

## **Counseling Corner**

### **Cyber Bullying**

Bullies and mean girls have been around forever, but technology has given them a whole new platform for their actions. As adults, we're becoming more aware that the "sticks and stones" adage no longer holds true; virtual name-calling can have real-world effects on the well being of kids and teens.

It's not always easy to know how and when to step in as a parent. For starters, our kids tend to use technology differently than we do. Many spend a lot of time on social networking sites, send text messages and instant messages (IMs) by the hundreds, and are likely to roll their eyes at the mention of email — that's "so old-school" to them. Their knowledge and habits can be intimidating, but they still need us as parents.

Fortunately, our growing awareness of **cyber bullying** has helped us learn a lot more about how to prevent it. Here are some suggestions on what to do if online bullying has become part of your child's life.

#### **What Is Cyber bullying?**

Cyber bullying is the use of technology to harass, threaten, embarrass, or target another person. By definition, it occurs among young people. When an adult is involved, it may meet the definition of **cyber-harassment** or **cyber-stalking**, a crime that can have legal consequences and involve jail time.

Sometimes cyber bullying can be clear-cut. For example, leaving overtly cruel cell phone text messages or mean notes posted to Web sites. Other acts are less obvious, such as impersonating a victim online or posting personal information or videos designed to hurt or embarrass another child.

Cyber bullying also can happen accidentally. The impersonal nature of text messages, IMs, and emails make it very hard to detect the sender's tone — one teen's joke or sense of humor could be another's devastating insult. Nevertheless, a repeated pattern of emails, text messages, and online posts is rarely accidental.

A 2006 poll from the national organization Fight Crime: Invest in Kids found that 1 in 3 teens and 1 in 6 preteens have been the victims of cyber bullying. As more and more youths have access to computers and cell phones, the incidence of cyber bullying is likely to rise.

#### **Effects of Cyber bullying**

No longer limited to schoolyards or street corners, modern-day bullying can happen at home as well as at school — essentially 24 hours a day. And, for kids who are being cyber bullied, it can feel like there's no escape.

Severe cyber bullying can leave victims at greater risk for anxiety, depression, and other stress-related disorders. In very rare cases, some kids have turned to suicide.

The punishment for cyber bullies can include being suspended from school or kicked off of sports teams. Certain types of cyber bullying also may violate school codes or even anti-discrimination or sexual harassment laws:

#### **Signs of Cyber bullying**

Many kids and teens who are cyber bullied are reluctant to tell a teacher or parent, often because they feel ashamed of the social stigma, or because they fear their computer privileges will be taken away at home.

The signs that a child is being cyber bullied vary, but a few things to look for are:

- signs of emotional distress during or after using the Internet
- withdrawal from friends and activities
- avoidance of school or group gatherings
- slipping grades and "acting out" in anger at home
- changes in mood, behavior, sleep, or appetite

### **How Parents Can Help**

If you discover that your child is being cyber bullied, be sure to discuss how it feels. Offer assurance that it's not your child's fault. Talking to teachers or school administrators also may help.

Many schools, school districts, and after-school clubs have established protocols for responding to cyber bullying; these vary by district and state. But before reporting the problem, let your child know that you plan to do so, as he or she could have concerns about "tattling" and might prefer that the problem be handled at home.

Other measures to try:

- **Block the bully.** Most devices have settings that allow you to electronically block emails, IMs, or text messages from specific people.
- **Limit access to technology.** Although it's hurtful, many kids who are bullied can't resist the temptation to check Web sites or phones to see if there are new messages. Keep the computer in a public place in the house (no laptops in children's bedrooms, for example) and limit the use of cell phones and games. Some companies allow you to turn off text messaging services during certain hours, which can give bullied kids a break.
- **Know your kids' online world.** Check their postings and the sites kids visit, and be aware of how they spend their time online. Talk to them about the importance of privacy and why it's a bad idea to share personal information online, even with friends. Encourage them to safeguard passwords.

If your child agrees, you may also arrange for mediation with a therapist or counselor at school who can work with your child and/or the bully.

### **When Your Child Is the Bully**

Finding out that your child is the one who is behaving inappropriately can be upsetting and heartbreaking. It's important to address the problem head on and not wait for it to go away.

## Help children use social networking sites safely

Social networking sites can have many benefits for children, such as allowing them to explore new interests. Help your children use them more safely by going over the following tips and discussion starters.

