is sending and receiving.
- Inform your Internet Service Provider (ISP) or cell phone service provider of any abuse. Although it can take a lot of time and effort to get Providers to respond and deal with your complaints about cyber bullying, it is necessary to try to stop it from re-occurring.
- Purchase apps that monitor your child's social media and phone use, and be open about why it is important for you to do so.

Suggestions for Schools

As with other forms of physical or emotional bullying, awareness and education are the keys to the prevention of cyber bullying. It is often a very hurtful, difficult and time-consuming challenge to deal with the effects of cyber bullying after it has occurred.

- Amend your school's anti-bullying policies to include text messaging, cell phone use and online bullying.
- Educate teachers, students and parents about cyber bullying. Write a short article for your next

school newsletter; address the issue during Curriculum Night; add a section to your website; update your Parent Handbook; address it at your next School Council meeting.

- Make sure parents know who to contact at the school if there is a problem.
- Never allow a known incident of bullying to pass unchallenged and not deal with it.

Encouraging students to be aware of, report and intervene when cyber bullying occurs will help to ease the escalation of this form of abuse.

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