

A Guide to Cyberbullying and Cyber Threats for Parents

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Cyberbullying and cyber threats

Young people have fully embraced the Internet as both an environment and a tool for socialising. Via the Internet and other technologies, they send e-mail, create their own websites, post intimate personal news in blogs (online interactive diaries), send text messages and images via mobile phones, 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 behaviour. There are also increasing reports of teens posting material that raises concerns that they are considering harming themselves or others...

We aim to provide parents with insight into these concerns and guidelines to prevent your child from being victimised by or engaging in online harmful behaviour. It also provides guidance on things you can do in either case to keep your child safe or from your child breaking the law.

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.

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

Denigration. "Dissing" someone online. Sending or posting gossip or rumours about a person to damage his or her reputation or friendships.

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.

Outing. Sharing someone's secrets or embarrassing information or images online.

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

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

Cyber stalking. Repeated, intense harassment and denigration that includes threats or creates significant fear.

Cyber threats

Cyber threats 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.

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:

- Do not 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 cyber-threat, even if you are just joking, you could get in serious trouble at school or with the police.
- 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 or worse.

How, who & why?

A cyberbully may be a person whom the target knows, be anonymous or an online stranger. A cyberbully may encourage the involvement of other people who do not know the target - cyberbullying by proxy.

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

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, without really thinking of the consequences.

Impact of cyberbullying

Face-to-face bullying can result in long-term mental harm to the victim. This harm includes low self-esteem, depression, anger, academic failure and avoidance, and, in some cases, hurting themselves or others. It is possible that the harm caused by cyberbullying may be greater than harm caused by traditional bullying because:

- Online communications can be extremely vicious.
- There is no escape for those who are being cyberbullied - victimisation can be anytime day or night.
- Cyberbullying material can be distributed worldwide and is often irretrievable.
- Cyberbullies can be anonymous and can involve unknown online "friends."
- Teens may be reluctant to tell adults what is happening because they are emotionally traumatised, think it is their fault, fear greater retribution, and fear online activities or mobile phone use will be restricted.

What Role does your child play online?

If your child has been actively socialising online, they could have 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, who, in some cases may be the bullies at school and in other cases, the victims.

Harmful Bystanders: Those who encourage and support the bully or watch the bullying from the sidelines, but do nothing to intervene or help the victim.

Helpful Bystanders: Those who seek to stop the bullying, protest against it, provide support to the victim, or tell an adult.

Related online risky behaviour

There are other concerns about youth online behaviour 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 behaviours.

Disclosing Personal Information: Young people are disclosing personal contact information and massive amounts of sensitive personal information in public online sites or through personal messages. 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.

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: Sites and groups that foster hatred against "others" are actively recruiting angry, disconnected youth. Some young people informally use the Internet to coordinate troublesome and dangerous activities.

Risky Sexual Behaviour: Some young people are using Internet communities and matching services to make connections with others for sexual activities. 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 misconception that all interactions online, including violent ones, are "just a game."

What can you do?

Many parents think that if their children are home using a computer they are safe and not getting into trouble. Unfortunately your child could be the target of cyberbullying or be causing harm to others from your own family room or their bedroom. 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 young people still access material parents don't want them to access, filtering cannot prevent cyberbullying or address other online 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 behaviour - including online behaviour.

- 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:
 - a. 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.
 - b. Intimate personal information. Private and personal information 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.
 - c. 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.
- 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 inappropriate behaviour. 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 behaviour.
- Watch out for secretive behaviour. It's a danger sign if your child rapidly switches screens as you approach the computer or attempts to hide online behaviour by emptying the history file.

Important Note: *If you ever 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 on 101 and explain your findings.*

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 behaviour, 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. Also, discuss the point that if your child misuses email or a mobile 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:
 - a. Am I being kind and showing respect for others and myself?
 - b. How would I feel if someone did the same thing to me or to my best friend?
 - c. How do I feel inside?
 - d. What would a trusted adult, someone who is important in my life, think?
 - e. Is this action in violation of any agreements, rules, or laws?
 - f. How would I feel if others could see me?
 - g. Would it be okay if I did this in my home or at school?
 - h. 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 behaviour. Further, your child could be mistaken as the source of the problem. Contact school for support.

If your child is cyberbullying another

If you become aware that your child is engaged in cyberbullying, it is essential that you respond in a firm and responsible manner. Parents could be held liable for the harm caused by their child.

Useful actions to take are as follows:

- remove any potentially harmful material that has been posted
- Warn against taking any action in retaliation or asking anyone else to engage in retaliation.
- Establish very clear rules about behaving in this manner.
- Direct your child not to access the Internet anywhere but at school or at home, and tell them 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 victimisation, 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 victimisation

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 mobile phone.
- Avoidance of friends, school, and activities, or a decline in school work, or both.
- Subtle comments that reflect emotional distress or disturbed online or in-person relationships.

If your child is depressed, appears to be suicidal, or has made a suicide attempt, it is critically important that you get your child immediate medical attention and inform school.

Encourage your child to be a helpful bystander

Cyberbullying is occurring in online environments where responsible adults are generally not present. Young people 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 victimised 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 I am not part of the activity, then how could I be doing something wrong?" Here is an answer: "Bullies need an audience. By paying attention to their bullying, you are encouraging their behaviour. You become part of the problem rather than being 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, Child Line or the police.

Responding to cyberbullying

Help your child to:

- Understand the importance of NEVER RETALIATING online. Retaliating frequently gives the bully a “win” because the bully’s intention was to make the target get upset.
- Retaliating can also lead someone to think that your child has caused or is part of the problem.
- Develop personal guidelines for online involvement.
- Make a realistic evaluation of the quality of an online community and the benefits of remaining or leaving.
- Recognise the need to leave an online situation that has gotten out of control.
- Conduct a self-assessment of his or her behaviour or communications that may be contributing to victimisation.
- 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 some of these incidents, but that it is important to contact an adult if:
 - a. He or she is really upset and not sure what to do.
 - b. If the attempts made to stop the cyberbullying have not worked.
 - c. The cyberbullying could be a crime.
 - d. He or she is being bullied by the same person at school.
 - e. The cyberbully is anonymous.
 - f. 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 some actions.

- If you can demonstrate that a student may be involved, inform the school.
- If a crime has occurred, tell the police.

Tell the Cyberbully to Stop: Your child can send the cyberbully a non-emotional, assertive message telling the cyberbully to stop. You could guide your child on what to write.

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.

Make a Complaint: Cyberbullying is a violation of the terms of use of most Web sites, social networks and mobile phone companies. Make 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.

Contact Your School: Your school may be able to discipline a student who cyberbullies away from school. Your school can also contact the parents of the cyberbully to get the cyberbullying to stop. Avoid meeting the cyber bully's parents face-to-face. Instead, take the downloaded material to the school and request that the cyberbullying stop and all harmful 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.

Contact CEOP: Many websites, including The Pingle Academy website have a link to the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre. If you are concerned that someone has acted inappropriately with a child online, then visit this site to get advice and to report the issue.

