

Cyberbullying: Ways to Prevent it, and What to do if it Happens

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What is the best approach for monitoring your kids on-line (without breaking their trust)?

- Begin these discussions early, even before your children are asking for social media accounts, etc. Remember, schools have children using the Internet from as young as kindergarten, and their friends will have many tools and gadgets your child will have access to, even if your family does not choose to provide those. You don't want to leave your child without your understandings and influence in the world of technology, so be sure your family ethos and values are a part of how they "grow up" online.
- Emphasize that the Internet is a public place, even though it seems as if it is not. This is hard for even middle schoolers to fully understand. Even though you are sitting alone in your living room and it feels private and safe, the Internet is not private...it is entirely public. The earlier in time your children can come to understand this, the better.
- Also emphasize that your job as your child's parent is to keep them safe, especially in public places. Point out other measures you use to keep them safe in public venues. Even in the middle school years you give them a means to contact you, you investigate the places they go and the people they are with when they are away from you/ in public. The Internet is one of those public places.
- Switch the conversation from one about trust to being one about safety. You do trust them, but there is no way to trust the anonymous strangers that are on the Internet. Your job as their parent is to keep them safe. There is no reason to battle at all about trust, it has nothing to do with that. It is all about keeping them safe and that should be the emphasis in your conversations.
- Help them understand that media access is a privilege, not a right. Thus, to keep them safe, you will need to know their usernames and passwords for each of their online accounts, you will need to know the sites they visit, etc. Not because you do not trust them...only to keep them safe. Once your child knows that you will be doing this, you do not need to keep reminding them. Get a program that lets you see the sites they visit, or one like ReputationDefender, which offers free and paid online tools to monitor what's being said about them on the Web. Do not interact on your child's web pages (e.g., post updates or respond to FB postings). Remember, your role is simply to provide safety, not to meddle.

What should parents do if they discover their child is being bullied on-line?

If you discover your child is the victim of cyberbullying, the most important thing to do is to follow the Four Steps outlined in our book [*Little Girls Can Be Mean: Four Steps to Bully-proof Girls in the Early Grades*](#). So often our heart is racing and we want to jump in and try and fix things. But this will only leave your [child] alone in [their] own experience of fear or humiliation. Unless he/she or another child is in danger (in which case, call the proper authorities immediately!), take a moment to Observe, Connect, Guide, and Support to Act. Your child and their well being are your first priority. Some other practical tips:

- Save all evidence. Don't delete or destroy any texts, postings, etc. Authorities need a trail of evidence to respond to.
- Block the bully from our child's page or email.
- Notify the proper authorities. This might be school officials, the police, etc. Be sure your child is a part of these decisions.
- Contact the social media provider. For ex., Facebook can take down the page from public viewing, but preserve the evidence.

What is the best approach to prevent their child from being bullied?

Trying to prevent your child from being bullied on line is tricky, as there can be no rhyme or reason for a child becoming a target. And many targets were once aggressors! According to iSafe.com, 53% of children in the survey acknowledge saying hurtful things to peers while on-line or while texting, 58% report having received hurtful messages while on-line or texting, and 42% admit they have been bullied on-line.

Even young children are not immune to cyberbullying's devastating effects. Decrease the likelihood your elementary-aged child will become a cybervictim:

- Keep computers in public spaces (e.g., the living room). Supervising eyes maybe the best way to protect your daughter (and friends) from inappropriate sites/on-line activities.
- Keep shared accounts (e.g., email) for as long as possible. Children are less likely to send harassing messages to accounts shared with adults.
- Always know your child's usernames/passwords. For safety, there can be no secret accounts. You trust her; you don't trust the strangers that prowl the Internet!
- Emphasize Internet smarts: not sharing personal information, not giving friends her passwords, etc.
- Discuss family values and expectations around on-line behaviors. Emphasize that technology is a privilege to be earned, and it can be revoked. Get an Internet safety program and tell her her actions will be reviewed (e.g. your reading her emails,

keeping track of the sites she visits). Stress this is about safety, not privacy. The Internet is a public place and even “private” interactions become public. To keep her safe, her actions will be open to your review. But remember, do not harp on this. You are a background safety protector, not the eagle trying to control her every keystroke online.

