
4 Things Many Parents Don't Know About Cyberbullying

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Did you know that according to the 2011 Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System survey, 16 percent of high school students report being the victim of cyberbullying? That's one in six. Three or four out of every classroom.

One of them could be your child.

Kids (and grownups) have been mean to each other since time immemorial. Bullying is hardly new. But the explosion of electronic technology has allowed bullies to victimize in ways that are easier to hide from adults--and at the same time more visible to peers. Not only is the bullying more visible to peers, it's visible to *more* peers, and more quickly. Cyberbullying is harder to control, harder to make go away--and its effects can be devastating, even deadly.

How much do you know about cyberbullying? Here are four things many parents don't know:

Most parents of victims have no idea it's happening. Cyberbullying happens in a sort of parallel communication universe, one that most parents simply don't have access to. It happens in text messages passed between kids, on social media sites parents don't visit or in posts they can't see because of privacy settings. Victims often don't want to tell their parents about it; they may be embarrassed--or, quite simply, they may not fully realize that they are being bullied. They know that what is happening makes them feel bad--but may not connect with the fact that it is wrong and something that they should tell someone about. In part, that's because...

Many kids think of it as "drama", not bullying. If you talk to teens, many will tell you that drama is a fact of life for them and their peers. Some of what they see online or in text messages may make them squirm, but they don't necessarily think of it as wrong or bad, let alone something they need to react to or try to stop because of the damage it could do. Parents can play an important role here in helping their kids understand that whether you call it drama or bullying, it can hurt--sometimes very badly.

Bullies are often the popular kids--or are victims of bullying themselves. Bullies are not just big mean kids who beat up little kids for their lunch money. Popular kids may be particularly good at the social nuance that makes bullying particularly powerful--and may be particularly invested in it if they feel that it is somehow helping their social status. They also have an air of deniability; parents and teachers might find it hard to believe that a student who appears well-liked by peers, is an athlete or a good student, could be capable of being mean and hurtful.

At the same time, it's important to be thoughtful, and ask questions, when bullying is discovered. Many bullies have learned the behavior from being bullied themselves--or are lashing out because they've been hurt. While bullies should be punished--it's behavior that must have consequences--they may also need real help.

Cyberbullying should never be ignored. Even seemingly "little" things, like a text message that makes fun of somebody, should get a reaction. What we need to teach our youth is that it's never okay to be unkind, and that words can hurt. Some cyberbullying should be reported to authorities, such as if it is threatening, stalking or sexually explicit; it should also be reported if it breaks school rules (parents should make sure that they and their kids know what the school rules are). But more than that, we need to teach youth to be good online citizens--and a big part of being a good online citizen is understanding the role of the bystander in bullying. Bystanders can make everything worse when they encourage or just ignore bullying--and they can make all the difference when they refuse to encourage it, when they support the victim, and when they stand up to the bully. It's important for parents to talk to their kids about this, and empower them to make that difference.

To learn more about cyberbullying, and bullying in general, visit stopbullying.gov.

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