- Check your child's friend lists to see who has access to his or her profile. Make sure your child knows all friends in person.
- Teach your child to set profiles to private—but be aware that privacy settings do not guarantee complete privacy.
  - Have your child remove any inappropriate content and photos and delete any personal information.
  - Check the profiles of your child's friends to see if there is revealing information or photos about your child.
- Report inappropriate or criminal behavior to the appropriate authority. Most sites have a reporting mechanism for non-criminal behavior. Criminal behavior should be reported through law-enforcement agencies and the CyberTipline® at [www.cybertipline.com](http://www.cybertipline.com).

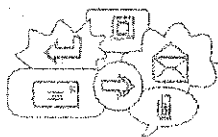
## Discussion Starters

### Start a discussion with your child

Use these discussion starters to get an Internet safety conversation going with your children. The more often you talk to them about online safety, the easier it will get, so don't get discouraged if they don't respond immediately!

- Could you show me your online profile(s)?
- Do you use your real name or age when communicating with others online?
  - What kinds of things do you post on your page?
  - How do you decide who to add as a friend?
- Would you feel comfortable if I checked your profile?

For more information and safety tips visit : [netsmartz.org](http://netsmartz.org)



**A PARENT'S GUIDE TO SOCIAL NETWORKING**



**Comments Info Photos Profile Inbox**

**Help! My child is on a social networking site!**  
 While you may be concerned when your children join a social networking site, it doesn't mean they're in danger. Social networking sites are places online where young people go to socialize with their friends, talk to people with similar interests, and share what's going on in their lives. But these sites can also be places where kids post something inappropriate or meet the wrong people.

**How can I keep my child safe?**  
 Check, check, check! The most important thing you can do to protect your child on these sites is to get involved and regularly check his/her profile.

**What do I look for?**  
 Sometimes looking through your child's social networking profile can be overwhelming. Where are the privacy settings? What is a "wall"? Use this practical guide and check off each section when you're done. That way, you won't miss anything.

**5 Positive Things Your Child Can Do On Social Networking Sites**

- 1. Create family photo albums**  
 What better way to keep your distant relatives up-to-date on your family's activities?
- 2. Champion a cause**  
 From animal rights to bullying awareness, social networking sites are the place to go for social activists.
- 3. Join a group**  
 Niche communities have found a home on social networking sites where people can connect and discuss their interests with like-minded people.
- 4. Market a talent**  
 Stars are born every day online. No need to move to Hollywood to pursue that recording contract; with one hit video the producers will come to you!
- 5. Find a college**  
 Social networking makes it easier to chat with college students and faculty, so your child can make an informed decision about where to go to school.

**POPULAR SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES FOR TEENS**  
 Facebook | MySpace | myYearbook | Bebo | Gaia

This resource brought to you by



**For more resources visit NetSmartz.org**  
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**Profile Picture**

This is the picture that will appear next to your child's name. Is it too revealing? Is there anything inappropriate, like nudity, alcohol, or drugs? Make sure you approve before it goes public.

**Username**

This is either your child's real name or a nickname. Using a real name isn't bad; it just means you have to look more closely at the privacy settings and contacts.

**Account/Settings**

This is where you'll go to adjust your child's privacy settings. Go through each option slowly. Always ask yourself - what is on the profile and who can see it?

**SOCIAL NETWORKING SITE**

**Information/About Me**

Here your children can post personal information, including where they live, where they go to school, who they're dating, etc. Check what they're sharing and delete anything you think is too much information.



**Information**

Birthday: January 17, 1997  
Location: Virginia

**GeorgeyD**

Home Account Inbox

**Comments**

- Beach later!
- Soooooo jealous :(
- Worst Day Ever.
- hang in there!
- Awww, sorry!
- Me too!!!!

**Comments/Wall**

This is where your child's friends post messages. Delete any inappropriate comments, and don't forget to check what your child is posting on others' pages, too.

**Friends/Contacts**

This is a list of everyone your child has accepted as a friend/contact. It may include people you don't know, or even people your child only knows online. Go through each contact together and decide if each is an appropriate friend for your child.

**Friends**



**Photo Album**



**Advertisements**



**Ads/Apps**

Most social networks have ads and applications from 3rd parties, like games and fan pages. If your children click on these or add them to their profiles, they may be allowing access to their personal information. Have a discussion about what's OK to add and what's not.

**Photos/Albums**

What kinds of photos is your child sharing? Who can see them? Check for anything inappropriate, like nudity, alcohol, or drugs.