- If your child has a cell phone, get one without photos, videos, texting, or email...most phones are replaced every few years, and elementary-aged children don't need these privileges. Check out the TicTock, Firefly glowPhone, or LG Migo VX1000. If you want a full service phone that allows many parental controls in the background, check out Kajeet.
- Teach your child to always think twice before “sending.” Cyber-bullies were often once cyber-victims. Before they consider retaliating, remind them of the consequences “sending” can have. “Once you hit send, it may never end.”

What should parents do if they discover their child IS the bully?

Little Girls Can Be Mean: Four Steps to Bully-proof Girls in the Early Grades has an entire section helping parents understand why nice kids can do mean things, and what to do about it.

While our first response is often to want to jump in and tell our child that what they did is wrong and how they need to fix things, here too you will want to take a breath and follow the Four Steps we outline in the book. The reality is, very nice children can do very mean things and still be very nice children. What they need is a parent to observe what has happened, connect with them over what they were trying to do (feel important, have influence, etc.), guide them in understanding how their choices were inappropriate and help them not only make new choices moving forward, but also to take responsibility and make amends for what they have done. Part of this process may involve a suspension of media privileges, but should be decided as a component of the Four Step process as opposed to a top-down reaction on the part of the parent.

An ounce of prevention is often worth a pound of cure. So make sure your child understands from early on that they can face criminal charges as a result of cyberbullying. Depending on the specifics of the bullying and the state you live in, if you use the Internet or a cell phone to bully another person, you can be charged with harassment, stalking or making terrorist threats. Physical bullying can result in assault charges. Cases such as these are usually handled in juvenile court.

How can parents teach kids to be aware of things like photos being posted of them that they (the kids) prefer not be posted, videos on places like iChat, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, etc?

Discuss the dangers of technology. In stark contrast to when we were younger, your child is growing up in a digital world. From cell phones to emails to video cameras to IMs, the influence of technology in your child's world is only a breath away, if you do not feel it already. Thus, girls need to know that whatever they do electronically is permanent, public, and—once in the hands of others—completely out of their control. Emphasize to your child that she should not do anything with a cell phone, computer, or video camera around that she does not want her best friend, her worst enemy, her mother, or her teacher to also see. No matter how good a friend might be today, you never know when she will do something “funny,” like post a video or spam an email.

You can also look into free and paid tools that let you (or your child) monitor what's being said about her, or what photos she is being tagged in on the Web. You can look at ReputationDefender, AOL's SafeSocial, GoGoStat, or SocialShield, among others.

If an incriminating video were posted of a teen or child, what steps can parents take legally to get the material removed? What steps can parents take legally in general against bullying messages their child is receiving?

The legal world of bullying and cyberbullying is changing almost daily. First and foremost, keep any and all evidence of the bullying. Contact the media service provider, most of which now have their own protocol for managing these situations. Contact the appropriate authorities to see what the laws and regulations are in your area.

And take a breath. While no parent wants their child to go through anything like this, it's important for both your and your child's sake to go through the Four Steps (unless your child or another is in imminent danger, then, contact the proper authorities right away) to be sure you can move forward as a team and provide the best support, resources, and guidance.

Any other tips for teaching our kids about this technology that we didn't grow up with?

There is a wealth of information in the answers above. However, one additional point to raise is how different emails, texts, the Internet, and other anonymous media can feel to a child (or an adult for that matter!), compared to an in-person interaction. You can't see faces, you can't read tone of voice, you don't feel the same sense of connection and obligation because it's not a “real” interaction (even though, of course, it is!). Many children do things through technology they would never do in person. In addition, so many misunderstandings happen when we are not face-to-face, having live interactions with one another.

And lastly, the stakes feel higher than ever, and our wonderful desire to protect our children can cause us to dictate facts and rules, as opposed to working to understand our child's experience in this age of technology. The more we can support our child as they venture into this world, and the more we allow them to feel they can come to us with a question, concern, or when something just doesn't feel right, the sooner we can provide the support they need to stay safe. If we get preachy or seem too constraining, we lose that opportunity.